

DESIGN BUILD: HARDSCAPES

Belgard Hardscapes

The new Anglia Edger provides a cost-effective and decorative option for edging paver surfaces. Designed for edging driveways, patios, walkways and creating small planter walls, its 8-in. height also allows it to be installed on the same base as the pavers — to easily form a modern, clean, raised edge. The chiseled finish emulates hand-hewn stone and is tumbled to look distressed. Available in a variety of color choices and a number of different lengths for flexibility of design, the Anglia Edger is beveled on the ends to allow for creating both curves and angles. The larger scale of the edger makes it an alternative to mortar-set granite and other natural stone edging because there are fewer pieces to install and fewer joints. Anglia can also be used to create natural-form steps because of its height and thickness. BelgardDesignPro.com



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AZEK VAST

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CalStar Products

Permeable pavers, made from 40% post-industrial recycled material as a binder, allow rainwater to drain through them, reducing stormwater runoff and flooding. Compared to concrete and clay pavers, they're made with fly ash. They're suitable for vehicular applications, are ADA-compliant for slip resistance and feature maximum allowable space between units. Available in eight colors, they meet ASTM C936 and can be packaged for mechanical installation. CalStarProducts.com



MoJack

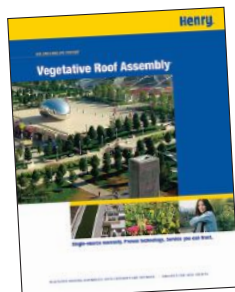
The LoadSmart design positions the load over the axle for better maneuverability. Extendable features make handling large, awkward loads easier. The appliance hand truck features telescoping handles that make merchandising, storing and using easier. Two convertible, extendable models provide an extra 12 in. of space to handle difficult loads. Accessories include moving blankets, four-wheel dollies and the LoadKicker, which will safely and easily remove a heavy stack from the base plate with one simple lift of the foot, according to the manufacturer. TheMojack.com

DESIGN/BUILD:

ENVIRONMENTAL ELEMENTS

Henry Co.

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Joshua Taflinger met a demand to combat the emerald ash borer.

ADD-ONBIZ

BY CASEY PAYTON ◀◀ EXTEND YOUR BUSINESS

Battling the emerald ash borer

By fighting the pest, one man's business soars.

JOSHUA TAFLINGER, CERTIFIED arborist, took what started out as an add-on biz and parlayed it into a full-time career. Taflinger was running a tree removal business and performing injection services on the side, and it soon became obvious to him that the emerald ash borer problem in the Indianapolis area was worsening.

Taflinger had been battling the emerald ash borer, an invasive boring beetle, with an injection product from Arborjet. The results were encouraging, so Taflinger seized the opportunity to specialize in emerald ash borer diagnosis and treatment.

He performed his first treatment in 2008. In fall 2009, he dissolved his company's tree trimming and removal

division, focusing entirely on preserving Indianapolis's ash population. His new enterprise, IndyAsh, took root.

"I treated about 300 trees total in 2008, 2009 and 2010, but last year alone I did 1,800," says Taflinger. "I'm now preparing to do as many as 5,000 trees this year. People are starting to recognize a problem as entire neighborhoods begin showing signs. But there's still a long way to go in getting the message out that there's still time to save the ash population."

While the emerald ash borer infestation is a serious problem, Taflinger knows this won't be a lifelong business. "It's pretty new science, but the estimations right now show it's going to be a 12-year period from the time a tree starts showing signs of emerald ash

»»»

PHOTO COURTESY, JOSHUA TAFLINGER

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»» SERVICE SNAPSHOT

«« borer to the time it's totally killed off," he says. "That will happen to every ash tree in the area that hasn't been treated. Once the ash trees are gone or have been treated, there will no longer be a food source for the emerald ash borer, and they won't be able to survive. Though there's still a lot of time for me to do this, there will come a point where the service is no longer needed."

By then, Taflinger hopes to have gained enough knowledge and education to be a full-blown tree doctor. Currently, if he's called out to a job that is out of his realm, he calls in a specialist. His only focus is emerald ash borer. But even though he's not treating trees for other diseases, he says he's learning more every day. "I might refer the client to a tree doctor, but I'll still do the research so I'll have the experience to eventually do these diagnoses myself," he says. "I'd love to become a consultant and be able to offer a full-range of treatment services."

While his niche requires specialized

COMPANY: IndyAsh

HEADQUARTERS:
Indianapolis, IN

WHY FOCUS ON EMERALD ASH BORER TREATMENTS? A passion and a need.

WHAT KIND OF INVESTMENT IS NEEDED? Someone starting out would need to invest in the IV equipment and a cordless drill, so you're looking at about \$2,000 for all of that. The most expensive part is the chemical, but that's purchased on an as-needed basis.

BIGGEST RISK: If you misdiagnose or the treatment doesn't work, the customer's tree is dead.

OTHER CHALLENGES: People are skeptical when they don't understand something, because they have to totally trust you. And treatment is not cheap.

knowledge, Taflinger says any business willing to invest in education can successfully add a tree injection service. "Even though I've made it my main focus, it does make a good side business," Taflinger says. "But the biggest mistake those who are new to the business will make is misidentification.... A lot of these conditions look alike. Good treatments are not cheap. The client is investing a lot of money. They'll know if you misdiagnosed it when the tree dies."

Taflinger suggests starting with just one treatment technician and seeing how it goes. "My best advice is to get educated," he says. "I would recommend about 50 to 100 hours of education. That's what makes my business a success. Anyone can buy the equipment, but if you can't answer your customers' questions you're not going to get the job."

The author is a freelance writer with six years of experience covering landscaping.

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John Watson, owner of Knoxville, TN-based Common Grounds Landscape Management, operates his business around a set of core values. He also promotes sustainable practices for the industry. Watson started his career in the professional landscaping industry through a high school internship and is now the president of the Tennessee Nursery & Landscape Association.

“As members of the original Green Industry, I believe it’s important for us to take the lead in finding alternative, environmentally friendly ways to manage our landscapes,” he says. Watson stops to share his views of the maintenance industry with *LM*.



John Watson (center), owner of Common Grounds Landscape Management, shows off his company’s Snapper Pro S200xtp propane-fueled mower to environmentally focused customers Randy Holloway (left) with Jones Lang LaSalle, and Mark Harvey with Cowperwood Co.

INSIDE INFO

Company: Common Grounds Landscape Management Inc.

Headquarters: Knoxville, TN

Employees: 37

Key to being a maintenance leader: My team and I operate under three core values: One, use your best judgment to do what is right and fair; two, commit yourself to excellence in everything you do and don’t accept anything less from others; and three, treat everyone as you would like to be treated. Even though the business has changed over the years, our core values have stayed the same.

TOP TRENDS

› **Propane-fueled mowers.** We started using propane-fueled mowers two years ago as participants in a study conducted by the University of Tennessee, which compared gasoline-fueled mowers with those fueled by propane. We were so impressed with the performance of the propane-fueled mowers that we converted half of our walk-behind fleet to propane-fueled models. These mowers help reduce costs, because propane costs less than gasoline for us — especially in the summer — and our on-site refueling station provides convenient refueling and virtually no fuel spillage.

› **Smartphones on the job.** We provided smartphones to our employees to help with everyday tasks and to help track our job costs. Our personnel clock in on their smartphones at the beginning of the day and clock into a specific job when they get to the property to start service. Everything is web-based, so we can check the progress of each job, what is finished and not finished, and can even post new jobs to the site.

› **Educated customers.** Google has changed the world as we know it. I have noticed our customers use Google to look up information about their plants and landscape, and they are looking for educated technicians who are just as knowledgeable. I tell my account managers not to hesitate to do a little on-site research with customers on their smartphones when questions arise. If this happens, I counsel the customer that they need to be sure they are using a reputable information source.

TOP OBSTACLE

› **Recovery from the economic downturn.** I think any obstacle is an opportunity to change and get better, which for us was how we ran our business before 2008. Things have to be important to customers before they spend their money, because in reality, your budget is their money. In light of that, we have transitioned to more customer-focused business practices. We need to remember that as the economy gets better, we need to keep whittling away at inefficiencies and creating lean management practices.

TOP OPPORTUNITIES

› **Environmental stewardship.** Our customers are really focused on finding sustainable ways to lower their carbon footprint. Common Grounds was green before it was popular to do so. We believe it’s important for the industry to find alternate ways to manage our landscapes.

› **Rewarding employees.** We developed an open-book bonus plan in 1990, which is based on our profit-and-loss statement from each month. The simple formula is sales less the cost centers on which team leaders can have a direct effect. We take this number and use a multiplier that is split between all the team leaders. During the economic downturn, this knowledge of all costs allowed our team to become very lean. With everyone working together, we were able to save all the full-time jobs — and actually increased team leaders’ bonuses.

The author is the director, Business Development & Marketing for the Propane Education & Research Council.

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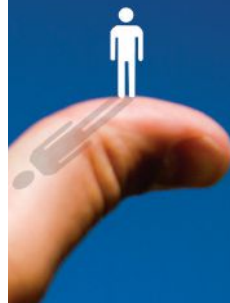
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[Coming in May]

Many plows, like this Caterpillar sectional snowplow, sat idle this winter.

WARM WINTER BLUES

In many parts of the country, snowplows, and the contractors who operate them, sat idly by as record warmth kept snow from piling up in clients' driveways and parking lots. In an industry intertwined with the weather, the mild temperatures dramatically affected many operators. And because insect pest populations, weeds and turf diseases usually diminished by the cold went largely unscathed this winter, lawn care business owners also have been deeply affected. *LM* next month will explore the impact the mild winter had on the Green Industry.



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MY BIGGEST MISTAKE

LESSONS LEARNED THE HARD WAY » BY CASEY PAYTON



A landscape business owner says failing to recognize the good times caused him to miss out on strategic opportunities.



Mark Ahronian learned recognizing the good times is key to surviving the bad times.

COMPANY: Ahronian Landscaping and Design Inc.

HEADQUARTERS: Holliston, MA

NO. OF EMPLOYEES: 10

SERVICE BREAKDOWN: Design/build: 80%, Maintenance: 20%

CLIENT BREAKDOWN: 95% residential

WHILE GETTING
IN a groove can be good for business,

Mark Ahronian, MCH, president and designer of Ahronian Landscaping and Design, Holliston, MA, says he now recognizes the importance of paying closer attention to the “ups and downs” and making business moves accordingly. That includes making bigger moves when times are good — something Ahronian says he failed to do. In not recognizing the good times, Ahronian says he missed out on the opportunity to purchase equipment and grow the company.

“Instead of recognizing that we were in really good times, I felt it was the ‘norm’ and it was what I could expect out of business as we moved forward,” says Ahronian. “I never thought things could get so bad.”

But they did, and Ahronian says that putting off equipment purchases that could have made the company more efficient was a bad decision. “I was being conservative by putting off equipment purchases, but now nobody is lending, and it’s incredibly difficult to make large purchases,” he says. “Being too conservative for that era of time — when business was good — has been my biggest mistake.”

Gauging good business

Ahronian says being able to recognize good times is the first step in knowing that it’s okay to be a little more aggressive with purchases. “If you’re booked for eight weeks or more, that’s likely a good indicator that business is good and you should start thinking about new or different equipment that can make you more efficient,” he says.

“When business is good is the time to analyze your efficiencies and make sure you’re getting the most out of billable hours. It may not just be field equipment — it might be something in the office. Maybe you need a new computer system to keep up with the flow.”

Follow the ups and downs

Part of gauging when times are good is following the ups and downs. Ahronian says that his previous method was just “floating along” — especially when times were good. “Now I realize that if we’d been more on top of things and recognized how good the times were that we could have made more money and been better prepared for the bad times,” he says. “Many small business owners don’t plan ahead for bad times because it’s easy to get comfortable and float along in the good years.”

But in 2009 Ahronian had the worst year in his company’s history. He had to lay off an entire crew and found himself caught in a Catch-22. “I no longer had the labor crew, so I really needed the equipment. But I hadn’t made those purchases when times were good. I found myself in a really tough spot.”

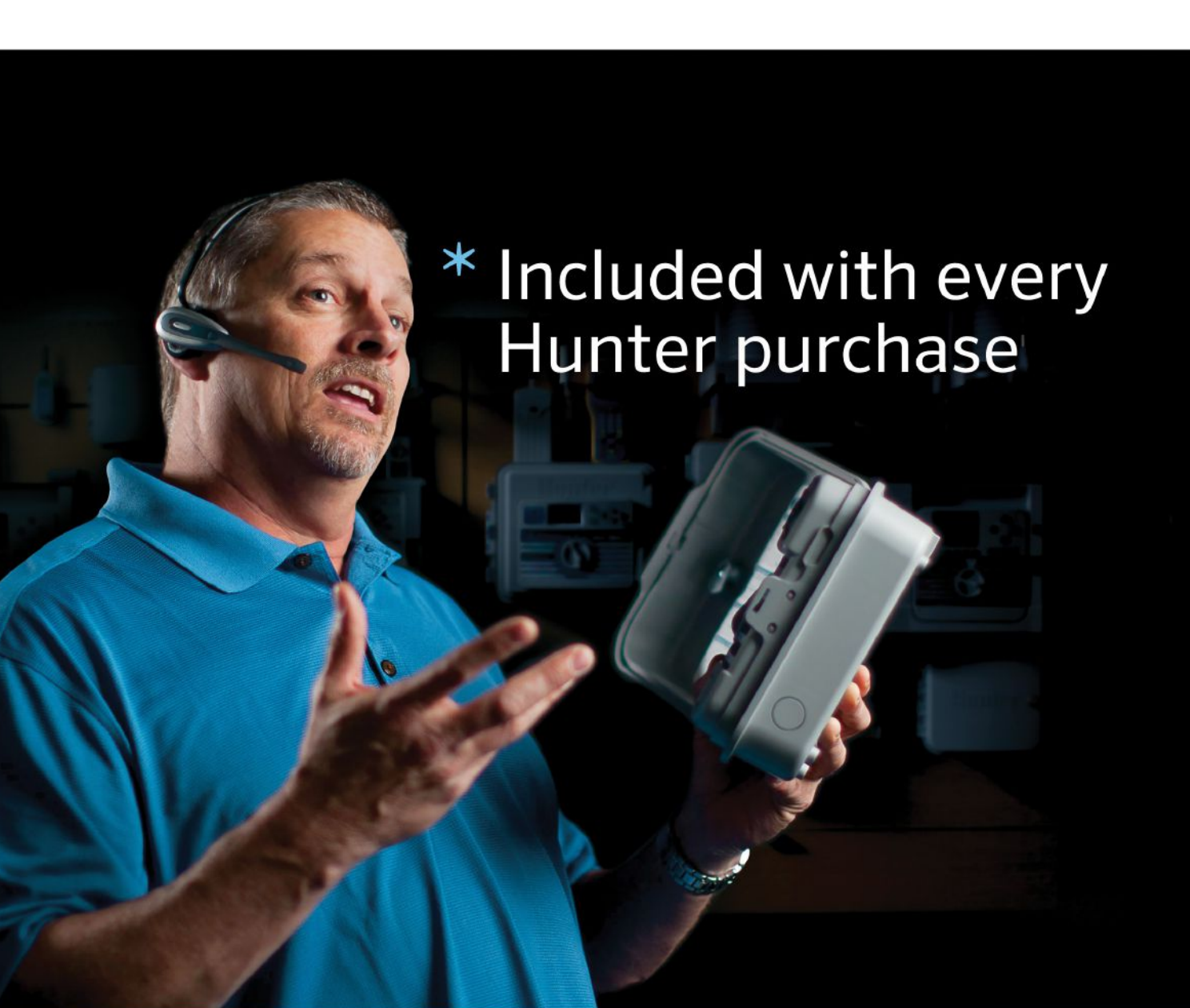
Don’t rest on your laurels

In moving forward, Ahronian says the biggest lesson he’s learned is not to rest on his laurels. He says he’ll never again assume everything will be fine.

“I look at things a little backwards now,” Ahronian admits. “The next time we have a really good year will be the time I say, ‘Uh oh, what do we have to do to prepare when the bottom falls out?’ I’m always going to be on my guard whether times are good or bad.”

Ahronian also has changed the way he sets prices. That used to be done in the spring of each year but now he reassesses prices every month. “Prices for materials are fluctuating every month, so you constantly need to be looking at what you’re charging,” he says. “I’d also advise not pricing jobs out too far in advance. The bottom line is that you have to be prepared. You don’t have to spend your life worrying, but you can’t assume everything is always going to be fine.”

Payton is a freelance writer with six years of experience covering landscaping.



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