

**Hot, hot, hot**

The *Pelargonium interspecific* 'Caliente' series from **Syngenta Flowers/Goldsmith Seeds** features dark foliage and free flowering qualities. This new class of geraniums is an ivy and zonal geranium cross, bred to have better heat tolerance. Colors include orange (pictured), pink and Hot Coral. [SyngentaFlowersInc.com](http://SyngentaFlowersInc.com)



**The bold and the beautiful**

New for 2012, *Gardenia jasminoides* 'Coconut Magic' is a **Ball Ornamentals** exclusive. At 5 to 6 in. in diameter, its creamy white flowers are the largest of any gardenia, and have fragrant blooms all summer long, the company says. The low-maintenance plant slowly changes to golden yellow blooms over the season, and doesn't need pruning. Both its height and spread range from 36 to 48 in., and it's hardy in USDA Zones 8b to 11. [BallHort.com](http://BallHort.com)



**Earned its stripes**

Reaching 20 in. tall and 24 in. wide, **Monrovia's** new Sun Stripe *Agapanthus africanus* 'Mon-Kageyama' is hardy in USDA Zones 8 through 11. Discovered by F.K. Nursery in Los Angeles, the center is green marbled with yellow stripes, bordered with a wide, soft yellow. Blue flower stalks appear in summer, thriving in perennial gardens or containers. It works well in morning sun, but appreciates dappled shade in hot afternoon. [Monrovia.com](http://Monrovia.com)

**Compact stature**

As the dwarf form of the popular 'Lime-light' Hydrangea, **Proven Winners'** 'Little Lime' is one-third the size of traditional hardy hydrangeas. Each year, the summer flowers on this deciduous shrub open soft green and turn pink and burgundy in fall. It does best in partial to full sun, and is hardy in USDA Zones 3 to 9. [ProvenWinners.com](http://ProvenWinners.com)



**Just desserts**

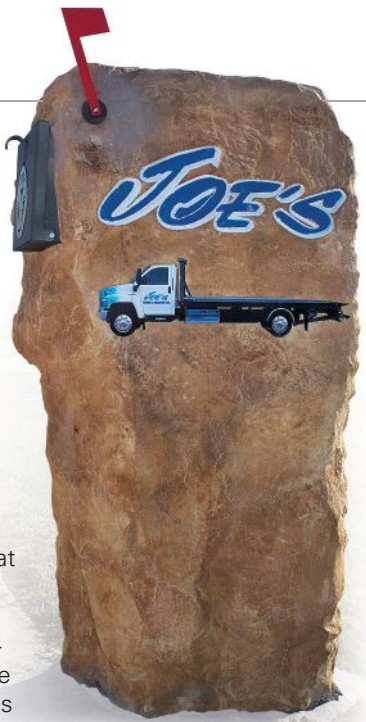
New in **Terra Nova's** Crisp Series (which also includes 'Blackberry Crisp,' 'Peach Crisp' and new 'Pear Crisp,'). 'Apple Crisp' alum root features ruffled green leaves and a white veil. Its tight, compact mounding habit is suited for moderately well-drained, organic soil types in Zones 4 through 9. The heat-, drought- and humidity-tolerant plant attracts hummingbirds and offers nice winter color. [TerraNovaNurseries.com](http://TerraNovaNurseries.com)



**Worthy namesake**

Hardy in USDA Zones 5 through 9, **David Austin Roses'** repeat-flowering English Rose *Rosa* 'Kew Gardens' offers 2.5-in. flowers with five petals. Abundant single flowers are clustered in large heads, similar to a hydrangea. The young buds are soft apricot, opening to white with a hint of soft lemon behind the stamens. The flowers are followed by small red hips, which should be removed to encourage repeat flowering from early summer through the end of the season. Reaching approximately 5 ft. tall by 3 ft. wide, the healthy, thornless bush features upright growth. It was named in celebration of the 250th anniversary of Kew Gardens, the famous Royal Botanical Garden in London. [DavidAustinRoses.com](http://DavidAustinRoses.com)

Concrete boulders bring Engels Lawncare added revenue.



## The boulder business

A small landscape company finds that custom-made boulders are a great way to boost business.

**K**EVIN ENGELMANN, OWNER and operator of Engels Lawncare in Frankfurt, IL, says that finding an additional business or service to complement his landscape company has always been in the back of his mind. When he came across information on Boulder Designs, he knew he had the perfect fit. As a company that develops made-to-order concrete boulder products, Boulder Designs had many tie-in opportunities with Engelmann's landscape business.

While many of the Boulder Designs franchisees are developing commercial business signage with the product, Engelmann saw an opportunity for using the boulders in residential properties. The product not only offers an unusual alternative to traditional business signage, but it can be a beautiful addition to both commercial and residential landscape design.

"I'm a small landscape company, and wanted to find something that was an add-on that I could still do myself," says Engelmann, who is now also the owner of the Boulder Designs of Will County franchise.

"I thought this was something neat — and a little different —

so I gave them a call. It's something I really enjoy. You get to make something from nothing, and end up with a beautiful product that customers love."

Traditional man-made boulder products typically use chicken wire, Styrofoam and a concrete mixture — and as a result, are not always very durable, Engelmann says. Part of the appeal of the Boulder Design custom-made solution is that it uses specially enhanced concrete and is solid. This gives the boulders the same characteristics as the "real thing," he says, and ensures the product is strong and durable.

The secret to building these boulders is proprietary. Franchisees are walked through the process and are then able to

build their own boulders at their own sites.

Engelmann says that in addition to the step-by-step secret of building the boulders, Boulder Designs has been helpful in its marketing support. But, he says, the best marketing has been word-of-mouth.

"It's really a see/touch/feel thing," says Engelmann. "Customers need to see the product to appreciate how neat it is. I find the more I get out and sell, the more new customers I pick up. When people see the product, they love it and want one for themselves."

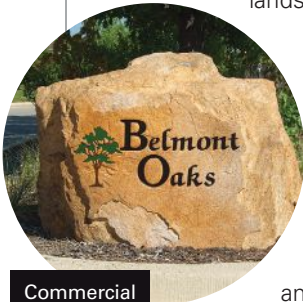
Besides selling to new customers, Engelmann says that this new add-on business has been an opportunity to go back to former clients and pitch something new. And he says it's been a great upsell for his current projects.

"The possibilities are endless when it comes to using the product for landscaping purposes," he says. "A new product we're working on now is benches, which are really sharp."

Now that he has the boulder business, Engelmann says it's another way to keep revenue flowing. "You might get a call for a landscaping job, and then give them a brochure for the boulder business and wind up with that sale, too," he says. "Or it's happened that maybe I didn't get the landscape job, but I still sold them a boulder."

Engelmann says the learning curve for building boulders was manageable and something that any hands-on landscaper would be able to easily pick up. "It helps to have an artistic side — which many landscapers do," he adds. "But it's something that isn't too hard to learn. I felt that the cost investment was relatively low for the opportunities you have to make that money back. For me, it's really been a great decision."

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



Commercial signage is a perfect fit for this add-on biz.

### » SERVICE SNAPSHOT

**ADD-ON BUSINESS:** Boulder Designs of Will County

**WHY BOULDERS:** "I was looking for something unique that not everyone else was already doing," says owner Kevin Engelmann. "There's not a lot of competition for this, and there are protected territories through the franchise."

**PRIMARY BUSINESS:** Engels Lawncare

**NO. OF EMPLOYEES:** 2

**CLIENTS:** 90% residential; 10% commercial

**SERVICES:** 80% maintenance; 20% design/build

BY DAVID WEINSTOCK &amp; CURT HARLER

# TEXAS DROUGHT TEACHES (BUSINESS) SURVIVAL SKILLS

Three Lone Star State LCOs learned an important marketing lesson: **Focus on irrigation.**

**T**he summer of 2011 was a record breaker in Texas. Texans experienced the longest stretch of the highest daily temperatures, accompanied by the least amount of rain, in recorded weather history.

In East Texas, for example, there was not a single day in July in which the maximum temperature failed to rise above 100° F, nor was there any instance of rainfall. All segments of the growing industry — landscape, agriculture, cattle and turf farms — were scorched. Water became more precious than oil. By summer's end, the state's bellwether Green Industry — cattle — was looking at one of its lowest inventory levels ever. With no grass for animals to graze on and precious little surface water to drink, even the wizened cattle producers were hanging it up.

For the most part, the Texas land-

scape industry fared better. As fears over dwindling water supplies increased, numerous communities passed water-use restrictions, limiting lawn watering from once or twice a week to once or twice a month. But a number simply made adjustments, moving into other enterprises that cushioned the losses the water scarcity created.

True, some Texas landscapers pulled their horns in — laying off crews, parking trucks, waiting for rain. And yet one Dallas firm, Southern Botanical, actually did well because of the drought.

## Drought-intensive profits

"It made us real busy," reports Alan Richmond, the company's vice president of irrigation, drainage and lawn treatments.



Drip irrigation installation has become increasingly popular.

Founded in 1995, the company has 150 employees and a fleet of approximately 50

vehicles. Its business is derived from Dallas Metroplex residential and commercial properties.

Southern Botanical gained a lot of its drought-season revenue servic-

## ARID SUMMER

Randy Mase of Tyler, TX, had fewer landscaping contracts than normal this summer. Lawn fertilization, seeding and some construction work helped keep one of his three crews busy during the drought season.



ing customer irrigation systems. “The drought exposed a lot of irrigation system flaws,” Richmond says. “We do a lot of maintenance work on existing irrigation systems.”

They also made time to add water-retention materials to their clients’ landscapes. Expanded shells and commercial soil additives were among some of the materials they use, though Richmond declines to identify which brands they employed.

The company’s new strategy is to “water deep and less frequently,” Richmond notes that when watered less, turf tended to probe more deeply into the

soil with its roots for moisture.

In addition, they installed a lot more evapo-transpiration (ET) controllers on irrigation systems. Costing \$1,500 and up, the controllers self-adjust soil moisture to make up for the portion removed by the plants, while accounting for evaporation and transpiration on the sites. They began the ET-controller installations last year on both residential and commercial properties.

Southern Botanical employees saw a lot of sunburned plant material while in the field this summer. It caused them to focus more on plant materials and to make more visits to do so. It was as

a result of the increased visits that they spotted the coverage issue.

### Shift in emphasis

Yet another Dallas firm simply redirected its operational emphasis from planting to construction.

“The early part of the summer was not easy,” admits Lambert Landscape Co. Director of Garden Development Jud Griggs. “By the beginning of August, we stopped all our planting operations and focused on construction.”

A succession of replacements and negative client complaints forced the switch, he says.

“Most of the smaller groundcover plants fried in the heat,” Griggs adds. “Lawns everywhere were scorched. There was just no point in taking plants out of the greenhouse and placing them into an environment of incessant heat.”

The most telling damage he recalls seeing was a large, mature red oak that was healthy and vibrant in the spring — and covered with flashing yellow and brown leaves, a sign it was dying, by summer’s end.

Founded in 1919, the privately held Lambert Landscape Co. normally employs 180 people and has a fleet of 82 vehicles, plus equipment. It derives nearly all its income from residential accounts in the Dallas Metroplex, although reduced income brought the company some projects from the Austin and Wichita Falls areas.

The summer slowdown in residential business caused Lambert Landscape Co. to reduce work hours to 32 hours a week, and then resort to layoffs. The good news is that, by mid-October, nearly everyone had been rehired.

Designing and building patios, fountains and walls normally make up about 55% of the company’s summer revenues. This past summer, it comprised two-thirds of capital intake.

“We did a lot of irrigation repair and maintenance as well,” says Griggs. “Any turf without irrigation took a beating this summer.”

The hotter weather forced them to use a number of dry-weather con-

struction techniques, such as pre-wetting stone and using additives to make sure concrete didn't set up too quickly.

A number of Lambert clients, faced with municipal water-use restrictions, resorted to hand-watering to keep their sensitive plants alive. The heavy clay soils in the area caused a lot of overwatering problems that company crews had to educate their clients about, and then troubleshoot.

Surprisingly, says Griggs, the landscape input industry didn't reduce prices against lagging demand.

Because of area water restrictions, Lambert has begun talking to its clients about drip irrigation. "We're also using more permeable surfaces to capture the rainwater when it does come," Griggs notes.

The region's climatologists are saying the drought could continue for as long as a year (see "More to come?"



## MORE TO COME?

In late September, Texas State climatologist John Nielsen-Gammon revealed his belief that this drought resembles a mega-drought that began in 1950 and ended in 1957.

Current thinking in meteorology links southern Great Plains droughts to La Niña. A strong one emerged last fall, which fizzled in early summer. At press time, a new La Niña was emerging, according to scientists at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) — bringing with it the promise of another dry Texas winter.

The argument for this being the start of an extended drought is compelling. Nielsen-Gammon said the same warm ocean temperatures that fueled the droughts of the 1950s are present in the tropical region of the Atlantic Ocean today.

There is no guarantee this drought will last as long, but if it does, Texas landscapers have already demonstrated droughts don't faze them any more than other weather systems do. Knowing what services to sell and which varieties to plant will see them through.

box above). Griggs agrees with their assessment.

"We've not seen the full effects of the summer drought yet," he predicts.

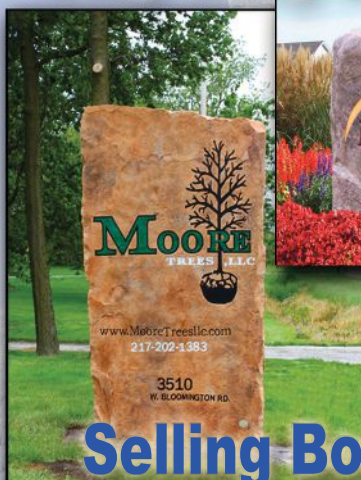
"If we face another tough winter with

cold temperatures and freezing, things could get really bad."

That will likely bring about a lesser dependence on non-native species.

Lambert crews are using native spe-

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## ARID SUMMER

cies wherever they can, especially drought-resistant ones.

### Back to basics

“Encore azaleas,” says Randy Mase of Tyler, TX-based Mase Landscape Co., “were the worst this year.”

Instead of blooming once each year, the azaleas should bloom all year.

“But when the temperature hit 112° F and the relative humidity fell to 14%, they died, everywhere,” Mase says.

A self-described “landscape artist,” Mase’s firm serves the well-to-do of Tyler’s oil-rich population. He normally runs three crews. But this year he’s down to one.

Born and raised in Tyler, Mase got started in what he calls the Great Freeze of 1983. “I started out with one truck and one part-time employee, and projected my income at \$30,000 that year,” he recalls.

The Freeze of which he speaks was



**TOP:** The drought made the hard red clay of East Texas even harder to excavate this summer, making small drainage projects like this one a little longer to complete.

**BOTTOM:** Construction projects like this pool and hot tub kept companies like Mase Landscape Company of Tyler, Texas, and Lambert Landscape Company of Dallas busy this summer.

an unseasonal cold streak that brought March temperatures down to freezing and near-freezing levels. “The people of Tyler had dead plants all over their yards. It killed every plant in town,” he explains.

By year’s end, Mase grossed \$1 million and employed 25 people.

This year — between the delayed effect of the recession and the hot, dry summer — his company was forced out of its artistic pursuits and into more mundane tasks, such as lawn seeding and fertilization.

He’s been selling some of his clients on the virtues of zoysia grass. Heat-resistant, thick sodded, and wear-tolerant, he said it’s an easy sell once customers see an established turf. **LM**

---

*Harler is a freelance writer from Strongsville, OH. Contact him at [curt@curtharler.com](mailto:curt@curtharler.com).*

PHOTOS COURTESY: MASE LANDSCAPE COMPANY (TOP); MASE LANDSCAPE COMPANY

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Ted Hofer

At Plainfield, IL-based Spring-Green, Chief Executive Officer **Ted Hofer** has a lot on his mind. To start the new year, he took a minute to opine about financing, marketing, the strength of the industry's customer base and other issues affecting his business and the industry overall.

## TOP TRENDS

► **Educating the customer.** A customer's cultural practices are a deciding factor in the quality of their lawns. One of our challenges in lawn care has always been to make sure customers understand that mowing at the right height and watering properly are important to the aesthetics of their lawns. In addition to the aesthetic appeal, there are extensive environmental benefits gained from having properly maintained turf, so now we take it one step further and let the customer understand that by mowing and watering properly, and by using our service, they are having a positive impact on the environment.

► **Lawns are still being maintained.** While the lawn care customer base may not have grown over the past few years, it's not declining severely, as you may have seen in other industries. Many people are spending more time at home than ever before. They're eating in more frequently and taking fewer vacations, so they want their homes and their properties to look good. Despite the economic downturn, and the unpredictable future ahead, most lawn care users have kept their service.

## TOP OBSTACLES

► **Access to credit.** Many Spring-Green franchises are looking to expand and accelerate their growth, but the lack of access to credit has slowed a business's ability to achieve its long-term goals. This is true for most small businesses today. They would like to grow but are often unable to get financed through traditional means. In today's lending environment there are still plenty

of million-dollar deals getting done, but the lower loan amounts (\$25,000 to \$200,000) have been more difficult to secure.

► **Increasing costs.** This past year has seen significantly increasing costs in fertilizer and fuel, two key components of our business. To offset some of these cost increases, Spring-Green franchises went back to the basics and utilized a daily driver's report to track product usage and vehicle mileage. They made sure their equipment was properly calibrated and tracked their fertilizer usage daily. They used routing software to schedule tight routes for each day's work. Then they monitored the mileage being driven each day. Lawn care businesses certainly experienced a tightening of margins in 2011 and I'd expect 2012 pricing to reflect the increasing costs of doing business.

## TOP OPPORTUNITIES

► **Increasing our marketing complexity.** Although I think of lawn care as a service that you don't want to over-complicate, there are some areas of our business, such as marketing, in which we can delve deeper. We want our franchisees to keep a "database mentality" when it comes to marketing, and they do so by maintaining detailed customer and prospect databases.

► **Annual plans.** One of the great things about lawn care that many companies don't take advantage of is that it's fairly easy to put together an annual business plan. During winter, the Spring-Green support team works with franchise owners to create a plan for the upcoming year that focuses on areas of the business such as staffing, equipment and marketing. After the spring sales season, our team revisits the plan, evaluates where the business will be at year's end, then makes educated managerial decisions during the second half of the year to improve bottom lines. By maximizing potential cash flow they are able to fund next year's marketing investment and keep the cycle turning.

## INSIDE INFO

**Company:** Spring-Green

**Headquarters:** Plainfield, IL, with 122 franchises in 26 states

**Employees:** 350

**2010 revenue:** \$34 million

**Key to being a maintenance leader:** In lawn care, a leader needs to run an operation that can generate business and get the work done on time. So at Spring-Green we make sure our franchise owners have a strong operational focus while also maintaining a marketing mentality.

In lawn care, there are operational realities that can't be ignored. A certain amount

of work needs to be completed each year and a schedule has to be maintained throughout the year to finish on time. Our franchise owners track their progress against their production schedule while accounting for real-life factors such as weather and employee turnover.

As they deal with daily operations, our franchise owners need to be able to maintain a marketing mentality in order to take advantage of each sales opportunity. They execute and follow through on their marketing activities with the same passion as the production side of the business and train their staff so that everyone feels comfortable making sales.

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**Landscape Management**



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[ Coming in February ]

## MAKING THE MOVE: M&A

Mergers and acquisitions have always been part of the industry and a way for companies to grow quickly. But these deals come with a unique set of business challenges. We'll talk with some companies that have taken the plunge to find out what they've learned.

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For turfgrass producers in the state of Louisiana, getting a high-profile college coach to promote natural turfgrass was like scoring a winning play in the final seconds of a football game.

### LD/B Solutions

One contractor fronts a home with fairy tale cottage curbside appeal to win the Illinois Landscaping Contractor Association's Gold Award.

### Get Growing

An economic study confirms the vital role the Green Industry plays in providing entrepreneurial opportunity, jobs and income to U.S. Latinos.

### i-News

We pressed on (through 2011), hoping that the economy would turn around, and that it would be heading in a positive direction by now. While there have been some positive signs of growth this past year, we still have a long road ahead of us.

## Landscape Management

# Meet the LM Team



**DAN JACOBS**  
Editor-in-Chief

Jacobs is a veteran of the Green Industry and an award-winning journalist. During his 20-year career, he has written for a variety of newspapers and magazines. He is a past president of the Press Club of Cleveland and a graduate of the University of Cincinnati and John Carroll University. He joined *Landscape Management* in 2006 as Managing Editor and was promoted to Editor-in-Chief in April 2011.



**BETH GERACI**  
Senior Editor

Geraci has worked as a professional journalist for more than 15 years, including six years as a writer for the Chicago Tribune. A graduate of Allegheny College and Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism, Geraci is an award-winning reporter who has expertise in both print and online media.



**MARTY WHITFORD**  
Editorial Director

Whitford is an award-winning journalist and editorial leader at Questex Media. He has served Questex's Green Group for four years, including two years at the helm of *LM*. He steered *LM*'s reader-driven print and website redesigns that helped the brand win a record number of awards from the Turf & Ornamental Communicators Association (TOCA). Whitford brings 18 years of experience in business-to-business integrated media.

# MYBIGGESTMISTAKE

LESSONS LEARNED THE HARD WAY » BY CASEY PAYTON



Andrew Weilbacher found that growing his number of crews gave him more headaches — and less profit.



Andrew Weilbacher improved his company's performance after downsizing.

**COMPANY:**

Weilbacher Landscaping

**HEADQUARTERS:** Millstadt, IL

**OWNER:** Andrew Weilbacher

**2010 REVENUE:** \$500,000

**PROJECTED 2011 REVENUE:**

About the same

**CLIENTELE:** 80% residential;

20% commercial

**SERVICES:** 70% retaining walls; 20% paver patios; 10% design/build

**WHILE MANY PEOPLE** tend to think of growing their companies in terms of adding employees, Andrew Weilbacher says that having too many crews was a mistake for his business. It became tough to manage multiple crews, and he was

getting callbacks on jobs he didn't personally supervise because mistakes were being made.

For a time, Weilbacher, who owns Weilbacher Landscaping in Millstadt, IL, says he had about 10 employees and three separate crews going out on jobs. Though he grew the business from doing side work on his own into a full-time career, he figured that adding more crews was the best way to move forward and grow his business. But what he found was that having his hand in the work and overseeing it as much as possible was actually more effective for him.

"As the economy got shaky and I cut back my employees to just three or four crew members over the last couple years, I've found that I'm actually making more money and dealing with a lot less problems," he says. "My quality control is much better because I'm able to be at the job myself most of the time."

Weilbacher says he started the business as a hands-on owner and has found that it works better that way for his business.

"With a few crews going out that I wasn't personally working on, I was getting callbacks that the work wasn't done well enough or there were mistakes," he recalls. "That's a big problem for my business. Most of my jobs are weeklong jobs, where we start on a Monday and finish up by Friday. If we get a call over the weekend that something needs to be fixed before we get paid, it means spending half a day back on that property on Monday instead of starting the next job."

Since downsizing to one key crew with himself as the leader, Weilbacher says he's no longer getting those callbacks. "It's my company, and I'm looking for perfection," he says. "I understand that a laborer getting paid \$12 an hour isn't going to care if it's perfect — but I do."

Today, customers are happier, and Weilbacher says he's enjoying a simplified payroll. He says that paying 10 employees each week was really eating away at his profits, and he started to feel like he wasn't making as much as he should be. The extra work he was accomplishing by having multiple crews just wasn't paying off with all the

callbacks he had to handle. While things have much improved, Weilbacher says one problem he continues to have is finding good employees. Though he's currently happy with his crew, laborers tend to come and go — and Weilbacher says that finding good help is difficult.

"Just recently, I went through four laborers to find the one that was great," he says. "One of the biggest lessons I've learned from that is the fact that you have to be your employees' boss, not their friend. You need to find the best person for the job and not worry about hurting anyone's feelings. What I do now is give employees a two-week trial period. I explain up front that if it doesn't work out, they'll still get their paycheck, but we'll have to part ways."

Weilbacher says that knowing whether to cut down on the number of crews is really a fine line for small businesses like his.

"Everyone always wants to know how many employees you have, and they think that it's somehow a measure of how good you are," he says. "But a bigger business isn't necessarily a better business. After all, it's not about what you bring in, it's what you take home. I've definitely found that I have less headaches and more money — and I'm much happier with the way things are today."

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