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## The path down memory lane leads right back to the present

**J**osh just finished his sophomore year of college. Sammie is days away from becoming a high school senior. Where did the time go?

As a boy growing up in the Midwest, the time it took to graduate from high school and go to college seemingly dragged on forever. The time since has passed more quickly than ever. I'm not sure how that works. Maybe it has something to do with Einstein's Theory of Relativity. He did once explain the concept this way: "When a man sits with a pretty girl for an hour, it seems like a minute. But let him sit on a hot stove for a minute — then it's longer than any hour. That's relativity!"

I guess it's my wife's fault, then. Our 21 years of marriage (nearly 24 as a couple) have whizzed by in the blink of an eye because of my beautiful bride.

One way to relive those years is through the gauzy mist of memory. Ironic isn't it? The years seem to have flown by, so the memories should be fresh. I should be able to draw on those images with the same clarity that highlights watching last week's characteristically bad round on the golf course — something I'd rather forget, but no. Those memories persist rather stubbornly.

The other way to recall the past is to page through the increasingly dusty photo albums wedged into boxes in the basement. There's something set-

ting and calming about leafing through those old Kodak Instamatic images. Sifting through the photos recalls comforting times. They're a reminder that despite the frenetic pace at which we all move, there were once more manageable moments.

But there's another reason to pull out those old photographs, one that connects that idyllic history to this modern world.

The Internet provides an endless stream of mindless banality. But every so often, I stumble across a site created by someone particularly clever, someone who truly grasps the power of the Internet and its ability to reach people in ways that would be challenging if not impossible otherwise.

My current obsession (and the reason for that trip down memory lane) comes from a variety of websites where people post those long-stored images of themselves alongside photographs in which they recreate (as much as possible) the same scene. They strike the same poses, wear clothing and do so in the same settings they were in years, often decades, earlier. Just type "now and then photos" into your favorite search engine and you'll come across any number of websites featuring side-by-side comparisons of photos.

Some are funny. Some are heartwarming. Some are daring. Some are flat out strange.

I'm not sure exactly what makes this so engaging. Maybe it's that connection between the old and the new. I can still look on my office wall and see the first issue of this magazine, published half a century ago. There are plenty of Green Industry businesses whose longevity makes us feel like teenagers. Whether you're a young upstart or a veteran enterprise just showing a little gray around the temples, send us your family's now-and-then photos. Maybe we'll share them on our pages, when *Landscape Management* celebrates 50 years in publishing later this year.

LM's own version of "now and then" photos — our very first magazine cover from 1962 and the most recent cover.





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# PROGRESS



## Keep on truckin'

**F**or the past 50 years, pickup trucks, vans and trailer combos have been the most popular vehicles for mobilizing work crews and equipment in the landscaping industry.

In the mid-'50s, Ford introduced its F-100 truck series with the first automatic transmission and overhead valve V8 engine, commonly called the Y-block. It also introduced two other irresistible features: the chrome grill and the four-wheel drive.

The more compact pickup was popularized during the '60s, when Toyota and Nissan entered the North American truck market. In the '70s, the Ford F-150, Chevy Silverado and Dodge Ram were introduced.

Today, landscaping trucks come in a wide variety of truck bodies, including dump trucks, flat beds and more. They fall into one of three weight classes: lightweight, medium range and heavy-duty.

### Custom commercial

Many of today's landscapers are investing in highly customized, medium-duty trucks designed to eliminate the operation of trailers.

Tony Bass, president of Super Lawn Trucks, Fort Valley, GA, has been capitalizing on this trend since the early '90s.



A custom-painted Nissan NV

### From four-wheel drives to alternative fuels, maintenance trucks continue to move forward.

He sells a highly specialized landscaping truck system designed to store and transport tools and equipment.

Nissan recently revived the commercial van with its new NV model. Joe Castelli, vice president, Commercial Vehicles and Fleet, Nissan NA, says he believes the NV is ideal for landscapers for a number of reasons, including its versatility and mobility.

"A commercial van must serve many more functions today, including acting as a mobile office for time spent on the road or at a job site," says Castelli. "We've made storage and productivity items integral to the design, too."

The NV's driver compartment allows the operator to organize the paperwork, business cards and equipment needed to handle multiple jobs. The vehicle has a full-sized center console capable of accommodating hanging files or a laptop computer. The lid slides forward to provide an efficient work surface. And, the passenger seat folds down to provide another flat work surface.

In the Ram, improving the organization of tools and equipment meant adding the RamBox, a cargo management system with adjustable cleats. "It combines lockable, lighted storage bins in the truck's bed walls with enough space to fit toolboxes, but also equipment such as rakes, blowers and pruners," says Nick

Cappa, spokesperson for Ram Truck Brand, Chrysler Group LLC.

In the age of the Internet and smart technologies, more truck manufacturers are developing Wi-Fi systems in their vehicles for mobile functionality. GM has developed a Wi-Fi system available on select models that turns its work trucks into a wireless hot spot within a 150-ft. range. Ford Work Solutions is a bundled package of technologies for running businesses remotely in its work trucks.

Today's landscapers are saving money by downsizing their trucks and learning how to do more with less. "There was a time when a large fleet made me happy," admits Dean Snodgrass, vice president and one of three brothers operating Dennis' 7 Dees Landscaping in Portland, OR. But now, he says, "we realize that we don't necessarily need large, heavy trucks on-site all the time and for every job. We are always rethinking the size of vehicles necessary."

San Francisco-based Cagwin & Dorward used to rotate its trucks out of day-to-day operations about every 10 years. "In this current economy, we are stretching our budget by extending the life of our trucks up to 15 years if necessary," says Steve Glennon, vice president, treasurer and chief operations officer.

The big gas-guzzling vehicles that landscapers thought they needed in the heady days of the '90s helped put many in the fast lane toward bankruptcy once the recession hit. To become more economical, landscapers are now moving away from fuels they've traditionally used, such as diesel and gasoline. Instead, they are turning to propane, biodiesel and natural gas for their long-term economical and ecological value.



## Just say 'no' to naysaying

**T**he other day, I went to my usual café for a latte. It was late afternoon, and I really needed a boost.

But once I stepped inside, much to my surprise, I saw that in just one day's time the café had released its entire staff and replaced it with a new one. Not one familiar face greeted me.

Uh-oh, I thought, this does not bode well.

The old staff was professional. They'd worked there for years. They knew my order without asking; cut me a deal every now and then; piled on extra sandwich meat whenever I asked; and called me by name. They gave me freebies on my birthday, shared stories about their kids and were quick to serve me.

But this time, when I strolled to the espresso bar to place my order, I waited. And waited. And waited...for someone to help me. No one did. Two guys stood in the back, chit-chatting. The cashier was shooting the breeze with a coworker as well. And the new manager sat at a table talking on his cell phone — looking right at me.

The grossly untrained cashier finally came over to take my order. I happily told her what skim milk is and where the refrigerator was. I would have explained how to make a latte as well, but we didn't get that far.

Because I had ordered a large.

"Coffee drinks only come in medium," she said, standing next to a stack of large cups.

"Really?" I asked. This was new to me. "But I'd really like a large, and the cups are right there," I said. "I'm willing to pay for it."

She called the manager over. When he finally did come over and heard the situation, he had just one thing to say: "Lattes only come in medium."

And that was that. I left, sans latte.

Now, I could easily have accepted the medium. It would have tasted the same. But it was the principle of the thing.

I used to go to that cafe nearly every day. Now I

go only in times of desperation (read: never).

I've worked in the service industry many a time. I've worked at cafes. I've worked at clothing stores, record stores, even a frozen yogurt stand. In every one of those jobs, my managers drove home one thing — if a customer asks for something, just say "yes."

Whatever we had to do to make it happen for the customer, we did it. If a customer wanted to return clothes after they'd clearly been worn, we shut our mouths and gave 'em a refund. If the food was taking too long to come out of the kitchen, dinner was on the house.

And guess what? Our customers appreciated it, or at the very least were placated. And they returned time and again, to spend money.

When it comes down to it, there is no word more irksome to a customer than "no". Have you ever said it? How did that work out for you? As a customer yourself, have you ever heard it? How did that work out for them?

In today's competitive marketplace say "no" even once and there's a good chance the customer won't be calling on you again. It sounds dramatic. It's not. There are just too many other businesses out there willing to do whatever it takes to ensure customer satisfaction. Let yours be one of them.

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**Customers appreciated it, or at the very least were placated. And they returned time and again, to spend money.**



*For the second  
straight year,  
unusual weather  
gave us an  
extremely  
challenging start  
to the season.*

BY **DAN JACOBS** EDITOR-IN-CHIEF



# The winter (and spring) of our discontent

**S**nowplows sat idle, gathering dust instead of snow. Temperatures blinked to late spring levels in February before alternating between record heat and below freezing for much of the country. It sent contractors everywhere scrambling and launched their 100 Days of Hell as much as 45 days earlier than in years past.

“Everyone is scrambling to find out what it means for bugs and weeds because it’s uncharted territory,” says Phil Fogarty, owner of several Weed Man franchises in northeast Ohio. “We’ve never had this combination of things happen, let alone any one of them.”

While so much of what Green Industry professionals do is dictated by the weather, preparing and planning for the season takes place around the calendar. And while Mother Nature rarely abides by exact dates on the calendar, she doesn’t usually vary her schedule by so wide a margin as she did this year. It’s forced maintenance teams out well ahead of schedule and wreaked havoc on lawncare programs.

“As you look at how people make their applications, those who were in a routine of looking at a calendar and thinking, ‘This is the time that it goes,’ better adapt this year,” says Kevin Frank, associate professor and extension turf specialist at Michigan State University. “It’s obviously not

the case so far.”

“It’s craziness,” says Frank, who in late March had just returned from an overseas teaching assignment. “I don’t know how to describe it. Usually I go to China this time of year because I figure by the time I get back the season will just be starting.”

Instead, he was about a month late. Not dealing with a typical year is, well, typical. Rarely does the average season materialize. Average is just the balance between the highs and lows of extremes. An average season, if such a beast exists, certainly hasn’t appeared in any widespread form in the past few years.

“Two years ago, we had snow cover the entire month of March,” Fogarty says. “We didn’t make our first applications until March 31st or April 1st or 2nd. You couldn’t see lawns from Thanksgiving until April Fool’s day. Here we have the opposite of that. After two really, really bad winters, we’ve got a year where we’ve had almost no winter.”

“Last year we had the wettest year ever; then we had the mildest winter on record. Then we have a spring that starts off with four or five record temperatures in a row.”

Such unusual weather has implications for a variety of services.

“You get used to when a pest or when a

## COVER STORY

disease is going to show up,” says Jim Zwack, director of technical services for the Davey Institute. “If everything is running three, four or five weeks ahead, it becomes a little more of a wild card. You’ve got to juggle your lineup because you’re not used to dealing with this problem or that problem at that time of year. You can’t rely on the way you’ve always done it. In a year like this, that might not be good enough.”

### Maintenance

Besides losing revenue from the highest margin service he offers (snow plowing), the unusual weather forced Roscoe Klausing, owner of Lexington, KY-based Klausing Group, to adjust his maintenance plans.

“It’s been a killer,” says Klausing. “You’ve got a block of hours that has to be performed in the month of March — that’s mulching. In April you’ve got a big block of hours and that’s mow-



A lack of winter and early warm weather has left a lot of turf in rough shape. Many tree leaves and flowers arrived far earlier than expected.

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ing. As soon as people start calling and saying, the grass has to be cut right now, you're stealing from that (first) block. It's been really, really challenging."

Challenges are part of life in the Green Industry. And like many other difficult situations, the key is good communication with clients.

"As much as is possible, we're trying to educate people," Klausing says. "That's the best tool that we've got. You can't talk to customers in terms of weed and feed. They have to understand what we do, even if you have a good lawn care in place, there are variances within every season. There has to be some level of tolerance on their part."

Tolerance and accommodation. Klausing is working with his customers to provide the level of service his customers demand without losing the profit he needs.

"By far, 98% of our customers have fixed-priced contracts," Klausing says.



*"With the extended season we're going to have, we're going to see more weed pressure this year, and I think we're going to see some increased spraying. And callbacks are going to be a problem this year with homeowners."*

**DEREK MILLER**, SOUTHERN REGIONAL SALES MANAGER, BASF

"You can't start mowing three weeks early and still be expected to adhere to a weekly visit that was sold to start April 1 and end the last week of October.

"We make clear that we are not going to exceed the number of occurrences in the contract. That may mean we go 10-14 days between visits in the heat of the summer. We can adhere to your budgets, but quality and service could be impacted by a change in the weather."

Most people understand the situation, and about 15% have already purchased a few additional mowings, Klausing says. The rest have opted to see how the summer goes, and if there's a need, purchase those extra mowings later in the season.

### 100 Days of Hell

Memorial Day might mark the traditional start of summer, but it's April Fool's Day that traditionally begins contractors' busy season. February and March



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**“We were on a site and found a place where petunias had wintered over. This is a summer annual that should die back in November when it starts to get cold. These were exploding in March with blooms.”**

**ROSCOE KLAUSING,**  
THE KLAUSING GROUP

are normally spent planning. For many, those months were spent in the field.

“Those guys have been cranked for the last few weeks,” says Derek Miller, southern regional sales manager for BASF.

Areas that traditionally are covered in snow through the winter months not only spent much of the season bare, they were far warmer than normal.

“There was no winter,” Frank says. “We never had frost under turf this year. There was never frozen soil up here all winter, which is pretty remarkable. Then you get off to the fast start that we got off to with spring; it’s going to be interesting.”

Interesting, challenging and unexpected. And that’s not just for contractors. Chemical manufacturers are having their own issues.

“When you forecast something for April, and now it’s March and your manufacturing plant is trying to do just-in-time manufacturing, it compresses that schedule,” says Adam Manwarren,

Product Manager — Turf & Ornamental for FMC Professional Solutions.

“We’ve had a few stock-outs, which is a good problem to have, but you never want to keep the customer waiting.”

When FMC does its forecast, management also provides a plan for a good year, which includes a 10% to 25% bump in product. FMC, anticipating the need for its post-emergent products, is acting on that higher production plan.

“I’ve seen increased demand a lot earlier than I would have ever anticipated,” Manwarren says.

## Lawn care

The early warm weather forced lawn care professionals to apply their pre-emergents much sooner than they typically have in the past. Doing so this early in the year might require a split application. Products have an expected duration. If those products are applied 30-45 days sooner than normal, they’ll break down that much sooner. In other words, some areas might need a second round of pre-emergent application, and will very likely need additional post-emergent attention.

This serves as both a challenge and an opportunity for lawn care professionals. Companies that offer pre-sold programs will need to convince existing customers to pay for an extra application. It’s either that, risk the wrath of a customer unhappy with a stressed lawn, or eat the cost of product, fuel, labor, etc.

“Instead of starting a month later, we started a month earlier,” Frank says. Thus, “your program isn’t going to come out exactly the same.”

Fogarty isn’t sure if the weather is creating opportunities “but we’re on a really good pace this year, and so is most every operation I talk to in our group,” he says. “They’re way ahead of last year’s sales. We’ve done a lot of marketing things to push that along. And the economy seems to be getting better. I don’t know what combination of factors is making it happen, but we’re way ahead of pace.

“It’s been easier to get people to get into a conversation about their lawns when it’s not covered in snow and they can start to see weeds and growth.”

But the weather is creating some challenges.

“From an economic perspective, the lawn care operators should be in a position to capitalize on it — as long as they have the manpower ready to go,” Manwarren says.

And Fogarty’s addressing that.

“You plan to start around a calendar date,” Fogarty says. “You can’t plan to start whenever the weather breaks. We’ve got to bring people on, hire them, get them trained and have trucks ready. Even though the weather was