

A second set of hands

Independent landscape design firms fill the role of staff designers for a fraction of the cost.

By EMILY SCHAPPACHER

Last June Patrick DuChene quit his full-time landscape design/management position to offer his services as an independent designer. DuChene Design Solutions, based in Branchburg, N.J., currently meets the design needs of 20 regular clients and counting, all whose businesses have grown and improved since bringing on DuChene as an extra set of hands, he says. It's a win for everyone, DuChene adds. He's able to offer his landscape design skills to multiple firms, while the company owners receive professional designs without the overhead costs of a full-time employee.

"That's the business model that makes this such a benefit to me and to the landscape company," DuChene says. "I saw what the economy is doing, and I saw a real need for what I'm doing."

Cooperative Design Resource (CDR) is another independent landscape design firm. Since last

year, the five-person cooperative has offered design and sales services to landscape contractors, suppliers and architects in the Denver metro area. About 90 percent of its jobs are for residential clients.

"Our part is to take the workload off the contractors so they can do what they need to do to build the design," says Jennifer Verprauskus, a CDR partner and the firm's marketing manager. "The projects they're getting are going to be really good, and they don't have to have a hand in it and micromanage. They can trust us it's going to get done."



Patrick DuChene



Patrick DuChene (designs pictured here) has about 20 regular clients.



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HOW IT WORKS

DuChene Design Solutions provides landscape designs and presentations for primarily residential projects to design/build firms throughout the U.S. Via conversations with clients and by using file-sharing services like Dropbox, DuChene can analyze his clients' properties through photographs and land surveys no matter where they're located and get a good feel for the job. His services cost anywhere from \$45 to \$100 an hour, depending on what the design entails.

For example, DuChene will charge more for jobs requiring 3D modeling or animation. Regardless of the hourly fee, DuChene's services are a "humongous savings" for landscape contractors, particularly those who are in a period of growth but are not in the position to hire another employee, he says.

"The average salary of a landscape designer is \$35,000 to \$45,000, and if

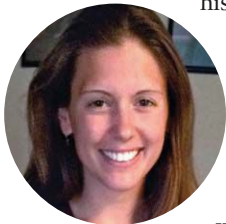
you add in the expenses that go along with that—a vehicle, cell-phone, benefits, uniforms, a computer—that number goes up into the \$60,000s," DuChene says. "If my clients aren't selling landscape jobs, they don't need me. I approach each job as if I am an employee of theirs, but I'm not. I'm there to help them."

CDR charges a design fee up front, a minimum of \$750 depending on the complexity of the design, and then a flat percentage of the project's total cost if the design is sold. The firm touts a combined 135 years of landscape design and sales experience.

Both DuChene and Verprauskus agree the biggest benefit of outsourcing landscape design work is the cost savings for the company owner. Verprauskus also has found many of CDR's clients value the sales services the firm offers, as it's another piece of the puzzle they don't have to worry about.



Sample projects from Cooperative Design Resource, which serves the Denver Metro area.



Jennifer Verprauskus



"The sales part is a huge part of our model," Verprauskus says. "Some contractors weren't confident in sales or design but could do a good job with the install. When we go out to a project we are representing that company, and when we make a sale we are selling on behalf of that company."

One aspect of outsourcing design jobs that some contractors find challenging is having less control during the design process, Verprauskus adds. While

The Goods: DESIGN/BUILD

KICHLER 2700K DESIGN PRO LED FIXTURES

The warm-white 2700K color temperature option will be available in two Design Pro LED 12V two-in-one water and accent lights, three Design Pro LED 12V wall wash accent fixtures (pictured here), 18 Design Pro LED 12V deck and patio fixtures and 46 Design Pro LED 12V path and spread fixtures.

STAY WARM

This warm, white option is ideal for enhancing yellow, orange and red hues in foliage or the natural earth tones found in siding or other building materials, Kichler says.



WHITER WHITE

A 3000K color temperature option is already available for all of these fixtures, giving customers an additional pure white option.

STICK TO IT

The new fixtures adhere to tight LED binning tolerances for color consistency.

CDR offers clients the opportunity to tweak or modify a design, some clients find it difficult to not be involved each step of the way. DuChene agrees this can be an issue, so his design process includes what he calls a “progress proof,” which is a black-and-white design concept he offers clients during the early stages of a project to make sure he’s on the right track.

Other hesitations some clients face is that working with a third-party company will make communication more difficult or that they’ll be overcharged if they don’t have visual proof of how much time was spent on a design, DuChene says. But building relationships and establishing trust can ease these uncertainties and establish a long-term partnership that works for everyone.

“It is a subcontractor relationship, but we see ourselves as partners because we help them and they help us,” Verprauskus says. “The clients’ best interests are our best interests.”

Schappacher is a freelance writer based in Charlotte, N.C.

The Ticker: DESIGN/BUILD

Proven Winners named the Rockcastle River Trading Co. its first Proven Winners Botanical Trail, a designation bestowed to a property that integrates Proven Winners plants into a landscape containing indigenous plant material. Rockcastle River Trading Co. is located in Livingston, Ky., on the family property of **Jon Carloftis**, who maintains the grounds.

Now available on the **Landscape Management** website is a free, editable spreadsheet from **LM** columnist and go-to Green Industry financial expert **Frank Ross** and **A Better Way 2 Learn**. Visit LandscapeManagement.net/downloads to access Ross’s estimate summary spreadsheet, which allows you to plug in direct costs, overhead and net profit to determine job break-even point, gross margin and more.

a better way 2 learn			
Estimate Summary Sheet			
Contract No.	Job Name	Estimate Date	Estimate Total
Client Name	Address	Estimate By	Estimate Date
Contract Amount			
Contract Amount	\$ 40,000.00	100.00%	\$ 40,000.00
Direct Material	\$ 12,000.00	30.00%	\$ 12,000.00
Direct Labor	\$ 10,000.00	25.00%	\$ 10,000.00
Other Direct Costs	\$ 1,000.00	2.50%	\$ 1,000.00
Total Direct Costs	\$ 23,000.00	57.50%	\$ 23,000.00
Gross Margin			
Gross Margin	\$ 17,000.00	42.50%	\$ 17,000.00
Overhead Applied			
Overhead Applied	\$ 3,000.00	7.50%	\$ 3,000.00
Profit on Material	\$ 1,000.00	2.50%	\$ 1,000.00
Profit on Labor	\$ 1,000.00	2.50%	\$ 1,000.00
Profit on Other	\$ 1,000.00	2.50%	\$ 1,000.00
Total Overhead	\$ 5,000.00	12.50%	\$ 5,000.00
Total Estimated	\$ 28,000.00	70.00%	\$ 28,000.00
Net Profit Available	\$ 12,000.00	30.00%	\$ 12,000.00
Break-Even Point			
Break-Even Point	\$ 40,000.00	100.00%	\$ 40,000.00
Labor Cost per Hour	\$ 12.00		\$ 12.00
Material Cost per Hour	\$ 20.00		\$ 20.00

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Tricks for techs

Brickman's Joe Ketterer shares five pointers for lawn care applicators to increase efficiency with landscape bed weed control.

By MARISA PALMIERI

When it comes to effective and efficient application techniques for landscape bed weed control, Joe Ketterer has a few shortcuts up his PPE-approved, long-sleeved shirt.

Ketterer, a certified pesticide applicator with a bachelor's degree in ornamental horticulture from Pennsylvania State University, is a 30-year veteran of the Brickman Group. He serves today as a regional production specialist for the Rockville, Md.-based national landscape company, providing in-house training and research/development capabilities in the areas of labor, materials and equipment.

Ketterer presented, "Best Practices of Weed Management in Landscape Beds," during an April webinar hosted by *Landscape Management* and sponsored by Nufarm.

He covered many of the basics, such as the importance of reading pesticide product labels, but he dove deeper to encourage attendees to think differently about product selection and application techniques.

"There are some (chemical) products small companies see and say, 'That's too expensive—I can't afford it,'" he says about product choice. "But if you take the time to apply the products properly and it drastically reduces the amount of hand weeding you have to do, you can afford it."

Regarding techniques, Ketterer offers five tricks to make landscape bed weed control applications easier.

1 Think custom. ACME Spred-Rite granular spreading tools are a staple in Ketterer's operation for precision granular material application in beds (typically preemergent herbicides). The standard tool comes with a green plastic paddle and a clear plastic tube. Ketterer has aluminum paddles custom made to "bulletproof" them for commercial use and extend their life spans.



2 Consider premixed products. Many lawn care operators (LCOs) overlook consumer-oriented, store-bought pesticides, but not Ketterer. He likes to keep a few jugs of this type of specialty product at the ready for specific situations, such as treating an unexpected poison ivy patch. Keeping in-house prepared products on hand is an alternative; however, it's important to remember bottle labeling requirements and to keep the product labels and MSDS on the truck.

3 Fabricate solutions. When working in beds, it's vital to protect nontarget plants adjacent to spray areas. Ketterer does so by modifying the top of a 32-ounce sport drink bottle and affixing it to the end of a spray wand to create a drift guard.

He starts by cutting the bottle along the top ridge and drilling a hole through the bottle cap (slightly smaller than the spray tip threads). Next, he removes the spray tip from the wand, screws the bottle cap onto the wand and replaces the spray nozzle. Finally, he screws the trimmed bottle into the bottle cap. At that point, if the plastic interferes with the spray pattern, he'll remove more of the plastic. "You can buy a drift protector for \$7 or \$8 apiece or make one with a recycled sport drink bottle in under two minutes," he says.

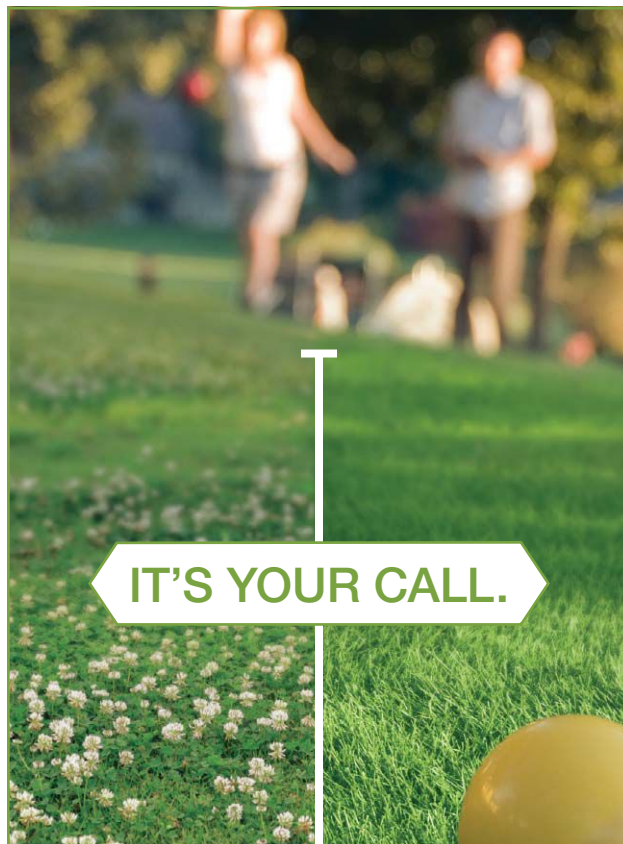
» WEB EXTRA

To view a recorded version of the bed weed control webinar, presented by Brickman's Joe Ketterer and Virginia Tech's Jeff Derr, Ph.d., visit LandscapeManagement.net/webinars.

The Ticker: **LAWN CARE**

The **Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)** and **Army Corps of Engineers** proposed a rule under the Clean Water Act that would regulate fertilizer and pesticide use on properties near any water, including man-made water bodies, ditches and flood plains. Aaron Hobbs, president of **Responsible Industry for a Sound Environment (RISE)**, opined on the new rule, noting professionals would need to obtain permits to treat such properties and that could cause additional difficulties. The rule is open for public comment until July 21 and viewable at buff.ly/1fx80Zv.

Bayer CropScience opened the doors to its North American Bee Care Center in Research Triangle Park, N.C. The \$2.4 million facility will act as an educational resource and research hub for stewardship and best management practices pertaining to honeybees. While research has been focused on agriculture so far, projects are in the works related to urban settings, primarily the impact of pesticides and like products on bee populations.



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4 Wick on. Don't forget about specialty equipment for targeting specific weeds in sensitive situations, Ketterer says. A wick applicator, for example, looks like a hockey stick

with a paint roller on the end. "You can wipe glyphosate onto the weeds to selectively take them out," he says. "It's a pretty cool little tool that comes in handy."

5 Top it off. Filling Spred-Rites with granular herbicides directly from product bags can be tricky, causing spillage and waste. Ketterer recommends using a 5-gallon paint bucket with a lid and pour spout to keep the product dry and make the task easier. **LM**

SAFETY FIRST

It goes without saying that lawn care professionals always should follow personal protective equipment requirements listed on pesticide labels, says Joe Ketterer, regional production specialist with the Brickman Group. Still, everyone needs a reminder, he says. Here's his must-have safety gear checklist.

Don't forget

- ✓ Safety vest
- ✓ Safety glasses
- ✓ Gloves
- ✓ Boots
- ✓ Eye wash bottle (solution and cups)
- ✓ Spill cleanup kit

Wear when applicable

- ✓ Long-sleeved shirt
- ✓ Ear protection
- ✓ Chemical gloves
- ✓ Dust mask

The Goods: LAWN CARE

FMC TRIPLE CROWN T&O INSECTICIDE

Triple Crown is a three-way combination of bifenthrin, zeta-cypermethrin and imidacloprid, offering multiple modes of action on pests, including ants, fire ants, grubs (masked chafer, European chafer and Japanese beetle), chinch bugs, annual bluegrass weevils, ticks, mites, billbugs, mole crickets and more.

APPLY AWAY

The product is labeled for broadcast lawn treatments, mound treatments and landscape applications.



TOUGH ACTING

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PROFITING FROM DESIGN

JODY SHILAN

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Beyond commercial bid/build

Q We do a lot of residential and commercial maintenance. We also do residential design/build work. Business has been good, but we're always looking for additional sources of revenue. Got any ideas?

A Many landscape contractors have a mix of residential maintenance and design/build work as well as commercial maintenance, but there's one category of business that has been overlooked for years that has profit potential. Let's see if you can figure it out what's missing from your business.

- › Residential maintenance
- › Residential design/build
- › Commercial maintenance
- › Commercial _____/_____

Hopefully you figured out that the missing opportunity for your business is commercial design/build work. Not commercial bid/build work but commercial design/build. Give it a minute and the concept will hit you like a ton of pavers.

I came up with this concept about 10 years ago when we did a design/build installation project for a client who happened to be the facilities manager at one of the corporate campuses we maintained. After his project was completed he told me the property owners where he worked wanted to redesign the building entrance and create an outdoor lunch area for the employees. He told me he was interviewing architects, landscape architects and landscape designers about the project and asked me if we wanted to bid on it when the drawings were ready.

I said: "I have a much better idea that I think can work for all of us. Since you already know us and the work we do, why not let us design and build the project instead of hiring a separate designer and installation contractor?" He agreed that made perfect sense and so began our foray into commercial design/build work. We never looked back.

Believe it or not, facility managers have difficult jobs. Regardless of the size of the properties and building(s) they manage, they're responsible for creating and maintaining a budget, managing a

support staff, sourcing service providers, interpreting business contracts and much more. It behooves you to help make their lives easier. Here are some ideas to help get you started

Where to start

First, contact the commercial property owners and facility managers you currently do maintenance or snow plowing for, and let them know you've created a new commercial design/build division specifically for your commercial clients. A colorful and informative marketing piece would be great, too. If not, an introductory letter or initial phone call is a good start. They already know you, depend on you and have a working business relationship with you, why wouldn't they be interested?

Next, set up a meeting with the facility manager and any other influencers to take a walk around the property to discuss existing problems and/or future opportunities. If you really want to impress them, start off by showing them how they can save money on their maintenance bill or snow contract. That should get their attention.

Toward the end of the meeting, ask them to prioritize all the things you discussed and maybe pick the top three. Finally, offer to provide them with some numbers for the proposed work so they can put it into their 2015 budget. This way when they're ready to pull the trigger on the project, the money is already there. Who knows, maybe you'll get lucky and they already have a project in the pipeline just waiting for someone to design it and make it happen.

Facility managers really do have a lot on their plates and would appreciate a helping hand from a friendly face who's already a qualified and trusted partner. When you look at it this way, you can understand how valuable a commercial design/build landscape contractor can be to a facilities manager when faced with outdoor issues or potential projects.

To submit a question for Profiting From Design, please contact Shilan at jshilan@gmail.com.

Taking a stab

York Landscape opts for verticutting to remove thatch and ramp up revenue.

AMONG THE GREATEST nemeses of a lush lawn is thatch, a layer of dead, organic debris that develops between the blades of grass and the soil surface. While contractors commonly turn to power raking to tackle thatch, Pinellas Park, Fla.-based York Landscape takes the high road with its verticutting service, removing thatch and excessive top growth from turf using a machine to slice rows into the ground for new seed to drop in. Owner York Somerville has been verticutting for about 30 years, and says he's seen only a sliver of the Green Industry adopt the add-on, too.

"Customers don't understand what it is or what it does," says Somerville, who first learned the practice in Long Island, N.Y., where he used a verticutter for overseeding lawns. "It's something golf courses do all the time, but it's not as common for residential landscape."

The buildup of thatch can occur on many turf varieties, but it's especially prevalent in creeping-type grasses like St. Augustinegrass, which Somerville often maintains. Thatch accumulation can increase disease and insect problems, cause watering issues and create an undesirable "spongy" feel to the grass, among other complications.

Compared to power raking, Somerville chooses verticutting because it opens up the soil so well.

"Contrary to popular belief, and even information you may find on the Internet, a power rake will not remove thatch," he says. "It only will remove surface debris. The best way to remove thatch is by investing in a verticutter."

GETTING STARTED

Somerville notes some verticutters simply make cuts into the ground while others (overseeders) make cuts and drop seed. He operates a machine that doesn't distribute seed. Those in the South may have trouble finding a suitable machine, he says.

"The verticutters seem to be built for Bermudagrass or grasses you find up North," he says. "I'd been using a machine that was more than 30 years old and it just recently broke. I bought two newer ones but had to modify them to work on St. Augustine."



Verticutting removes thatch and excess top growth from turf.

York Landscape puts a two-man crew on its residential verticutting duties for the four months out of the year it offers the service (typically two months in the spring and two months in the summer). "Larger commercial sites certainly could use verticutting and you'd need a bigger crew," Somerville says.

You can't do much damage to a lawn with a verticutter, he says, but there are some hazards to look out for.

"You just need to be careful to always mark your sprinklers and be prepared to fix one if you break it," Somerville says, adding that's a practice most maintenance companies likely are already familiar with.

Somerville prices his verticutting jobs based on the size of the lawn. In other areas, companies will give consideration

to weather variances and whether their verticutting involves seeding. Although he didn't disclose financials from the add-on service, Somerville says it's proven to be popular among clients and a bit of a revenue booster for the company.

Even so, York Landscape doesn't heavily market verticutting outside of its mention on the company website and through upsells to existing customers.

"You don't need to be a wonderful salesman to pitch this," Somerville says. "It's one of those things that can have a pretty dramatic effect on how a lawn looks and that's always an easy sell to people who are already investing in their lawn."

In addition to being a sure way to remove thatch and thin a lawn, Somerville says verticutting also allows a lawn to breathe, stimulates new growth, aerates and prepares it for seeding. "Verticutting is important to all types of grasses because all lawns create thatch," he says. "It's really a no-brainer."

Payton is a freelance writer with eight years of experience writing about the landscape industry.

SERVICE SNAPSHOT

COMPANY: York Landscape

LOCATION: Pinellas Park, Fla.

SERVICE: Verticutting

WHY: It's the best way to remove thatch, Somerville says, which is a huge problem in his region.

BIGGEST CHALLENGE: Finding equipment. "I have yet to find a piece of equipment built to work well on St. Augustinegrass," he says. "I've always had to make modifications."

BEST TIP: "Look for the best machine you can find," Somerville says. "If you're in a region where St. Augustine is not your primary grass, you shouldn't have an issue with finding a piece of equipment that works great on your lawns."

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