

# WALKER TALK

SERVING LAWN MAINTENANCE PROFESSIONALS

## Finding a better way in Florida

*Lawn Masters' owner Jim Dubberly  
looks for little improvements*

How much does your  
mower really cost?

Filoli Center

Mowing by the book in D.C.



# WALKER TALK

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## Leading by serving

There's the old saying, "leadership is earned and not given." And how is leadership earned? There's another old teaching (Biblical) "Whoever would become a leader, let him be a servant." That sounds like a paradox, and as a business principle, it just wouldn't work . . . "You'd be eaten alive in the dog-eat-dog business world." But this is a principle that Walker Manufacturing was founded on and is trying to follow.

Let me explain. In free enterprise, no one has to do business with our company. Our suppliers don't have to sell us components, the factory employees don't have to work here. Our distributors and dealers don't have to sell our products and our customers don't have to buy them. It's all voluntary. A leader doesn't have much to lead if no one is willing to follow. How successful a company becomes (and the leadership position it attains) hinges on the people who choose to entrust themselves to and associate with the company and its products. Because it is voluntary, this choosing is largely based on how well the company serves the interest of others. What we find is in serving others, we indirectly help ourselves. And due to the trust placed with our company, leadership is attained. It's amazing how strong business relationships become when they're not forced and when the basis of conduct is looking after the other party's interests as well as your own.

Does this sound weak? It isn't. We are working to be a leader and strong competitor in the commercial mowing equipment business. We are both energetic and excited about producing a product that serves our customers and about operating the business in the spirit of being a servant-leader.



*Bob Walker*

Bob Walker  
President

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# Finding a better way in Florida

*Little improvements pay big dividends for Lawn Masters*

**W**hen Jim Dubberly saw the light, it had nothing to do with the house he was wiring. He was observing a mowing crew tackle the new housing development in which he worked, and thought he could do a better job mowing and improve his lifestyle doing it.

So it was, eight years ago. Jim talked the developer and the board into giving him a chance to maintain the property. He gave up his vocation as a journeyman electrician and formed Lawn Masters, Sebring, Florida.

Finding a better way has since been the key to keeping this relatively new maintenance firm growing and profitable.

## Unusually speaking

To hear Jim tell it, there is nothing unusual about his business. Warning! Humble people usually have the most to share.

Just as an example, three of Lawn Masters' five Walker mowers were purchased in 1988 and '89. Each has logged somewhere between 2,400 and 2,800 hours mowing the state's notoriously tough Bahia grass. The mower decks and engines were replaced prior to this mowing season — but these vital parts are still going — on competitors' Walkers.

To be sure, there's something special about the way Jim treats his equipment. He also has discovered



*Owning and operating a lawn maintenance business has given Jim Dubberly an opportunity to grow his own destiny.*

the ideal way to transport, maintain and store

his equipment — right inside two enclosed trailers. One of his trailers is set up with a generator, air compressor and enough parts to keep his mowers going, with minimal downtime. There's plenty of room inside, too, for crews to take breaks and to change clothes, all requisites thanks to Florida's summer heat and humidity.

Finding a better way even creeps into operating procedures. With only three maybe four employees plus himself, Jim has to cover a lot of ground to maintain 250 properties. Anything that saves time, saves



*Four of Lawn Masters' five Walkers: Two of the oldest ones have logged a combined total of 5,200 hours.*





*This enclosed trailer functions as a storage facility, transport vehicle, repair shop and break room.*

energy and money, especially during fast-growing summer months when grass jumps an inch a day.

"Rain, high humidity and sprinklers mean that lawns generally don't dry out until 10:00 a.m.," notes Jim. "But we used to mow early anyway, just to be able to get the work done. The going was slow and mowers used more fuel to get less done." Not anymore. Last year, he bought a string trimmer for all of his employees, and they've since used them in concert until midmorning. Then they clean up and mow for the rest of the day. The new procedure didn't win Jim any popularity points, but it saves wear and tear on the mowers and lowers fuel costs. Jobs

from any comparison with high profile contracting firms or the fast-moving executives who run them. In fact, Jim moved his family to Sebring from West Palm Beach to get away from the fast-paced life of the rich and famous.

"I don't have any business training and I don't have any grand plans," he tells. "I just want to make a good living." Mowing and maintaining lawns has obliged.

The move to Sebring reduced the Dubberlys' earning power substantially. In fact both electricians and nurses — Jim's wife's vocation — make half as much in Sebring as they do in West Palm Beach, but the couple thought the move was worth

get done faster, too, simply because mowers operate only during optimum mowing conditions and all employees are mowing at one time.

### **Business savvy**

Lawn Masters' owner shies away

it. Still, the reductions were a bitter pill. Owning and operating a lawn maintenance business gave them an opportunity to grow their own destiny.

"When I told my wife about my mowing idea, she thought I was crazy," remembers Jim. The developer took him more seriously and so did the board after Jim presented the idea to them. He signed a one-year contract to mow 120 retirement homes in the expanding Cormorant Point community.

The first year, he mowed the property with a combination of midsize walk mowers and garden tractors. The following year, he saw an ad for a Walker and bought one sight unseen. Two more the following year replaced the garden tractors.

"We were killing ourselves with the walk-behinds, and their grass catchers were constantly plugging. The garden tractors just didn't have the maneuverability," Jim explains.

Being one of the first contractors in the area to use a Walker, the machines gave him a competitive advantage in both speed and quality of cut. Lawn Masters no longer has a monopoly on the machine, Jim notes. Nearly every crew that goes by has a Walker. Why not, he asks rhetorically. "They're designed to pick up the high-moisture content

## **Money-making mowers**

If you're in the market for a used mower, don't ask Jim for a deal on one of his old Walkers. After putting somewhere between 2,400 and 2,800 hours on each of his first three mowers, he decided this past winter to replace their engines and decks.

"Factoring in the new engines and decks, and all of the oil, filters, parts and any other maintenance on the machines over the years, I figure each costs me about \$1 an hour to maintain," tells Jim. He says the cost of maintenance is probably a little higher than the average contractor since all of his mowers are subjected to a fairly rigorous maintenance routine, including regu-

larly scheduled oil and filter changes, replacing bushings and bearings before they wear out and sharpening blades at least once if not twice a day.

Adding the \$1 figure to overhead — including employee wages and other direct and indirect costs — Jim estimates each machine has netted him \$50,000 over the years. Not bad. So how much is a new — or newly revitalized — Walker worth? Jim says if it's worth \$50,000 in Sebring, it's worth twice, maybe three times that amount in other areas of the country where contractors can demand more for their work.





*Simple, yet effective: When it comes to loading clippings, a re-engineered sprayer tank gets the job done. But Jim is looking for a better way to handle wet Florida grass.*

Florida grass and move quickly in and around small properties.”

Lawn Masters’ mower lineup today includes five Walkers. The three early ones have 16-hp Kohler engines. The two newer ones have 20-hp Kohlers. All have GHS capability, although one 54-inch side-discharge deck is used for the common areas. Mulching during the growing seasons just isn’t feasible, Jim adds.

### Cattle call

Lawn Masters handles as much grass as any Sebring contractor. In

part because Cormorant Point is one of the few developments in the area that requires the removal of grass clippings. In part, too, because Jim has an economical way to dispose of it.

Twice daily, the company’s 1-ton dump makes a trip to a nearby cattle farm where the animals “literally stampede” to get a taste of the fresh cut grass.

Still, even with the Walkers and the cattle connection, Jim says handling grass is one of the most challenging aspects of his operation.

Truck loaders won’t handle the wet grass, Jim reports, so crews wield a bucket — re-engineered from a sprayer tank — to lift clippings into the back of the truck. “It’s primitive, but it works,” he notes. “But there has to be a better way.”

Since the clippings are used to feed cattle, Jim also has to pay special attention to application schedules. Cormorant Point’s lawns, for

example, are fertilized three times a year, each right after the lawns are mowed to give chemicals a week to play out.

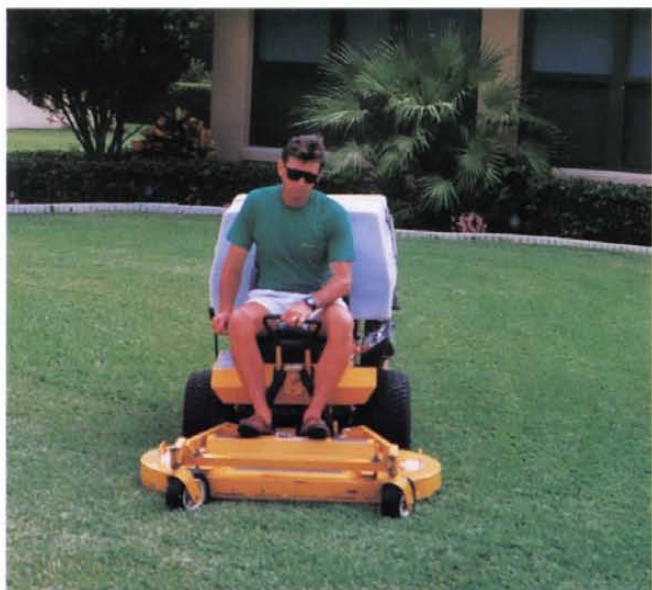
Lawn Masters now maintains 186 properties at the development where Jim has wired about one-third of the homes. And the company maintains 60 plus other nearby properties. At the retirement village, crews mow, blow and edge only. Homeowners take care of their other landscaping needs. The other properties have custom maintenance and landscaping contracts.

“One of the keys to making a decent living in Florida is to sign yearly contracts,” Jim explains. “It’s tough to make a profit in the summer when growing conditions are ideal. Slack, winter months help keep costs in line.”

Another key is to find employees who will put up with the steamy, summer weather. Jim says he pays his employees as much as he can afford, but they earn it, he adds.

This entrepreneur is also choosy about the properties he maintains. Florida sand has the reputation of literally sand blasting decks, blades and blowers. Hence, Jim only maintains properties that are irrigated and lush. To do otherwise is to look at higher operating costs.

One other key, in Florida and elsewhere? Constantly be on the look out for better mouse traps. **WT**



*Jim won’t mow just any property. He looks for lawns that are irrigated and lush. To do otherwise in Florida, where sand can quickly ruin decks, blades and blowers, is to look at higher operating costs.*





*An expansive landscape provides a beautiful setting for Heritage Insurance headquarters in Sheboygan, Wisconsin.*

## Working smart at Heritage Insurance

### *Corporate headquarters is a garden paradise*

**Y**ou know a company is serious about its landscape when it has 100 acres of lawn to mow, maintains 25 acres of mulched planting beds, and has planted more than 15,000 trees and shrubs since the mid 1980s.

If this isn't proof enough, consider this: Heritage Insurance has dressed up its corporate headquarters in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, with 15,000 perennials over the last three years, and each year it installs approximately 2,000 annuals and at least 1,000 bulbs. There is enough gardening and landscaping to bring in 12 to 15 semi truck loads of wood chips each year and enough dormant pruning in the off season to fill up 30 dump trucks (packed down loads) with debris.

All of this . . . and more is the responsibility of Jack Woodland, full-time horticulturist for Heritage. In addition to the above, he is in charge of snow removal and the maintenance of interior plantscaping, and oversees landscape maintenance and installation at seven of

the company's remote sites. Whew! That's a full schedule, and Jack accomplishes it with two full-time and two part-time employees. He also does landscape design and has written maintenance manuals to assist off-site personnel with their maintenance and installation duties.

"The landscaping is more than aesthetics," explains Jack. "An expansive landscaped environment was part of the original design pack-

age 10 years ago when the new office building was built. And company president John Holden has taken a personal interest in ensuring the property is constantly being upgraded." Of course, good first impressions are important whether you're an insurance company or a resort. But there's another driving force behind the greenery. Located strategically off of heavily trafficked I-43 and state route 28, the property

occupies one of the major entrance points to the Sheboygan area. The company wanted to put not only



*The maintenance crew is challenged by a wide range of landscape elements, from huge expanses of wide-open turf to mowing around a variety of trees, shrubs and beds.*







*Horticulturist Jack Woodland has his hands full at Heritage. He stays ahead, though, by working smart and taking advantage of "smart" working tools.*

its best foot forward, but that of the community, as well.

### Speed and versatility

The maintenance crew is challenged by a wide range of landscape elements, from huge expanses of wide-open turf to mowing around a variety of trees, shrubs and beds. The open mowing is left to a Jacobsen HR-15 wide area mower, and two Walkers, each with 42-inch side-discharge decks, do the trimming. As Jack explains the procedure, the "Jake" makes a pass by the office area, swooping in close to the shrubs, but not too close. A Walker will follow picking up the trimming.

"Our charge is to work smarter," says Jack, a graduate of UW - Madison with a B.S. in horticulture. "If we can find a way to reduce the amount we have to trim, we save that much more time and money." A typically "smart" approach would involve grouping or transforming three or four free-standing trees into a landscaped element or island that could be trimmed with one pass instead of several. Another would be to use an attachment wherever possible.

And the availability of attachments for the Walker mower was one of its key selling points. Operators use the rotary brush for spring cleanups, windrowing debris for easy pickup, and for keeping sidewalks tidy. The brush comes in

handy in the winter, too, for dispatching snow on the same walks. Jack says it will handle accumulations up to 2 inches, but really works best for keeping the light glaze off and precluding the excessive use of melting agents which can be destructive to nearby plantings.

The brush is also ideal for cleaning up winter damage, tells Jack. "By lowering the electric power ram just enough so the bristles touch the lawn, the brush does a great job removing dead grass, stones and other left-over debris. It's not like a serious de-thatching, but it still leaves the lawn fluffed up."

### Passing the test

Most of the Heritage Insurance property is comprised of undulating hills and long stretches of flat areas. But there are still a few steep hills that require mowing. "The Walker had to pass the hill test before we bought it," emphasizes Jack. "We found it had a low center of gravity, much lower than the other mowers we tried."

The fact the machine is compact, able to be transported in a pickup, was important, too, to the buying process. Jack maintains four other properties in the city, all belonging to Heritage. He used to drag around a trailer, a process complicated by a lack of storage for the trailer right on site. Now, he just drives the mower up the ramps and off he goes . . . and goes.

To be sure, this is not your ordinary in-house grounds maintenance person. There's not a large tree on the property planted since his arrival three years ago that Jack hasn't hand picked at a nursery. Which means he has traveled extensively to Illinois, all parts of Wisconsin and Minnesota, to name but a few states, looking for the right plant material. Four times a year, Jack saddles up again, this time to visit the company's remote

facilities in the Midwest. Although the maintenance work is left to custodians at each site, the headquarters plans and contracts all other landscape work. And Jack is always available to answer questions via the phone or fax. He recently completed a landscape design project for one of the company's subsidiaries in the state, as well.

Bigger design projects go to landscape architect Daniel Wienbach, Wienbach & Associates, Chicago. Still, Heritage personnel stay keenly involved by submitting a list of plant material suitable to the area's hardiness zone and soil conditions.

The Heritage property is truly something special, combining expansive areas of turf with a grand selection of trees, shrubs and color. From a passersby perspective, the landscape gives the appearance of a



*In addition to his duties at company headquarters, Jack Woodland oversees landscape maintenance and installation at seven remote sites.*

garden paradise. For horticulturist Jack, the paradise is a challenge he surmounts by working smart and taking advantage of "smart" working tools. **WT**



# Stepping up to a rider may cost less than you think

## True cost of a rider vs. a walk-behind

If you're like most lawn maintenance professionals, you started your business using one or two walk-behind mowers. And if you're like most successful entrepreneurs, your business has grown to the extent you now need to purchase additional mowing equipment. Should you buy more walk-behinds, or is it time to consider one of those expensive riders you see some of your competitors using? The answer may surprise you.

### Overcoming sticker shock

An immediate objection to a rider is the purchase price. "I can buy two or three walk-behinds for the price of one rider" is the common reaction. To get a true perspective of the cost of a piece of equipment, however, the purchase cost must be spread out over the useful life of the equip-

ment (see accompanying chart).

Assume the difference in purchase price between an intermediate walk-behind and a zero-turn rider is \$5,000. That's a lot of money. But when this figure is depreciated over the life of the equipment (5,000 hours), it would cost only \$1.00 per hour more to operate a rider compared to a walk-behind. This does not take into consideration other direct and indirect operating costs, only depreciation. Adding in direct operating costs such as fuel, oil, maintenance and repairs and indirect costs such as insurance, transportation and storage, the cost goes up only another 55 cents per hour, for a total of \$1.55 per hour more to operate a rider. Probably not as much as you thought.

Of course, your business will need to have enough cash flow to purchase the new rider outright or to service monthly payments on a lease or installment purchase.

### Rider rationale

The above additional cost may not seem like much to operate a rider and it isn't. But in the competitive lawn maintenance business, a dollar saved is literally a dollar earned. If a rider can't increase your hourly output, then there really is no reason to buy one.

As indicated above, both direct and indirect operating costs are higher for a rider. But so is a rider's pro-

ductivity — to the tune of better than 40 percent according to most industry experts. If you normally bill \$20 per hour for your walk-behind, a rider (see chart) should be able to earn \$28 for that same hour. The increase easily offsets the initial cost of the rider and operating expenses.

In fairness, production gains with a rider will vary, depending on the type of mowing job. While the 40 percent figure is an average gain commonly reported by rider owners, each mowing application needs to be examined to see if a rider is actually faster. On some jobs, of course, a walk-behind is the only choice because of terrain and size of property.

How does a rider cover more ground than a walk-behind mower when the ground speeds of both are about the same? Mowing speed is not all ground speed. Mowing speed depends in large part on a machine's maneuverability, trimming capability, and ability to minimize lost motion and reduce operator fatigue. A compact zero-turn rider holds the overall speed advantage in most mowing applications where both a rider and a walk-behind could be used.

### The human element

Labor is the biggest factor in producing mowing revenue. Contractors build profit by increasing labor output. Again, although all costs are important in any mowing operation, labor is the biggest expense by far. As the chart indicates, labor is anywhere from 10 to 20 times more costly than other operating expenses, and taken as a whole it dwarfs the additional \$1.55 per hour it costs to operate a rider.

The moral? Using labor produc-

### Walk-behind vs. rider profit production

	Intermediate Walk-Behind	Compact ZTR Rider
<b>Revenue (\$ per hour)</b>		
Typical Hourly Billing Rate (assumes +40% typical production increase for rider)	20.00	28.00
<b>Cost (\$ per hour)</b>		
Direct Operating Cost		
Loaded Labor <sup>1</sup>	10.00	10.00
Gas & Oil	.90	1.20
Maintenance & Repairs	.85	1.00
Indirect Cost		
Depreciation <sup>2</sup>	.50	1.50
Engine Overhaul Allowance <sup>3</sup>	.67	.67
Overhead (Insurance, Transportation, Storage, etc.)	.55	.65
<b>Gross profit (\$ per hour)</b>	<b>6.53 (33%)</b>	<b>12.98 (46%)</b>

Note: These figures are approximations but are intended to show a fairly accurate overall picture of typical operations across the USA (average)

<sup>1</sup> Hourly pay rate of employee plus payroll tax, benefits, workmen's comp insurance

<sup>2</sup> Assume full depreciation of the original purchase price of \$2,500 walk-behind/\$7,500 rider over 5,000 hours use

<sup>3</sup> Assume engine overhaul or replacement every 1,500 hrs at a cost of \$1,000



# WALKER NEWS

tively is the most important variable to be considered when selecting equipment. It has been said (and proven hundreds of times over) the difference between a good and bad employee is much greater than the difference between a good and bad piece of equipment. The secret to success in this business is to "weed and feed" employees (weed out the bad ones and give your good ones incentives) — and find your good employees, the most productive equipment for the job.

## Intangibles point to riders, too

When used in the right application, a compact zero-turn rider will allow you to do more work with less equipment, and it will reduce operator fatigue. A rider will produce more revenue and drop more to the bottom line. That says a lot for any piece of equipment. But there are other considerations, too.

Just having fewer machines to transport, store, carry parts for and maintain is a cost savings. Then there are employee training costs to consider. If a rider reduces employee turnover, it reduces training costs and the expenses associated with advertising for and hiring new employees. Also, in a tight labor market, riders open the labor pool to people other than 20-year-old athletic types needed for walk-behinds. Generally speaking, hourly pay rates for physically demanding work (e.g., operating a walk-behind mower) are higher, too.

One last point to consider. Perception is reality. Customers often-times judge a maintenance company by the equipment it brings to the site. An intangible to be sure; it can be argued, however, that a compact zero-turn rider projects a better, more professional image than a walk-behind mower. It just might be the thing that tips a bid in your favor, especially if you're bidding against a competitor with walk-behind mowers. **WT**

## New Options for '96

Several new options are being introduced for '96 Walker Mowers. Many of these options may be installed as an upgrade for an earlier unit:

- 52-inch side discharge/mulching deck with belt driven blades
- Easy deck cleaning and maintenance with tilt-up deck
- Power deck lift for transport
- Tail wheel lock for hillside stability
- All terrain tires for drive wheels
- Single wide tail wheel MD/MT
- Heavy duty deck geardrive (3 year warranty)
- Model MD/MT ground drive speedup kit (up to 7 mph)

Also, new standard features on Model MD/MT include larger 4 1/4-gallon fuel tank and Micro-V transmission drive belt.

## New customer service representative

In January, Tim Cromley joined the Walker staff, to assist in customer service and technical documentation, including the production of Service Bulletins, Owner's Manuals and other technical documents to support the Walker Mower.

Tim is well-suited for the position. He has a degree in Technical Journalism

from Colorado State University. And while working his way through school, he operated his own lawn maintenance



business, using a Walker mower. Tim's experience in the lawn maintenance business and knowledge of the Walker mower will be put to good use.

## Scandinavian dealers to factory

In late January, the Walker factory welcomed two groups of dealers (29 visitors in all) from Sweden and Denmark. Mr. Thomas Horberg, Mr. Lasse Svensson and Mr.



Thorleif Bernston from Grönyte Maskiner AB and Mr. & Mrs. Mogens Hansen from Hansen & Kilstholm, the Walker distributors from Sweden and Denmark respectively, arranged to bring their dealers to Fort Collins. Since several of the dealers were represented by both sales and technical personnel, factory sessions were directed toward marketing, new products, product improvements and technical training.

Sweden has been a leading sales area for Walker — in the top ten sales rank since '87. State maintained church grounds and cemeteries reportedly are major users of Walker mowers in that country. There is even a Swedish dealer selling machines above the Arctic Circle. Denmark is a relatively new market area for Walker mowers.



*Display gardens offer special maintenance challenges*

# Filoli Center turns back the clock

**H**ere's a job most any landscape contractor would enjoy. Maintaining one of California's most prestigious display gardens. Located 30 miles south of San Francisco, Filoli Center beckons back to the early 1900s when wealthy residents built some of the most luxurious country homes of the century. This one, built by William Bowers Bourn II between 1915 and 1917, is still in its original setting.

Located on the eastern slope of the Coast Range mountains, Filoli is comprised of 654 acres and includes a magnificent 43-room mansion and 16 acres of display gardens. The estate was purchased by Mr. and Mrs. William P. Roth in 1936 and it remained in their possession until 1975, when Mrs. Roth deeded it to the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

Today, Filoli Center is open to the

public by reservation and by self-guided tours. Visitors can take tours of the house and garden or hike the nature trails. The beauty of the environs is nearly untouched by time. The original architecture of the Georgian Revival house remains in full bloom as do the gardens, the original design and color schemes of which are maintained to the fullest.

It's the latter that occupies the time of 13 full-time gardeners and more than 100 volunteers who devote their energies to keeping the estate looking its early 1900s best.

## Maintenance challenges

Formal display gardens such as the one at Filoli offer maintenance personnel a set of new challenges, not the least of which, of course, is balancing modern maintenance practices with a tranquil setting. Weed trimmers, leaf blowers and



*Assistant garden superintendent Alex Fernandez devotes approximately 75 percent of his time to actual hands-on maintenance activity.*



*Filoli's Walker was purchased three years ago. It gives maintenance personnel speed, maneuverability and grass handling capability.*

riding mowers, for example, were not part of the estate's original list of tools. And nothing will more quickly awaken a visitor from a 1920s dream state than a Walker mower doing pirouettes around an Irish Yew. A pretty sight, to be sure, but one appreciated more by the operator than a visitor.

To keep noise and maintenance activity to a minimum, Filoli assistant garden superintendent Alex Fernandez schedules heavy maintenance such as mowing and string line trimming to be done on Mondays, when the estate is closed to the public. Small groups might walk through but generally speaking the crews have the grounds to themselves.

Of the 16 acres of gardens, there





*Small reel mowers, working in conjunction with a Walker and Locke mower, give turf areas a golf-green like appearance.*

are approximately four acres of lawn to mow, tells Alex, a recent graduate of Michigan State University with a master's degree in horticulture. Operators employ a combination of Honda rotary mowers, Trimmer reel mowers, a Locke reel mower and a Walker to keep the grounds manicured. Barring bad weather, the task is usually completed by 3:00 or 4:00 in the afternoon — not bad considering early morning fog and heavy dews sometimes keep mowing crews on hold until 10 a.m.

Lawns are mowed once a week from April to the end of November, and spot mowed the rest of the year.

Mulching, although necessary in many parts of the country, is not practical at Filoli and clippings from the Walker and the small reels with catchers are deposited in the estate's compost pile, the product of which is used to amend garden soil. Clippings from the Locke reel are minimal and left on the turf. There are plenty of places to put the compost to work. On average, 20,000 plants are planted annually.

Filoli's Walker was purchased three years ago to give grounds maintenance personnel more speed and maneuverability, tells John Mynott, whose job it is to keep the Walker and approximately 80 other pieces of equipment up and running. "At the time we were looking for a compact rider that would go through small gateways, climb the hills and still be very maneuverable and easy to handle," he recalls.

### ***The sweeper is used three times a year to remove algae buildup from the brick walkways.***

"Then we noticed the sweeper attachments and we were sold."

The sweeper is used only three times a year to remove algae buildup from the brick walkways — after the first major rainfall, before major events begin in the winter and before tours start in February. But when it runs it saves countless hours, John adds. Before the attachment, Filoli workers would put

down sand and water and literally scrub the walks by hand with a brush. With the sweeper attachment, someone applies the sand and water and the sweeper does the rest. "The attachment does a better job, too," says John.

The garden is divided into a number of separate areas, each with micro-climates that allow for a wide range of plantings. Weather patterns in

the San Francisco area also contribute to variety, allowing for a mixture of eastern and western plant life. It's not unusual for the valley around Filoli to receive 30 freezes in a year. And the winter months bring somewhere between 30 to 40 inches of rain. The total rainfall is not much different than Alex's home state of Michigan, except that Californians receive it in half the time. During the rest of the year, the gardens rely on an extensive irrigation system for moisture.

The biggest challenge for the turf area is people, not disease, explains Alex. Foot traffic, the result of better than 60,000 visitors annually, is a major concern. Yet traffic is well marked and controlled. In fact, the turf looks letter perfect, despite people and minimal use of chemicals. Location of the Crystal Springs reservoir nearby precludes large-scale chemical application.

What the lawn area receives, however, is annual rejuvenation through plug aeration and overseeding. And the old saying applies at





*Here, the Walker starts a "figure eight" mowing pattern around the Irish Yews.*

Filoli as well as almost any other property. The best defense against disease is a healthy turf.

#### **Perfect to a fault**

Country estates around San Francisco became popular after the devastating earthquake of 1906. The country seemed to be a safe place to build. And it was, and most cases it still is. Even though Filoli sits just to

the east of the San Andreas fault, bed rock keeps the ground stable. The recent major quake in San Francisco, for example, caused little damage at the estate. Still, a seismic upgrade, including installing a steel frame between the interior walls of the mansion and the brick exterior, will provide additional protection.

There's new construction, too, at the estate. A lecture hall/visitor center is scheduled for completion next year, which is part of a bigger plan to make Filoli even more accessible to the

general public.

Filoli Center has received worldwide recognition for its architecture and gardens. And students from around the world come to work in the gardens. A gardening internship program takes in three to five interns four times a year. Interests vary from landscape architecture to lawn maintenance. Students are taught how to safely operate equipment and routine maintenance procedures.

Operating capital for the

estate is generated equally by endowments, revenue from tourists and fund-raising events. To help keep the 16 acres of gardens in tip-top shape, volunteers are requisites, as well. Upwards of 1,000 people (most of whom are retired) have their names on Filoli's volunteer list working in all aspects of the center's operation, from leading tours to manning the tea shop. Alex himself devotes approximately 75 percent of his time to actual hands-on maintenance; the rest is divvied up among administrative chores, holding workshops and interacting with other training events.

Working at Filoli may not be every contractor's dream. After all, there is a big difference between working for yourself and working for someone else. But short of owning your own business, working at Filoli has other rewards. "It's probably a little more relaxing than working for yourself," notes Alex. "Hours are steady, too." The one similarity, however, is a big one, indeed. Customers come to expect nothing but the best. **WT**

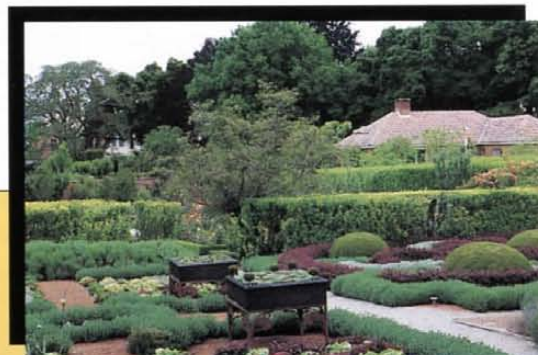
## **Vital statistics Filoli Center, Woodside, California**

- Located on the eastern slope of the Coast Range Mountains. Built by William Bowers Bourn II in 1917. Purchased by Mr. and Mrs. William Roth and later donated by Mrs. Roth to the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

- 16 acres of formal display gardens. Highlights: over 200 Irish yews, 500 roses and a variety of garden settings, including the unusual Knot Garden with its complicated interwoven patterns, the Sunken Garden and the Walled Garden.

- The main residence was designed by architect Willis Polk. It contains 36,000 square feet of floor space, including 43 rooms not counting baths. There are 17 fireplaces, 11 chimneys and a ballroom that measures 32' wide and 70' long. The house is furnished with original pieces, recent gifts and loans.

Tours of the mansion and garden are available from mid-February through early November. Tours are by reservation only Tuesday through Thursday; self-guided tours are available Friday and Saturday. There is an admission charge of \$8.00. For more information call (415) 364-2880 or write to Filoli, Canada Road, Woodside, CA 94062.



*It takes 13 full-time staff members and more than a 100 volunteers to maintain Filoli's 16 acres of gardens.*



# Mowing by the book

**Y**ou're a Vietnam vet, a retired police officer, and you've worked hard your entire life. What are you doing mowing lawns for a living? That's the question *Walker Talk* asked Vernon Henderson, owner of V. Henderson Landscaping, Washington, D.C. His answer gives a glimpse of a person who looks for more out of life than money and the pleasures that go with it. Oh, Vernon is human and he

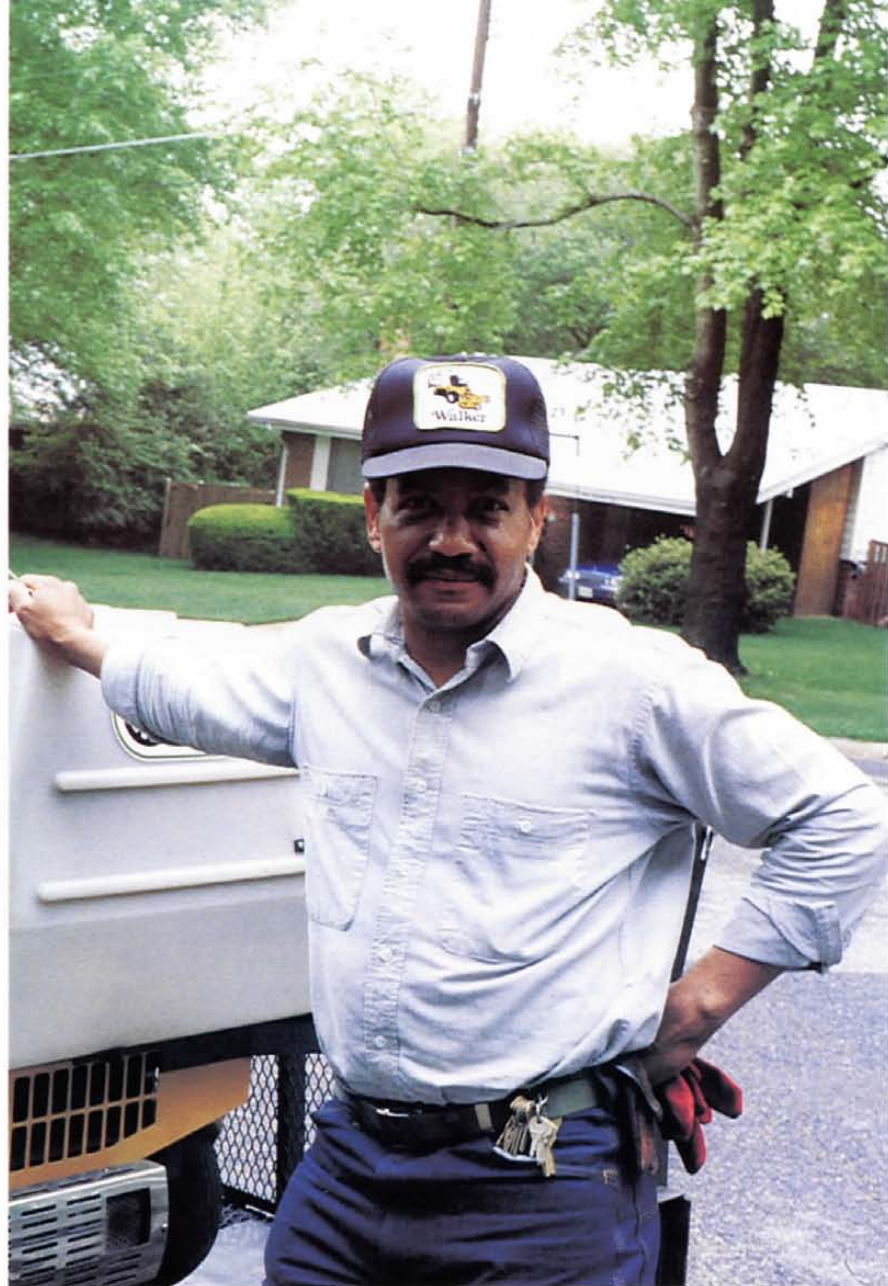
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***"It's not how much money you make, but how much you keep."***

likes money well enough. But he is also driven by a strong work ethic, the need to stay busy and to do something positive. Mowing lawns and landscaping fit the description.

Vernon is one of those people who would like to see at least 48 hours in every day. Even during his 20-year stint with the police force, he ran a dump truck operation and worked overtime for the force. And he started mowing lawns a full three years before his retirement date in 1991. A lady on his beat asked him if he knew of anyone who mowed lawns. He didn't but he found somebody. Himself.

Mowing lawns and landscaping seemed to be a natural way for Vernon to enjoy retirement. Born and raised in Alabama, he has an agricultural background. And his education and interest throughout life have been in agriculture. He also harbors a natural love for equipment. The basement of the apartment complex where his office is located resembles



*A retired police officer and Vietnam veteran, Vernon Henderson is driven by a strong work ethic and the desire to do something positive.*

a new car showroom. Two sports cars and a Harley wait patiently for their owner to rev 'em up. "I'm not materialistic like some people think," explains Vernon. "I care as much for my line trimmers and power blowers as I do my cars and bike."

In some circles, especially mowing and maintenance circles, Vernon might be viewed as a bit eccentric. What other mowing contractor, for example, won't let rain touch his Walker mower? Vernon won't. Not if he can help it. Or who

else retains "problem" customers in part because they are viewed as barometers for their business. That's right. Vernon sees these customers as challenges. "If I can please them, I can please any of my customers," he tells with a grin.

## **By the book**

Looking back, Vernon says both working in the Air Force and in the police department came naturally because he has always gone by the book. That trait carries over into his





*Vernon's grandfather taught him that equipment should last a lifetime. That's one reason he wraps protective towels around his hand-held equipment and keeps his 1988 Walker looking like new.*

business, too. All of his maintenance equipment, from his 1988 Walker mower to his Toro walk-behind and Echo hand-held equipment, is cared for like no other equipment on the planet.

"My grandfather always told me that any piece of equipment you buy should last a lifetime, and I still believe that," says Vernon, who uses nothing but the best synthetic oil and changes it religiously. He lets all of his equipment warm up before he puts it to work, and that includes his line trimmer and blower, each of which is wrapped in a blanket to offer protection to and from jobsites. He doesn't shut equipment down, either, until it has cooled.

Following the rules helps in other ways. Vernon is fastidious about keeping his properties neat and clean. And although he hasn't had any formal business training, he knows that his grandfather was right when he once told him, "It's not how much you make, but how much you keep that counts."

V. Henderson Landscaping is keeping enough to keep both Vernon and his younger brother Vantura busy.

"My brother is amazing," tells



Vernon. "He's great with landscaping and landscaping design. "I'm good at managing the business and buying equipment."

Together with two employees, the Hendersons maintain about 75 homeowner properties and a handful of commercial properties in the D.C. area. The company gets between \$25 and \$65 for regular mowing and maintenance accounts,

***"I don't understand why every contractor doesn't own a Walker."***

with income supplemented by larger landscaping projects like the ones it recently completed for Walter Reed Hospital and the Washington Metro. Vernon also does custom aerating and power seeding, which, he adds, is a real money maker, and a back breaker, too. As he puts it, "I've been blessed. The man upstairs has made me

work for everything." And Vernon wouldn't have it any other way.

## Street smart

Being a policeman and being a lawn maintenance professional have at least one thing in common. The most valuable lessons are learned on the street. When it comes to land-

scaping, Vernon has learned valuable lessons about buying equipment, hiring people and developing long-lasting relationships, all three of which are fundamental to any contractor's success.

"I've bought a lot of wrong equipment over the years," he tells. Not that it was bad equipment, it just wasn't what was needed to get his jobs done, he emphasizes.

One of his first mowers, for example, was an Excel Hustler. Vernon says it was a great mower for larger, commercial properties. But it was too big for smaller, residential yards. A couple of walk mowers sit idle in his garage, too, victims of being the wrong machine for the application.

Vernon saw his first Walker in a magazine advertisement and saw his first mower in real life during a 2:00 a.m. demonstration right at the police station.

"I liked what I saw," says Vernon. "The mower looked substantial and I liked the 16-hp Kohler." He pauses for a moment, then adds. "You know, I don't understand why every contractor doesn't own a Walker." Vernon's machine has 1,000 hours on it, and has never seen the inside of a service shop. The only problems over the last seven years has been a testy carb, caused by using high-test fuel, and a broken hour meter. Still has the same belts and





*Being naturally fastidious is a trait that plays well in the lawn maintenance business. Even then, Vernon notes, you can't please everyone. But you can try.*

tires, too, he says proudly. Although there is no question the Walker — like all of his machines — has been spoiled.

Equipment, however, is easier to spoil and maintain than either employees or customers. Vernon says one thing he's learned about hiring employees is to hire ones who are hungry to work. "Too many younger people live at home and don't really need a job," he relates. "Hire someone who has responsibility and needs a job."

Developing the respect of customers just takes time, Vernon adds, but it can start with something as simple as a work order. That's right. Vernon doesn't sign contracts yearly or otherwise with residential customers. Customers receive a work order that lists all of Henderson's services. They check off the ones they want and sign the form.

"If you don't want my services, just write me a letter to that effect," Vernon tells his customers. "And I'll do the same."

Vernon developed the work order idea early on in his business



*Buying the wrong equipment is part of the learning process, tells Vernon. In most cases, the equipment wasn't bad, it just didn't fit the application.*

after being approached by a couple of homeowners. They asked if he could mow their lawns the following year. When he inquired what was wrong with right now, they said they had contracts to honor.

From the contractor's point of view, there is little honor about fulfilling a contract when someone doesn't want you there, he notes. "A work order puts the burden of

proof on both the customer and the contractor."

### **Biscuits and gravy**

Like too many of his previous employees, Vernon doesn't have to work, either. But unlike them, he wants to and will continue to do so as long as lawn maintenance continues to be fun and he feels he's working toward an end. Vernon wants to develop and grow something that either a member of his family or an employee will want to take over one day. "That really is my goal for this business," he adds. "I've got enough money with the police pension and my savings to live on. After all, you can only eat so many biscuits."

No, there's more to life than eating biscuits or finding a gravy train. Growing up in Alabama taught

Vernon that lesson, as did his stint in the Air Force and serving in the D.C. police force. In fact, he would like to get time to set up a youth program in his home town. After being on the street, he has a good idea of what youngsters need today to stay out of trouble. You can imagine participants in his program would be asked to follow the rules — and develop an appreciation for work. **WT**



# "WALKER" IS THE NEW EMPLOYEE'S NAME

## IMAGINE DOUBLING YOUR REVENUE WITHOUT HIRING ANOTHER EMPLOYEE

SID BURCHAM III, OWNER OF TERRE VISTA LANDSCAPES IN WICHITA, KANSAS, WAS MORE THAN A LITTLE EXCITED THE YEAR AFTER HE REPLACED HIS THREE INTERMEDIATE WALK-BEHIND MOWERS WITH THREE WALKER MOWERS.

HE WROTE TO TELL US WHAT HAPPENED:

*"I think you have built, quite possibly, the BEST lawn mowing machine I have ever seen. I did not own any of your machines last season. This year, I own three with plans to buy a couple more next season. Your machine has allowed us to increase our business 100% from the previous year without hiring another employee. I would not have believed that it was possible but I can assure you that it is.*

*Our quality too has increased considerably. We were able to acquire a couple of major contracts this season and these businesses could not be more pleased with our work. I hold your mowers directly responsible for our success."*



*Discover Walker  
Labor Savings  
to Help your  
Business Grow*

