

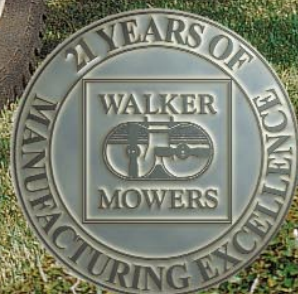
# WALKER TALK

SERVING LAWN MAINTENANCE PROFESSIONALS FOR YEARS TO COME

## Mid-Life Career Change

PERRY SMITH, OWNER OF  
STONEBRIDGE LANDSCAPING  
LAWN SERVICES  
IN GREENVILLE,  
SOUTH CAROLINA

GREEN ACRES LANDSCAPING  
ORCHESTRATING CINCINNATI'S GEM  
OPERATING WITH A CONTRACT  
FOLLOWING DAD'S FOOTPRINTS



VOL. 18



# WALKER TALK

CONTENTS **VOL.18**

**3**

## **Green Acres Landscaping**

George Moore Jr. didn't plan on growing his company so fast. But he did, and now his name is synonymous with landscaping in Charleston, South Carolina.

**6**

## **Orchestrating Cincinnati's gem**

Many parts come together for Xavier University's grounds crew to compose this beautiful whole.

**9**

## **From selling equipment to mowing lawns**

Before leaving the sales department for an OPE dealer to start his own lawn maintenance business, Perry Smith did his homework.



**12**

## **Do you operate with a contract?**

If you're operating without a contract, you may be missing out on one of the most effective ways to communicate with your customers.

**14**

## **When "Shoestring" turned 16**

Scottsdale landscaper Joe Martoccia got his nickname by making things last. And that's no small feat in Arizona's hot summers.

**17**

## **Bob T's tech talk**

**18**

## **Walker news/products**

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## MAKE YOUR OWN SATISFACTION

**T**he long-term prospects of most businesses depend on satisfied customers. We work every day on the idea that customer satisfaction is one of our highest priorities. Yet, in reality, we do not have complete control in satisfying a customer. We are dependent on a number of other people in our supply chain to deliver satisfaction — one of the most important being the customer himself or herself. There is a part each customer must play to bring satisfaction with a product or service.

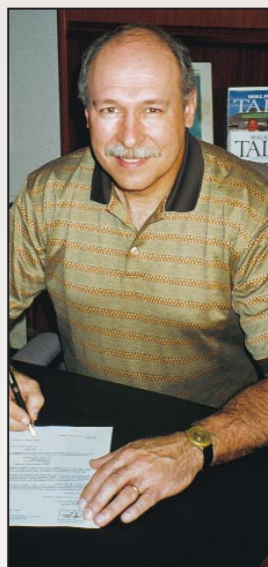
Modern culture has taught the popular idea "Make me happy" — a passing of responsibility for satisfaction. Mass merchants have popularized "Your satisfaction guaranteed" and "If you

are not completely happy, we will gladly refund your money." This leads to the axiom "The customer is always right." All of this ignores the truth that customer satisfaction is not the total responsibility of the supplier. The customer's behavior has a lot to do with his satisfaction.

We have more than our share of good Walker Mower customers. We are thankful for each one. For those who are unhappy or dissatisfied, we would

quickly acknowledge our responsibility — our machines have not always been perfect and without defect. But when problems come, we also would challenge our customers to do some self-examination. Ask if this problem was caused by: wrong use, failure to maintain, abusive treatment, an accident, altering the equipment. Ask yourself, "Can I prevent this from happening again and thereby improve my satisfaction?" Also ask your dealer for advice on the same question.

We will bend over backwards to help customers who are helping themselves by carrying out the best possible ownership of their Walker Mower. You make us look good, and we will do our best to show our appreciation by working for your satisfaction.



*Bob Walker*

*Bob Walker  
President*



# Green Acres Landscaping

## *Ten years later....*

**G**eorge Moore Jr. says he never planned on growing his company to the size it is today. Yet, in 10 short years, his company, Green Acres Landscaping, in Ridgeville, South Carolina, has grown from a one-person operation into a large, full-service landscape company. And it has a reputation that gives it entrée into some of the most prestigious commercial properties in the Charleston area.

**Green Acres' owner George Moore Jr. with maintenance manager Pam Sweatman.**  
"It seems that whenever we needed a person, he or she showed up."

How did this former drug store manager do so much in so little time? "I don't really know," he says, shrugging his shoulders. "I have a strong faith, and have had lots of help from so many people over the years. When starting the business, I didn't know anything about the industry. But I can say now that I truly love what I do. That makes all the difference in the world — having a desire to get the day going and doing the best you can do."

Moore's story is not unlike that of others in the industry. Wanting to try something different one day, he purchased two consumer riders with his credit card, and started mowing lawns. The riders lasted him four months.

"I realized I purchased the wrong equipment," he admits, "so I visited an equipment dealer and bought a Walker. It had a Kohler 16-hp engine. I purchased two decks, as well."

Yes, the Walker cut circles around his old mowers, but it did something he wasn't expecting, too. Since he could finish his routes faster, he had more time to solicit and plan.

That one, seemingly innocent move early on, to buy the right mower for the







**Top: Two of Green Acres' nine Walkers with a Dixie Chopper in the background. Green Acres owner George Moore Jr. thinks there is a place for wide-area mowers, mid-mounts and Walkers on his properties.**

**Center: On Daniel Island and other Green Acres' properties, the Walkers maintain the higher-profile areas.**

**Bottom: "You have to continually inspect your work in maintenance," says maintenance manager Pam Sweatman.**

application, gave Moore the boost he needed. He purchased another Walker in six months, and the rest is history. Today, Green Acres Landscaping operates nine Walkers, two powered by liquid-cooled engines and seven air-cooled models.

"I think I have more mowers than decks," he laughs, "but the Walkers have been vital to my growth. Nothing compares to them for quality of cut, and there's not a better vacuum system on the market."

Moore continued to provide maintenance services exclusively until five years ago when he picked up a \$15,000 construction project. Today, construction, including irrigation installation, accounts for 65% of Green Acres' revenue.

## EFFICIENCY PAYS OFF

The maintenance side of his business has held its own, despite construction growth. According to maintenance manager Pam Sweatman, Green Acres' mowing crews find their way to 130 high-end properties weekly. Accounts include business parks, resorts, high-profile homes, and a good share of the Hardees and Burger King restaurants in the Charleston area.

Sweatman, who has been with Green Acres from the start, remembers those early days with the Walker.

She says, "When I was mowing, I usually had an audience watching me. At the time, I think we were the only Walker operator in the area. Now, just about every other trailer has a Walker on it."

Interestingly, Green Acres' mowing trailers have other competitive brands, too. A Dixie Chopper, a couple of Great Danes and a Toro with an 18-foot cut operate on some of the same properties as the Walkers, albeit at a different application.

"Three years ago, our mowing crews had to become even more efficient than they already were," tells Moore. "Fuel costs were on the rise and labor was short. To speed up our operation, we purchased a Toro wide-area mower. The move improved our efficiency to the point we went from nine mowing crews to six. Since then, we've added a couple mid-mount zero-turn mowers to complement our Walker lineup.

"We used to employ the Walkers for everything, including properties that required upwards of 50 acres of mowing. It just wasn't efficient to use them there, or in other areas where we couldn't take optimum advantage of their unique features."

As Moore points out, one of the keys to a successful maintenance operation is efficiency. The Toro, for example, paid for itself in two years, and he expects similar returns on his new mid-mounts. As for the Walkers, his crews don't put nearly as many hours on them as they once did, although they are still a fundamental part of the operation. In fact, this year Green Acres purchased two new Walkers.

"They are ideal for high-profile areas and for picking up debris," relates Sweatman. "As far as I'm concerned, there will always be a place for a Walker as long as I'm here."

Moore doesn't disagree. He just prefers fine-tuning his operation so he's using the right equipment for the job. He asks rhetorically, "Why burn out a Walker or two and use extra employees when a wide-area mower will get the job



done faster?” There is a place for wide-area mowers, mid-mounts and Walkers. The key, he says, is to know when and where to use them.

The Green Acres maintenance staff attends to properties four days a week; the fifth day is allocated for servicing equipment. Altogether, there are six maintenance crews, three mowing crews (wide-area mowing) and three enhancement crews. In addition to mowing, the maintenance crews, equipped with Walkers, provide other maintenance services such as pruning, weeding and edging. Each crew has three to four crew members.

The three mowing crews operate the wide-area mower and 72-inch mid-mounts. These one-person crews tackle the big mowing jobs, e.g., the long medians that stretch for literally miles in some of the resort communities. Enhancement crews do the mulching and small plantings.

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**“People are key, but don’t leave out the Walkers as part of my success equation.”**

On the construction side, Green Acres has six crews: two irrigation crews, two planting crews and two that can do both. Three tractors, a skid-steer, a backhoe and dump truck, along with a full complement of attachments, provide the muscle in this division.

Both the maintenance and construction crews are currently working on projects on Daniel Island, just across the Cooper River from North Charleston.

“We are literally building a new city here,” tells Moore. “This is one of those exciting projects that you can follow from the ground up. Our construction and enhancement crews are very busy, and so are our mowing and maintenance crews that are mowing upwards of 45 acres on the island alone.”


## GROWING WITH PEOPLE

Green Acres Landscaping grew from literally nothing to projects such as Daniel Island in a relatively short time. The company operates on a 100-acre property 30 miles northwest of Charleston. In addition to Green Acres, Moore also operates Reevesville Tree Farm, and his wife Karen operates a poultry farm.

When pressed again to divulge his secrets to success, Moore reiterates his love for what he does, and tips his hat to his people, many of whom, like Sweatman, have been with him from the beginning.

“It seems that whenever we needed someone, he or she showed up,” says Moore, who emphasizes that no matter how good you think your company is, it’s only as good as the people who do the work. From employees such as landscape maintenance manager Sweatman and landscape manager Mike Manning to supervisors like Jake Brooks, Gilbert Mack, and Mack Ross, who have been with Moore nearly from the beginning, Green Acres looks to its people to bring continued success. Moore understands the value of his most important resource — all of his employees — and works to keep them informed and working together like a team.

Of his 100 employees, approximately 25% are Hispanic. He brings them into the company culture in part by printing the company newsletter in both Spanish and English, and having a translator at all meetings, including monthly safety meetings.

“People are key, but don’t leave out the Walkers as part of my success equation,” he emphasizes. “Finding the right equipment for the application has allowed us to provide the best service possible while maintaining the high level of efficiency needed to be successful in today’s marketplace. There’s a place on our trailers for several quality brand names, but I can say categorically, we wouldn’t be where we are today without the Walkers.” 

## YOU CAN’T EXPECT IF YOU DON’T INSPECT

Providing quality is a requisite for success in the maintenance business, and Green Acres Landscaping is nearly compulsive when it comes to ensuring the job is done right.

“He says it all the time,” tells Pam Sweatman about George Moore’s expression, “You can’t expect quality results if you don’t inspect.”



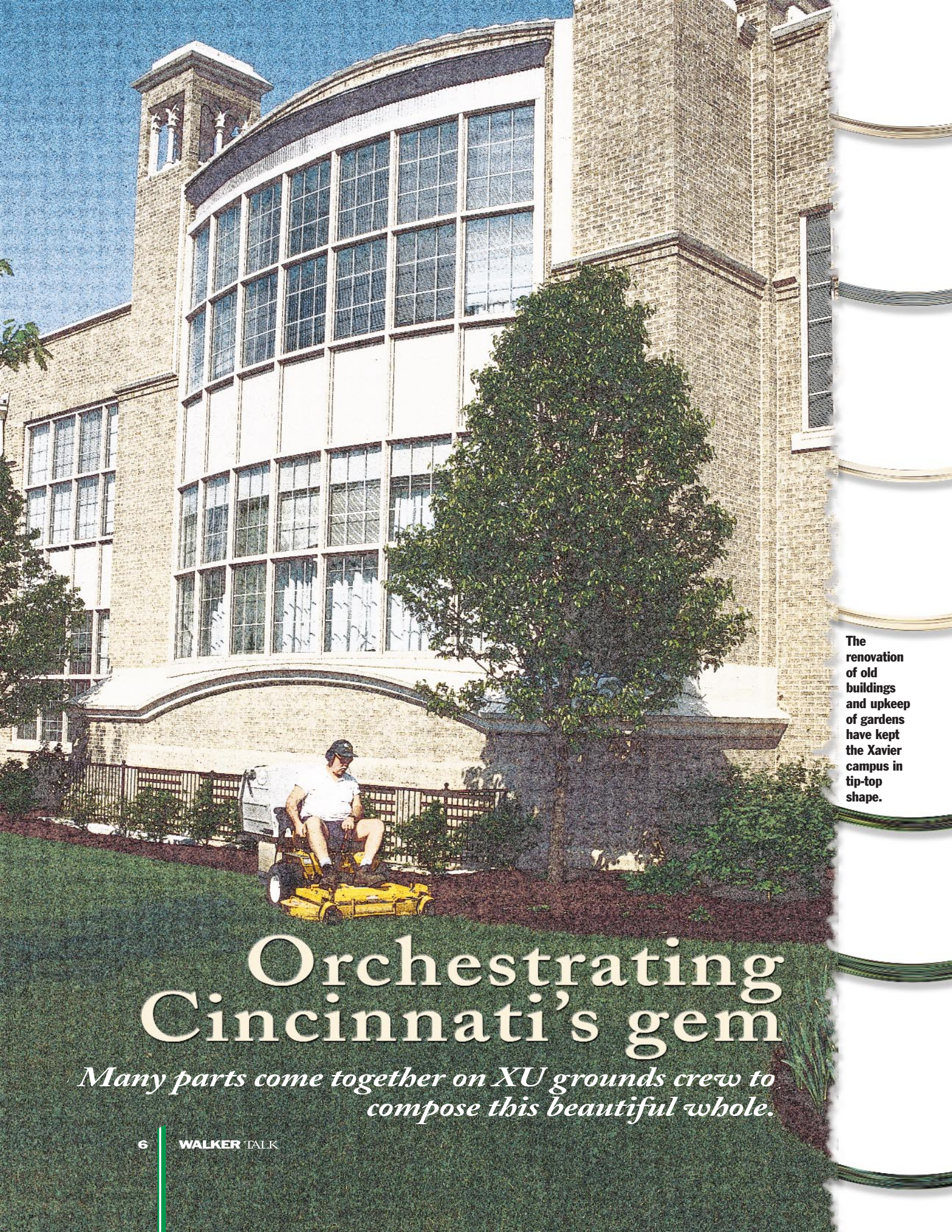
George Moore Jr.

“What he means,” Sweatman continues, “is that no matter how good a job anyone does, it pays to have someone checking on that job. Supervisors check the work of crew members, assistant managers inspect the work of supervisors, and managers like myself check the work of the assistants. And George checks on all of us.”

“You have to continually inspect your work in maintenance, especially. Jobs become routine, and it’s very easy to miss the little stuff.”

As chief inspector Moore relates, it’s the little stuff that adds up in this business. “I think if you receive a complaint call from a customer in this business, you have failed,” he points out. Instead of turning complaints into opportunities, Moore would rather look for opportunities elsewhere.





The renovation of old buildings and upkeep of gardens have kept the Xavier campus in tip-top shape.

# Orchestrating Cincinnati's gem

*Many parts come together on XU grounds crew to compose this beautiful whole.*



**X**avier University is an alluring college campus. Woven like a fine tapestry into the cityscape of Cincinnati, this urban college is a parade of old buildings and mature landscapes that challenges even the keenest eye to decipher where the campus begins and where it ends.

Founded in 1831, Xavier has virtually grown up with the city of Cincinnati. Yet, the school's low-key approach within the community has positioned it as a humble fixture in the area. A large part of this coexistence has been the restoration of old campus buildings, and an undying dedication to maintain the campus grounds.

The university's man-in-charge of the grounds is grounds supervisor Dick Menke, who aptly directs a staff of 14 people and a diverse line of power equipment. During the growing season, under Menke's guidance, the campus explodes into a 128-acre symphony of manicured turf, colorful flowering beds, and an overall clean setting for higher education.

Two key members of his troop are 20-year veteran and crew leader/horticulturist Walt Bonvell, and 24-year veteran groundskeeper and proud Walker operator Rex Brown.

"We don't use the Walkers for every job," relates Bonvell, "but we could do virtually every job with them." It is a fine balance, he continues, "We know that without the Walkers we could not perform many of the maintenance jobs with the efficiency that we do now."

Bonvell's co-worker Brown agrees, noting with a degree of pleasure that he is the one who wears the Walker hat and carries the Walker keys. "I have gotten to know our Walkers," says Brown. "And since Walt and I are the only ones who really operate them, we give them special attention to make sure that they are on the job when we need them."

Xavier's Walkers have become a campus mainstay, and are well-known for their finishing job, low profile, and ability to maneuver into places where riding lawn mowers should not be able to go. Another way the Walkers excel is using the rotary broom attachment for winter work.

Bonvell explains, "During snows, we are able to run the broom on the brick-paved walkways to keep walking paths clear."

He recalls how handy the broom worked last year for clearing a late-afternoon snow from in front of the university's new 10,500-seat Cintas Center.

"It snowed just before a men's basketball game, and I just swept paths right through here," Bonvell proclaims proudly while ambling between tree beds in front of the grand building. "No one got snow on their shoes that

night!" He goes on to explain how a Walker using a rotary broom, along with a 20-year-old Toro Groundsmaster with a V-blade, make a pretty solid combination for removing snow at Xavier.

#### **EVERYONE IS PART OF THE MIX**

Bonvell and Brown emphasize that they are just two of many who help bring this horticultural concert together.

"Just like the equipment, we all play a part in this," explains Bonvell. He points to a campus softball diamond where the infield is mowed by a Walker and the outfield by a Dixie Chopper.



**With almost 45 years at Xavier between them, Walt Bonvell and Rex Brown (seated) like to be known as the Walker guys on campus.**

The grounds crew maintains everything on the fully irrigated campus from small patches of grass on the academic mall to large open fields now incorporated into the campus by a city park project between Xavier and the city of Cincinnati. They even maintain off-campus houses owned by the university.

Maintaining this much property with consistency requires a seasoned staff, one the grounds department develops from hiring full-time positions instead of seasonal help. "We tried seasonal help," recalls Bonvell, "but not all of them were as committed to the campus as we are — it was a good lesson."



To be sure, the university takes the condition of its grounds seriously. “The students and faculty like to be comfortable in their surroundings,” says Bonvell, “and it makes visiting parents believe they have made a good choice of universities — a tidy campus even gives people a sense of security.”

While actually mowing 40 to 45 acres a week, the grounds crew has learned to work around campus activities and meld in with the students. As a matter of fact, on the morning of *Walker Talk's* springtime visit to campus, a group of students was in the middle of a political protest. Bonvell politely approached them and explained his crew's responsibilities to irrigate and mow the turf they were sitting on. He says his crew enjoys a nice rapport with students. “You get to know these kids during their four to five years here; they see quite a bit of us, and it is nice having them around, too.”

Bonvell recognizes another significant player in Xavier's mix — local Walker dealer Larry Barber. “Larry has really been an asset to us when it comes to helping us with our mowers,” Bonvell says. “I can remember the time we bought a snow cab, and he came over and helped us assemble the entire cab, at no extra charge.”

When a summer's work day draws to a close, the Xavier grounds crew orchestra puts away its mowing instruments. Only then can they take a moment to glance over their work and admire the harmony that is the Xavier University campus. **WT**



The Walker's ability to fit in on campus has allowed the crew to work without many restrictions.

Brown says the Walker “makes his job easy” when it comes to odd-shaped areas and small slopes.

## XU GROUNDS CREW ACCOLADES

Most people familiar with Xavier know about the business school, its longstanding Jesuit heritage, and the men's and women's basketball teams. Sometimes, lost in all of these achievements, is another award-winning segment of the university — the grounds crew.

In recent years, the crew has brought home a few prestigious awards. In 1999, they won second place in Professional Grounds Maintenance Society's (PGMS) Honors Award for an Urban University. And in 2000, Horticulturist and Crew Leader Walt Bonvell won the PGMS President's Award. Even Bonvell admits being a little shocked to receive the award at the PGMS banquet.

He recalls, “I had undone my tie and was ready to watch the presentation, and then they called my name as the winner of the President's Award — I just about fell out of my chair.”

Bonvell shouldn't be surprised about winning the PGMS President's Award. He has been active with PGMS for a number of years, including being a past president of the local chapter. During his term, Bonvell was able to use the campus as a study ground for the chapter, and he has used the university facilities to host monthly meetings.

Xavier is also listed as one of the top 20 leading grounds organizations in the United States by *Landscape Management Magazine*.

Bonvell is never too far away from his radio while working with the 14-member Xavier grounds crew.





# Mid-life career change

*From selling equipment to mowing lawns*

For 10 years, Perry Smith sold golf and turf equipment for a John Deere dealer. During that time, he became familiar with lawn maintenance equipment and with some of the most knowledgeable turf people in the industry — golf course superintendents. The combination was overpowering for this aspiring entrepreneur.

Despite the fact that he had a good career, and with wife Robin of 25 years, two daughters, one in college, three years ago Smith bought a mower and trailer, and started mowing lawns. He kept his “day job” the first year, until he discovered he could bring in the same amount of money mowing as he could selling equipment, minus commission.

So, the following year, he quit his job, hung his shingle and formed Stonebridge Landscaping Lawn Services in Greenville, South Carolina.

By the end of his first “official” year in business, the young company had generated in the neighborhood of \$100,000 in mowing and maintenance business. When Smith closes the books on his third year, the business will have grown by an astounding 500%. In simple terms, the career change was a near instant success, especially for

someone who enjoyed driving the equipment as much as he enjoyed selling it. Furthermore, Smith was still able to employ his natural sales skills, this time selling services to high-end residential and commercial accounts instead of equipment to golf courses.

## NATURAL ADVANTAGE

Smith didn’t start his business like so many younger entrepreneurs before him had. He lived in the area since 1969 and knew a lot of people, including many local developers. In addition, through his work in the equipment business, he became friends with several owners of lawn maintenance companies. When it came time to outfit his trailer, he asked them what kind of equipment to buy. Oh, there’s plenty of green on his trailer, including a John Deere walk-behind and intermediate mower. But the heart of his operation is a 25-hp GHS Walker with a 48-inch deck.

“I did my homework,” tells Smith. “I went to the people in this business and asked them what kind of equipment they used. They steered me toward a Walker. At about the same time, I read Bob Walker’s column in *Walker Talk* about

Perry Smith (right) and Chris Thompson “unload” at a 35-home retirement complex.





finding your best opportunity. It was a vote of confidence for me.” So, with the right amount of confidence, both on and off the trailer, Smith forged ahead.

His business grew leaps and bounds by word of mouth, only. He has never advertised, and lets his work do most of the talking for him. Among his customers today are 12 high-end residential accounts, six large commercial accounts and a number of condominiums, retirement centers and upscale town homes. Seems like an enormous amount of work for an owner/operator?



**Both Perry Smith (right) and Chris Thompson find themselves doing a little extra for customers.**

**Perry Smith says to be competitive today requires landscape contractors to out-service their competition.**



“For our type of operation and properties, there is no machine on the market that will do what our Walker does,” Smith relates, explaining how he can accomplish so much with a one-crew operation. “We collect grass on all our properties, and the rear-discharge design allows us to trim

with ease. In fact, I believe the mower has saved me one individual and another piece of equipment. It has streamlined an already streamlined operation.”

This year, he also hired a former golf course superintendent, Chris Thompson, to work in the business with him. Together, the two do most of the work, calling on “temporary” help during peak times only, e.g., spring and fall cleanup.

“The workload here is significantly different from working at a golf course,” admits Thompson, “although many of the tasks are the same. When I worked as a course superintendent, I had 30 people working for me. But one wrong move from any of them could cost you your job. Here, you’re more in control of your destiny, and it’s just more relaxing.”

**“I believe the mower has saved me one individual and another piece of equipment.”**

Not to say the work isn’t challenging. “This is a people business,” Thompson adds. “Many of our customers are retired, and look to us for other services in addition to mowing and maintaining their properties. I find myself changing light bulbs and doing a lot of different things not spelled out in our contract. We even spend more time than one would guess just talking with our customers. But it comes with the territory.”

Smith agrees, “I haven’t been in this business very long, but I know that being competitive requires out-servicing my competition. We all have access to the same body of knowledge, the same type of equipment and similar marketing strategies. What distinguishes one service provider from another is ... SERVICE. If we can provide exemplary service, then we can successfully compete.”

Having a “service plus” attitude is a perfect fit for Stonebridge customers, who have high expectations anyway. As Smith explains, both the high-end commercial and residential markets may be harder to break into than other markets. But once you get there, and perform, they are generally a little more secure. In fact, his company hasn’t lost an account yet. But the owner/operator isn’t resting on his laurels.



"One thing I learned in my previous career is the importance of communicating with your customers," Smith tells. "John Deere, for example, has some of the best development engineers in the world. The reason? They have a customer feedback system in place that's second to none. Before they design and manufacture a product, they talk with their customers.

"As a lawn maintenance professional, I do the same. Instead of performing the same service over and over again without getting feedback from customers, I talk with them on a regular basis to find out if the type and level of service we're providing is what they want." It's all part of the service picture and retaining satisfied customers, he emphasizes.

Of course, this entrepreneur has a slight advantage over his northern counterparts. In most instances, he is in contact with his customers year-round. The mowing season begins by the middle of March, and re-seeding and leaf cleanup carries the season through until after the first of the year.

## BUSINESS PLAN

With a 2% unemployment rate, Greenville isn't the place to go searching for employees. Yet, with construction up and people continually moving into the area, landscape contractors such as Stonebridge need all the help they can get. Caught between the proverbial rock and hard place, Smith is looking for ways to grow without spreading himself too thin.

In addition to Thompson, he looks to sister-in-law Shannon Sudderth and brother-in-law Jim Sudderth for ideas. Shannon manages the business, and Jim acts as his financial advisor.

"My team will take us to the next level," Smith says confidently, although getting too big is not part of his plan. "I'm thinking about another Walker right now, which would give us an opportunity to start a second crew that Chris will manage. The area is growing and we're growing with it. But we're going to grow slowly and make sure relationships don't suffer. After all, this is a business of relationships, and building and keeping new ones is the fun part." **WT**

## HOW DO YOU OUT-SERVICE COMPETITION?

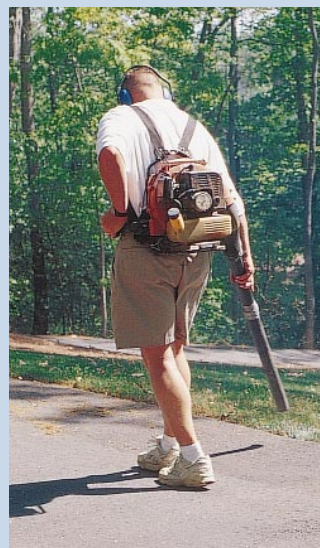
When you're in the service business, the first place to look for a competitive edge is in the service you provide. Perry Smith competes by taking his service to the next level.

Among service strategies, he communicates with customers on a monthly basis, and asks them what he is doing right, and doing wrong. He develops relationships by getting to know his customers, finding out, for example, when they and their children celebrate birthdays; then sending along a card.

From Smith's perspective, he's less in the mowing business and more in the people business. He does quality work and tops it off by having fun building relationships. The combination is a powerful one. That's why Smith and Chris Thompson spend time talking with customers, changing light bulbs and doing odd chores that may not be part of a maintenance contract. When it comes time to renew a maintenance contract, the grass may look good, but it doesn't have feelings and it can't talk. Customers, on the other hand, feel and talk, and they are the ones who will make the buying decision.



The Walker collects grass on all Stonebridge properties, and its rear-discharge design allows for trimming up close.



Chris Thompson says the Walker is such a great cleanup machine that he typically blows debris from walks and drives onto the lawn before mowing. "It may not save us that much time, but it sure enhances the property," he emphasizes.





# Do you operate with a contract?

**L**awn maintenance contractors who operate without contracts may be missing out on one of the most effective ways to communicate with their customers. That's right, because the reason for having a contract goes well beyond its legal definition.

To be sure, contracts are designed to protect the rights of all parties involved. But they also serve to communicate in detail the type and level of service a contractor will provide, and create a degree of expectation for customers that wouldn't be there without a contract.

"Communication is the key word when talking about contracts," tells Green Industry consultant Tracy Morland. "Customers intuitively want a plan, and they want to know what to expect from their contractors. A contract maps out the plan in detail, including a description of the services to be offered, when they will be offered, the frequency of the services, how much they cost and to what standard they will meet."

In addition to the basics of what,

when and how often, Morland points out that a typical contract may also include insurance data, information regarding who the contractor contact person would be on site, and details such as who will be responsible for watering new plantings.

Make sure to put enough detail in your contract to avoid any ambiguity, he advises. Include, for example, all the services you will be providing, from mowing and edging, to trimming, pruning, and fertilizing, as well as the name of your on-site contact person. If you don't know for sure who your contact person will be, possibly include something to the effect that all your people will wear uniforms and the supervisor (contact person) will wear a white shirt.

If you have a drug-free policy, include that in the contract, as well, Morland adds, along with special considerations. Here, he would include statements such as, "Work done outside the contract will have written approval by the property owner or manager." If doing work for a homeowner association, include the

phrase, "All requests have to go through the association, first."

Walker users Char and Kim Kellogg in Millersburg, Ohio, have their mowing and landscaping customers sign and return contracts each year. "Our primary reason for having contracts is to make sure our customers know the value-added services we provide," tells Char. "For example, we offer free fall fertilization as part of our maintenance program, along with several pruning sessions. The contract lets our customers know the level of service they're getting for their money."

## THE VALUE OF PREDICTABILITY

A contract not only provides a roadmap for the customer and a level of expectation, it also helps the contractor predict and plan for the future. As Morland indicates, it's easier to buy equipment and hire employees in the spring when you know you have a predictable number of routes and customers. Despite a standard "30-day out clause," a contract, (aka legal document), is more binding than a handshake, and therein derives the security.

**Expectations are a two-way street. If a contract creates them, then contractors have to meet them.**

Should contractors aspire to sign 12-month-long contracts instead of seasonal contracts? The answer is, it depends. On the positive side, a 12-month contract guarantees an income year-round, despite working nine or 10 months on a property. And there are some customers who prefer to be on a 12-month billing cycle for budgeting purposes.



The Kelloggs, who have operated Grasshopper Property Maintenance for 10 years, at one time offered 12-month contracts. Char notes that some of the customers found it difficult to think about paying for mowing services when it was actually snowing outside. With pro-rated contracts, the contractor is also financing his or her services interest-free, adds Morland. As he describes it, having a 12-month contract for providing nine months of service is like paying more taxes now so you'll get a refund later.

In both instances, you're trading money for security. The better alternative is to have a business or financial plan that accounts for the lack of cash flow in the off season. That way, you're getting your money when the work is completed.

Having customers pay for services when they're completed is healthy for both the customer and the contractor in another way, Morland explains. It allows for more accurate accountability.

From the customer's perspective, it's easier to track

what's being done if you can compare actual costs to performance. Similarly, from the contractor's perspective, it's easier to perform job costing when you can compare apples to apples. That is, when you can compare costs to actual revenue.

Multi-year contracts are a different story. They can be beneficial to both parties. The contractor receives an even greater degree of security, especially important for larger properties that may require the purchase of more equipment. The customer, on the other hand, gets to lock in a fixed fee for several years. The down side for the contractor? Cost increases like that of fuel will be difficult to recoup.

### DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

Providing a road map and creating expectations for customers are logical steps for most contractors. Customers aren't surprised either when they show up to provide a service or don't show up.

The key is that expectations are a two-way street. If a contract creates them, then contractors have to meet them. If, for example, you indicate you will show up every Tuesday of the month to mow, then you truly have to show up every Tuesday — and mow.

**Having a 12-month contract for providing 9 months of service is like paying more taxes now so you'll get a refund later.**

To protect themselves from acts of nature, e.g., too much rain, contractors should include disclaimers. They may not be able to show up every Tuesday, for example, if it rains Sunday and Monday. Having a contract that details frequency of cut can be good for normal and dry seasons, but bad for rainy seasons. The alternative is to have a per mowing agreement, or include in the contract that additional mowing trips caused by excessive rain will be charged as an add-on service.

Too much detail, though, can be confusing, too. The last thing contractors want to do is confuse the customer. So keep the contracts short, detailed enough to provide a good roadmap, and clear enough so customers have a reasonable expectation of what, when and how often you will be performing services. **WT**

*Tracy Morland operates Morland Landscape Resource in New Glarus, Wisconsin. In addition to providing consulting services to small, growing contractors, he also represents property owners and managers who contract lawn and landscape services.*

## CONTRACT BASICS

What should you include in a basic maintenance contract? Here are a few suggestions:

- Services** ..... Include detailed description of services, when they will be provided and how often they will be provided. Include enough detail to avoid ambiguity, but not so much as to cause confusion.
- Additional services** ..... Make sure to detail all services you provide even if you don't charge for them, e.g., value-added services.
- Terms** ..... Detail the total cost of the project and how often (number of installments) the customer will pay. Spell out how additional services will be paid for, as well.
- General conditions** ..... Include insurance information; licenses and permits, and any exclusions or special conditions, e.g., who is responsible for watering new plantings. A 30-day out clause is standard operating procedure, so detail how each party can terminate the contract.
- Contact names** ..... Inform the customer who your decision-maker is on the property. Also, if a multi-family project, words to the effect that "all requests must first go through the homeowner's association" would save answering many on-the-job questions.



# Arizona landscaper follows

*When “Shoestring” turned 16*

**G**rowing and maintaining landscapes in Arizona is a challenge for any landscape contractor. Water is scarce, temperatures are extreme, and working conditions in mid summer are, at best, described as “brutal.”

Yet, properties in the ever-growing Phoenix area look as green, if not greener, than their counterparts in other, less arid parts of the country. How do landscapers and lawn maintenance professionals work their magic in the desert? Just ask Joe and Tracy Martoccia, owners of Top Job Landscaping in Scottsdale.

**“I was born to be a landscaper and that’s just the way it is, no matter how extreme the conditions.”**

Hydration and vigilance are two key words, says Joe, who, with his parents, moved to the Phoenix area from New Jersey in 1975. All properties are irrigated, and maintaining the green look year-round requires a transition to Rye grass or Fescue in the fall, and back again to Bermuda in the spring.

But landscaping comes naturally for this operator, so his challenge revolves more around running a business than turning a desert into an oasis. How does one, for example, keep equipment and employees operating at an optimum level when temperatures climb to more than 120° during the summer months? In fact, the temperatures are so extreme, the four Top Job crew members routinely drink 30 gallons of

water a day, and wrap cloths around trimmer and edger handles to avoid getting burned.

“I’ve seen grass in the Walker Mower box smolder when it sits too long,” Joe relates. “Even the box itself will bow a little on extremely hot days. The sun and heat are killers here. They degrade plastic and rubber, and put a lot of additional stress on employees who have to wear long sleeves to protect their arms, and place wet rags on the backs of their necks to keep their body temperatures down.”

Doesn’t sound much like fun, yet this owner/operator says he has nothing but fun on his job. “Most days, I can’t believe I get paid for what we do

because I enjoy it so much,” he says, with a convincing smile on his face. “I was born to be a landscaper and that’s just the way it is, no matter how extreme the conditions.”

## **SWEET 16**

Joe worked side-by-side with his father, John Martoccia, until turning 16. As a birthday present, John gave him 16 accounts, a lawn mower and a hedge clipper. That was the very beginning of Top Job. By the time Joe was 20, the figure had grown to 65 stops. Along the way he went to school for HVAC train-



**Top Job Landscaping owners Joe and Tracy Martoccia work their magic together to turn a simple desert yard into an oasis.**



# in dad's footprints

ing, and earned his electrician's license. In that same year, his father died at age 49, and the younger Martoccia was left to carry on — on his own.

"My father was so instrumental in my success," tells Joe. "I will always remember the three things he stressed the most: '1) don't grab further than you can reach, 2) stay out of debt and 3) always do a great job.'"

His father's axioms were self-explanatory, although during a couple of growth spurts, Joe may have overextended himself a little. As he explains, with so much work available, it sometimes is hard to leave money on the table. But one has to do just that to avoid getting into debt and to continue to provide the high level of service that is the foundation of this business.

Joe's business took off in 1989, not coincidentally the same year he purchased his first Walker.

"I rented an 11-hp chain-drive Walker from a friend. When it took me 45 minutes to mow a property that usually took four hours, I was sold. My wife, Tracy, and I saved every penny we could and, later that year, purchased our first Walker for \$7,000. When we got the machine home, a 16-hp model with a 36-inch GHS deck, we looked at each other and wondered what we had done. But I was confident the machine would make us money, and it did."

According to the Martoccias, the new Walker paid for itself within six months, and brought in an extra \$4,000 to \$5,000. Several years later, they purchased a second one, a 25-hp model with a 42-inch GHS deck. Today, both mowers operate eight hours a day, five days a week. Joe



**Joe Martoccia (kneeling) with his "diamonds" (left to right): Odemar Aguirre, Cristian Castelo, Mauricio Lopez and Antonio Marino.**

claims the first mower has in excess of 13,000 hours, and the newer one has approximately 6,000 hours.

"My dealer, J.R. Crook of A & G Turf, can't believe I still operate the 16-hp Walker. I've replaced the deck. And last year, just out of fear, I replaced the original engine. It still has the original hydros and works like a charm. Oh, the original seat is long gone, too."

Making things last is not unusual for Shoestring, a nickname friends gave Joe because of his ability to do so much with so little. He says his 1970 GMC dump truck named "Old Nellie" has logged somewhere in the vicinity of 800,000 miles. Even his handheld equipment lasts years beyond its time.

He shrugs his shoulders. "The secret is preventive maintenance. We are as careful with our equipment as we are with our properties. In fact, I have a sign inside the trailer for my employees. It reads in Spanish, 'If this equipment doesn't work, you won't work, either.'"

Both machines and employees are working well today, together maintain-

ing six large commercial and 60 residential accounts. Joe and Tracy, who maintains the books, runs to the nursery, and answers customer questions to name but a few of her responsibilities, operate one "super crew" comprised of the two Walkers and three employees.

A fourth employee spends all week at the company's largest commercial property, a 150-home residential development. The team maintains a total of 300-plus yards a week, not to mention providing a one-stop shop for customers.

In addition to maintenance, Top Job does tree work, installs outdoor lighting and irrigation systems, provides design/build services and will do just about anything else a customer asks or doesn't ask, for that matter. For example, before leaving a property, the crew will wash the patio and drive for no charge, and Top Job's owner will accompany customers to a nursery (again, at no charge) to help them pick out plant material.

"I tell our customers we can do just about anything, but we can't read their minds," says Joe. "Communication is



# GOING THE DISTANCE IN THE DESERT

The Scottsdale area has some of the most difficult working conditions in the country. If the sun and heat won't break down equipment, then the desert sand will, especially during two weeks of turf scalping in the fall.

Joe Martoccia has accumulated some incredible hours on his equipment, despite the environment. How does he do it? Preventive maintenance is the key, he told *Walker Talk*. That includes religiously changing oil and filters, and inspecting equipment before it leaves the shop in the morning. He has some other tips, as well:

**Keep the equipment clean.** Top Job cleans equipment at the end of every workday with compressed air. The crew avoids using water that can infiltrate electrical components.

**Operator control.** Each Top Job crew member is assigned to a particular tool, for which he is responsible. Joe is convinced that equipment "gets accustomed" to an operator and doesn't perform as well or last as long with several different operators at the control.

**Tender loving care.** During lunch break, Joe exposes the Walker engine compartment to allow heat to escape.

**Year-end inspection.** Top Job equipment gets a short respite during fall and spring transitions from Bermuda to Rye and back again. During that time, equipment receives a thorough "going over." All bearings and belts are checked and replaced, if needed; fluids are drained and replaced; and any potential problem area is fixed.

**Train employees.** Employees are trained to perform preventive maintenance. They are also instructed to stop using equipment if they hear an unusual noise or notice anything uncharacteristic about its operation.



**"We are as careful with our equipment as we are with our properties," says Joe Martoccia, who tells his employees, "If this equipment doesn't work, you won't work, either."**

so important in this business. If you can keep the line of communication open and do the best job you can, then you will succeed. For my part, all I want is to be remembered as an honest man who tried." The phrase comes from Barry Goldwater, whose property he maintained for 14 years.

"The senator taught me a lot over the years. He was a fantastic person. Two things in particular I remember him saying, the first was about being honest and the second about leaving a legacy. As he put it, 'You're forever remembered by the footprint you leave.'"

## DIAMONDS

The Martoccias emphasize how important their Walkers have been to their operation. "Our business truly revolves around Walker," says Tracy. "The machines save us time and money, and they allow our customers to keep their costs down. There's no way we would be where we are today without them."

They feel the same way about their four employees whose names are inscribed on both sides of their

enclosed trailer. Joe calls his employees, "my diamonds."

"I'm not their boss," he emphasizes, "but their team leader. I respect their feelings and listen to their ideas and suggestions. We're in this business together. I let them know that if I prosper so will they and vice versa.



"Having employees you can depend on is so important today, and finding them is more difficult than ever. I know because I've probably hired over 100 in my lifetime. But once you have the ones you want, it pays to work hard to keep them."

The Martoccias are working hard to grow two other employees, as well — their son Johnathan and daughter Santina. Both can drive the Walkers (no blades operating). And, as 8-year-olds, understand more about running a business than many children twice their age. Why not? That's the same age Joe was when he started working with his father and walking in his footprints. **WT**

**Family affair: Santina and Johnathan with their mother, Tracy. You can tell by the looks in their eyes they would rather be riding a Walker than watching.**





BOB T'S

# Tech Talk

## “Don’t drop the toilet seat”

**A**fter nine years of fielding phone calls, doing service schools, reviewing warranty claims and working shows, you would think that “I’ve seen and heard it all”. Not true. On a weekly basis, I’m still amazed at the things people do with and to their Walker Mowers.

I’m really not one to stand on a soapbox and point my finger, and I promise not to do it more than every three to five years. Hopefully, this will be taken in the spirit in which it is intended, and that is to inform and promote proper and effective use of the Walker. As for the title — all of us have had a parent, a grandparent or teacher tell us that there are some things that you just don’t do no matter what, and so it is with a Walker Mower. Bad habits and poor practices can and should change. Here are a few examples:

Consider the skinny shock absorber-looking gizmo under the body or catcher that holds the body or catcher up. That is a gas spring, and its one and only function is to hold the body or catcher in the up position. It will not act like a cushion when lowering the body or catcher. Thus, if the body is dropped or the catcher box is given a push to close, something will either bend and/or break in a short time. The damage usually won’t occur the first time but will happen slowly over time. The damages from this practice can be a bent catcher frame, cracks in the catcher box, and even a damaged or destroyed engine. The few precious seconds of time saved can be quite costly.

“Time is money” — Oh, how I dislike that statement! It is so often used to justify inappropriate actions. I firmly believe that spending a little extra time here and there can make you money.

Picture this — one or more Walker Mowers on a trailer, with the decks in the tilt-up position, passing over a dip in an intersection at 25 plus mph. I personally witnessed this event. The mower and other items fly six or more inches into the air. The damage incurred by such a practice and the loss of use surely could more than pay for

the couple of minutes it takes to tie the unit down and to slow the vehicle down.

Likewise, the jumping of curbs vs. using a ramp or driving to a driveway is an inappropriate practice. The amount of force it takes to ram an 800 plus-pound mower over a curb will be costly. A bent chassis, broken axle, bent tail wheel fork, and damaged wheel, when including labor, will run into hundreds of dollars.

Overservicing an air filter (ref vol. 11) is a major contributor to engine failure. Walker’s turbine precleaner, coupled with the air flow indicator, reduces the need for removing the filter unless it is indicated. This whole issue of examining an air filter reminds me of the old Fram oil filter commercial where the mechanic says “You can pay me now or you can pay me later.”

It’s been proven that a filter with a covering of dirt is more efficient than a new one. Save yourself some time and a lot of money by keeping your hands off the air filter until the red flag appears in the window of the air flow indicator.

By now, I hope you are on the same track with me. A couple of other areas that deserve mentioning should be self explanatory:

1. Forcing the catcher door open against the action of the gas springs causes undue stress on the gas springs and the side walls of the catcher box.
2. Allowing the deck to drop from the tilt-up position paints a very ugly picture.
3. Leaving tire marks in the grass, on driveways and sidewalks is the result of either poor training or improper operation. Keep in mind who is paying the bills and giving you an income. They deserve the best job possible.

Before stepping off my soapbox I’ll leave you with this rhetorical question — Why should the care of a \$10,000 mower that is the primary source of your livelihood take on a lesser value than your truck or favorite hobby equipment (car, motorcycle, boat)? **WT**





## FACTORY ADDITION UNDERWAY

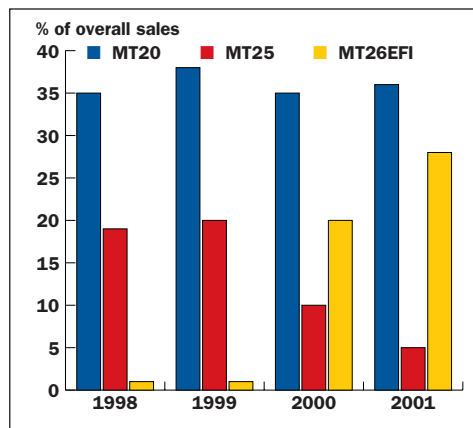
With a groundbreaking ceremony April 27, 2001, the long-planned, 100,000-square-foot factory expansion has been started. Construction should be completed late this year or early 2002, including the installation of a fully automated powder-coat finishing system.

As currently planned, the new addition will house finishing, assembly, product storage, and shipping while the original factory space will expand fabrication, welding and administrative offices. At full capacity, the new addition will allow production of 50 Walker Mowers per day with 250 employees.

## EFI SALES INCREASING

The Walker Mower Model MT26 with the Electronic Fuel Injection (EFI) engine is rapidly becoming a best seller, right behind the MT20 as the most popular model. The EFI engine was first introduced during 1999 with a limited quantity of 100 units. Given the success experienced with the initial units, full-scale production

was started in 2000, resulting in 19% of sales, and the EFI growth pattern continues with 28% of sales recorded so far in 2001. Even though the fuel injection engine adds about 6% to the selling price of the machines, customers report the power, fuel economy, and reliability of this engine is a winning combination in the Walker Mower.



## WALKER RECOGNIZED FOR EXPORT BUSINESS

The Governor's office for the State of Colorado recently announced Walker Manufacturing as the winner of the Governor's Award for **Excellence in Exporting** in the small-sized manufacturing category. This award, which has been given annually since 1970, honors four Colorado companies that made a significant contribution to exporting in 2000.

"It is the dedication and entrepreneurial spirit of these Colorado companies that exemplify the benefits of international trade," said Governor Bill Owens in presenting the award. The award presentation was made at the World Trade Day Dinner on May 16, 2001 at the Adam's Mark Hotel in Denver.

## MOWING FRANCHISE TO THE USA

In the course of worldwide marketing, the Walker Mower has been introduced to an Australian company who has had remarkable success in the mowing business. The man behind the enterprise is Mr. Jim Penman, and he runs the world's largest lawn care franchise, the Jim's Mowing Group, with more than 1,500 franchises in Australia and New Zealand (plus 40 in Canada).

Jim's Mowing is planning to expand into the United States. They will be looking for contractors who are looking for a way to build their opportunity in the mowing business using a proven business operating system. Visit [www.jims.net](http://www.jims.net) for information and to contact Mr. Penman.

While there is no direct connection between Walker Manufacturing and Jim's Mowing, many of their franchisees are enthusiastic Walker Mower owners and operators. A recent survey of Melbourne, Australia, franchisees showed Walker owners make 50% more annual revenue than non-Walker franchisees; demonstrating a good match between the franchise business operation and the equipment.

## MAINTENANCE VIDEO BEING PRODUCED

A new "How To Maintain" video program is being produced to show operators the daily and weekly maintenance for a Walker Mower. This presentation provides a quick visual look at the Maintenance Instructions contained in the Owner's Manual which are recommended to be accomplished by the owner/operator.

Other maintenance items that would normally be handled by a trained mechanic are not shown and should be referred to a Walker servicing dealer. The maintenance video is a companion to the "How To Mow" operator training video (P/N 5895-6) that is included with each new Walker Mower. The maintenance program will be added to this tape, providing operators with instruction in both operation and maintenance.



## RECALL AND SERVICE BULLETINS

Two recall bulletins and one service bulletin were issued June 2001 which are of particular concern to Walker Mower owners. All owners of the affected units are encouraged to have their machines inspected and updated free of charge by contacting their local Walker dealer (contact the factory if there is difficulty finding your dealer). The following units are affected:

- Bulletin #1134 All mower decks S/N DX-2203 thru DX-62874, replace deck counterweight springs
- Bulletin #1139 Model MT26 (EFI) S/N 01-49953 thru 01-53975, replace splash guard to prevent regulator electrical short
- Bulletin #1142 Model MC/MD/MT S/N 01-49578 thru 01-54787, remount PTO safety switch



For 2002 Models, the 54-inch side-discharge deck is redesigned to a new 56-inch configuration. Reduced blade overlap, less baffling and a discharge tunnel all work together to produce smooth cutting quality along with improved clog resistance and a stronger discharge pattern.

## MODEL MTL TRACTOR DEVELOPMENT PROGRESSING

With the advent of liquid-cooled, V-Twin engines and customer interest in this power package, development of the Walker Model MTL is nearing completion. A 23-hp Kohler Aegis engine combined with an electric fan-cooled radiator (similar to the Model MD) and a Model MT-style chassis define this configuration.

A phased introduction to the market is planned with limited production of this model starting during the 2002 model year. Expected benefits of the liquid-cooled engine in comparison to an air-cooled engine are reduced engine noise, fuel economy, and longer engine life at competitive pricing.

## 74-INCH "BIG" DECK INTRODUCED

Walker introduces an industry first combination — the largest deck in the industry mounted on the compact, mid-size Walker tractor. The four-blade design, with in-line timed blades, has many of the same features used on other Walker gear-driven decks. The narrow housing with a discharge tunnel offers a true finish cut with excellent scalp resistance, clog resistance and the same powerful, clean discharge pattern that Walker side-discharge operators have enjoyed for years.

The combination of the full-floating deck suspension and castering gauge wheels at the back of the deck help hold the contours of the terrain and also help prevent scalping. With a deck weight of 300 pounds, the tractor maneuvering and handling with the big deck installed remains nimble and quick. Just like all other Walker decks, the DSD74 tilts up to 90° for easy blade and deck maintenance.



Dean Walker takes his new 74-inch testing deck for a spin.

## PRODUCT IMPROVEMENTS FOR 2002

ITEM	MODEL	DESCRIPTION
5-gallon fuel tank	MD/MT	New molded tank and chassis saddle mount is one inch wider, giving increased capacity. Also, fuel line connection changed to top of tank with an easily removable fuel pickup and filter assembly, providing easier maintenance. Upgrade kit is not available for earlier units.
Tapered roller bearings on deck caster wheel pivot	All 36, 42, 48, 56 decks	All deck carrier frames will incorporate tapered roller bearings for the caster wheel pivots, offering increased durability in a high-wear area of the machine. This bearing system is already used on heavier 52- and 62-inch decks. No retrofit kit available for earlier units.
Micro-V belt drive for GHS blower	MC, MD, MT	Use Micro-V belt drive on blower drive, offers more clearance for easier belt replacement and potentially longer belt and pulley life. Started with S/N 01-52900, earlier units may be upgraded by Kit #7238-5.