

WALKER TALK

SERVING LAWN MAINTENANCE PROFESSIONALS

Pennsylvania showcase Longwood Gardens:

*More than 1,000 outdoor
acres and 20 indoor gardens
keep veteran groundskeeper
Henry Schweibenz
and his Walker mower
busy year-round.*

VOL. 5

WALKER TALK

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Dealer services needed

There is a shift these days toward throwaway or disposable products. Mass merchandisers have emerged to sell these products and it works. They essentially tell the customer, "You don't need service. If it breaks, just throw it away and buy a new one. Or we'll give you a new one within the warranty period." It is clear that the traditional dealer providing dealer services is not needed in this scheme. Some have foretold the demise of the independent dealer network as a result of these changes in products and retailing.

There remains another class of products — durable, serviceable products — which need dealer services to give the customer full value for the investment. In the early '80s, we were just beginning to market the Walker Mower. Since there were no dealers established, most of the early units were sold direct to customers. It soon became apparent this was a mistake. We were really selling incomplete products without local service and support, and it was a disservice to our customers to not provide dealer services. The lesson was learned and today there are 36 Walker distributors and several hundred dealers across the United States working to provide service to our customers.

For many riding mower owners today, especially professional users, economic reality supports investing in high-quality, durable, commercial grade equipment and then servicing this equipment regularly to receive full value. Some of these customers have tried "throwaway" and are tired of throwing their money away. These customers understand the important role played by the local dealer to ensure a satisfactory experience with the equipment and full return on investment.

Walker Manufacturing understands the need for dealer services for its products. By honoring and protecting our dealers' investment to introduce and support our products in the market, we ensure our end-user customers will receive dealer service and be satisfied with their investment in Walker mowers.

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Bob Walker

Bob Walker
President

Displays put Walkers to the test

Longwood Gardens gives new meaning to landscape maintenance

When Pierre S. du Pont bought Longwood in 1906, initial plans didn't call for developing his new property into the world's premier horticultural display gardens. Today, however, Longwood Gardens is just that. Located 30 miles west of Philadelphia in historic Brandywine Valley, Longwood features 1,050 outdoor acres and 20 indoor gardens. In addition to the 11,000 different kinds of plants that comprise the displays, the gardens have become a horticultural research center, a center of continuing education and a home for an extensive performing arts program where more than 400 musical and theatrical events are scheduled each year.

But the flowers and other beautifully landscaped elements are the main attraction for the 800,000 visi-

The gardens are open 365 days a year and from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. throughout the growing season.

tors who come to Longwood annually. And few people know the terrain better than senior groundskeeper Henry Schweibenz. A 32-year veteran



Senior groundskeeper Henry Schweibenz is a 32-year veteran of Longwood Gardens. He's one of 55 gardeners on staff who keep the grounds maintained year-round.

of numerous plantings, events, renovations and other maintenance and installation callings, Henry knows what it takes to keep his neighborhood groomed and growing.

He names the different exterior gardens without missing a beat. "Let's see, there's the Topiary Garden, Rose Garden, Flower Garden Drive and Walk, Water Garden, Wisteria Garden and Peony Garden." He pauses, then rushes to add the Hillside Garden, Peirce's Park and the Idea Garden which features ideas and information for the home gardener. The tight places throughout this set-

ting are maintained by Walker mowers, he tells. Longwood employs two Walker mowers, one with a 42-inch deck, the other with a 48-inch deck.

Then there are the wide, open spaces — lots of them — where maintenance crews look to their wide-area and front-cut Toros, Jakes and Ransomes to get the job done. There is even grass inside the conservatory where electric mowers get the call.

The entire landscape setting at Longwood, with its magnificent trees, flowers and lush grass, is maintained rigorously, along with the physical



Walkers are ideal for Longwood's garden setting where debris collection, maneuverability and a manicured look are requisites.

structures which require constant vigilance. The Italian Water Garden, for example, was recently rebuilt at a cost of more than \$4 million and the Main Fountain Garden is scheduled for a similar overhaul. By the year 2000 an estimated \$45 million will have been spent on physical plant restoration alone. Longwood offsets half its annual operating expenses of \$20 million from admission, garden shop sales, education programs, rentals and restaurant income. A du Pont endowment funds the rest.

Ideal setting

Henry remembers they purchased their first Walker in 1990 after the groundskeeping foreman saw the mower being used by a mowing contractor. "In about two days time, I was mowing in and around the gardens," he relates. "Before the Walkers, we used five push mowers. We'd start at one end of the gardens and just mow. We don't use the push mowers any-

more, except for a couple of areas where we can't drive the riders."

In many ways, this beautiful garden setting is ideal for the Walker. Scalping, turf damage and tree scrapes are out of the question. Yet being able to maneuver around obsta-

Longwood hosts 800,000 visitors annually.

cles and still be productive is a requisite. Collection is a necessity, too, where the alternative would be removing leaves and clippings from the beds. There's even a compost facility right on site to take care of the clippings and leaves.

Added challenge

But keeping a beautiful landscape manicured is not the only challenge for maintenance crews. As Henry's supervisor and groundskeeping and tree division head Phil Gruszka





Here's one place Walkers don't mow. Longwood has 20 indoor gardens, including open turf areas where maintenance crews employ electric mowers.

their guard. "If I see someone approaching, I'll shut the machine down just to be safe and courte-

ous," he adds. Maintaining a couple hundred acres of outdoor gardens would be a challenge for any maintenance crew. Longwood has 55 gardeners on staff, along with a total work force of 444 full- and part-time employees, students and volunteers. Maintenance crews mow from spring to the middle of December, and winter keeps them busy with snow removal, pruning projects, and equipment maintenance. With that kind of schedule, it's

points out, "With so many visitors daily, equipment operators have to pay special attention to people, as well." Over the years, he adds, Longwood has altered its mowing schedule to accommodate visitors and keep noise to a minimum. Yet, with the gardens being open 365 days a year and from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. throughout the growing season, it's difficult to find a spot to mow without a visitor standing nearby. As Henry tells, operators always have to be on

a wonder employees ever have time to enjoy the surroundings. Worse yet, they might learn to take the scenery for granted. "Not a chance," says

11,000 different kinds of plants make Longwood a gardener's paradise.

Henry. "There's one thing about a growing environment. It's always changing and offering new challenges." In Longwood's case, the changes are just that much more magnificent. **WT**

For more information about Longwood Gardens, write to Longwood Gardens, Inc., P.O. Box 501, Kennett Square, Pennsylvania. Or phone (610) 388-1000.



Growth: Every contractor's dream . . . every contractor's nightmare

Sandy Weaver, owner of Albuquerque Grounds Maintenance, is feeling pretty good these days. After all, this is her company's tenth year in business. AGM has an excellent reputation as well as a good mix of commercial business. And it's backed up by a cadre of loyal, hard-working employees. In Sandy's own words, "I'm glad to be where I am. But it sure wasn't easy getting there."

Her words echo the challenge facing all lawn maintenance contractors today. Nearly anyone can buy a mower and hang a shingle, and the majority of them can stay in business at least a year, or two. Those who do good work and learn how to run a business can last even longer. In fact, providing quality work and gaining business knowledge and experience is the ticket to longevity . . . unless you want to grow. With growth comes an entirely new set of challenges.

Growth spurt

Sandy's plan for slow, controlled growth worked for four years. But a growing market combined with a growing reputation eventually forced her hand.

"We started to grow six years ago," remembers general manager Eric Spalsbury. "At the time, we had two and one-half maintenance crews. Then the business really took off." The company added more maintenance crews and more services. Within two years, AGM was grossing around \$750,000, providing exterior and interior maintenance, installation and irrigation services.

Today, revenue has doubled to nearly \$1.5 million. AGM has eight

maintenance crews, jobs in nearby Sante Fe and a new location that it has already outgrown.

The growth spurt challenged both Sandy and Eric to develop a growth strategy. Two years ago AGM established department managers for its interior, color, landscape/irrigation and exterior maintenance divisions. The move took pressure off at the top, but didn't help in other areas.

"The toughest thing about growing is losing control," relates Sandy. "We really care about people. Growing doesn't change that, but it

"Sometimes a company just outgrows its people and its clients."

changes how you communicate that feeling. It's difficult, but sometimes a company just outgrows its people and its clients."

As she explains, employees who enjoyed a "mom and pop" working environment might find it hard to adjust to a slightly more formalized working environment inherent in a larger company. And customers who were accustomed to seeing owners in jeans doing the planting questioned their priorities when they weren't on site as much.

AGM University

At the employee level, AGM tackles the growth challenge two ways: by providing more training and offering new incentives.

AGM University was established to facilitate employee training. In addition to providing technical class-

es on pruning, fertilizing and applying insecticides among other technical subjects, the company offers classes that introduce employees to business fundamentals.

"Our employees appreciate and enjoy the classes," tells Eric. "In addition to helping them advance their careers, sessions also give them an appreciation for what it takes to operate a business."

But education alone doesn't ensure employees will adopt the company philosophy or perform up to expected standards. To encourage employees to do their best, AGM recently developed a Performance Incentive Awards Program (PIAP). "The program is easy to administer, and it holds value for the employee," explains Eric. A PIAP form is affixed to the back of hourly employee time



AGM owner Sandy Weaver says the toughest thing about growing is losing control. "We really care about people. Growing doesn't change that, but it changes how you communicate that feeling."



Eric Spalsbury and Sandy discuss maintenance strategies with employees. Three Walkers help AGM get the job done and keep employees in a tight labor market.

sheets. At the end of the week, employees are graded by their supervisor for 1) Being responsible for their actions, having respect for others/equipment/vehicles/shop/yard/etc.; 2) Attitude; 3) Time management; 4) Customer satisfaction; and 5) Attendance/punctuality. Employees who receive a perfect score get a \$10 bonus for the week. The crew with the best rating for the month is treated to a free lunch.

The program features an additional twist to encourage employees to

Albuquerque is currently a struggle, thanks to a huge building project under way by Intel. One of the country's largest construction projects, the building of a new Intel plant is literally "sucking the labor pool dry." All the more reason to find ways to keep employees interested.

Customer connection

AGM's customer rolls include 13 McDonald's, a large shopping mall, and several apartment/condominiums, hotels and other restaurants. Sandy and Eric strive to maintain as much client contact as possible, but the bigger they get, the more help they need.

Two years ago, AGM produced its first newsletter designed in part to keep customers up-to-speed about happenings at AGM and to promote seasonal services. A survey card sent to all 140 clients on a monthly or bi-monthly basis offers a way for customers to comment about current services or request new ones.

Even then, it pays to visit as many clients as possible. Eric relates a story from a couple of years ago when Sandy visited an AGM exterior color planting project. "She wasn't satisfied with the planting arrangement, but wasn't dressed to do the planting herself. So she purchased a new pair of jeans in a nearby GAP store and pitched in with the plant-

ing." Nothing beats that kind of interaction. Unfortunately, as much as owners hate giving up control, these instances are few and far between.

Tight focus

AGM is in a position now to consolidate growth, and concentrate a little more on the bottom line. Last year, the boom market brought plenty of business in small landscaping projects, Sandy relates. This year and the years after will offer other opportunities. The working plans call for hold-



ing the maintenance division where it currently is (it now brings in approximately 70 percent of the company's total revenue) while growing the landscaping and interiorscaping divisions.

"Ten years seems like a real milestone," says Sandy smiling and breathing a sigh of relief. "We've reached a plateau and now will begin looking for new growth opportunities." As she notes in this business, however, growth is really another word for finding ways to maintain employee and customer loyalty. **WT**

At the employee level, AGM tackles the growth challenge two ways: by providing more training and offering new incentives.

return the following year. If employees return the next year and have a perfect score for at least two months they receive an additional \$200 bonus.

Does the program work? It seems to so far, tells Sandy, adding that it's just one of many different ways to pique employee interest in their jobs. The biggest thing, however, is to show genuine concern about employee well-being and give them a chance to have a career, she emphasizes.

Just finding new employees in

Real questions from real people

Where is the best place to hear about Walker mowers? From the people who use them. A November 26th meeting of the Lehigh Valley Turf Association provided just such a forum. Hosted by Allentown, Pennsylvania, dealer Ron Lauchnor, the meeting attracted about 40 area lawn maintenance contractors.

Bob Walker attended the gathering. After giving a brief presentation, he fielded questions about Walker Manufacturing and later conducted a roundtable discussion to hear how users are putting their mowers to work for them. A synopsis of the Q & A and roundtable follows:

Q & A

Q. Most of us are innovators. We have to be. Yet some manufacturers are not receptive to our ideas. Are you receptive?

A. Absolutely! We take a serious look at every idea that comes across our desks. In fact, several design changes and improvements have already come from contractors just like you. Remember, small companies like ours don't have a huge R & D budget to play with. We can't afford to pass up nor would we want to pass up good ideas that come directly from end users.

Q. At a recent industry show, I saw a high-lift attachment for a Walker. Do you offer something like that and, if not, do you endorse the concept?

A. The answer is no on both accounts. Our mowers are designed

to be small and compact. We feel it would be neither prudent nor safe to attach a mechanism that lifts grass clippings high enough to dump in a truck or other container. Additionally, a high-lift mechanism substantially adds to the bulk and cost of the mower, and contractors would be better off putting that money toward installing lift and dump functions on their trucks or trailers.

Q. Do you manufacture a combination mulching, side-discharge and collection deck?

A. No, we do not. We produce eight different model decks. Each model is either a dedicated mulching deck, a dedicated side-discharge deck or a dedicated collection deck. Other manufacturers have designed one deck to do all three tasks, but it's our feeling and experience the performance of the three-way deck is compromised in comparison to ones that are dedicated to specific tasks. We advise collecting when you have to and using a mulching or side discharge deck when turf conditions permit. Right now, about 25 percent of the mowers we sell are equipped with an extra deck.



Making a point: Bob responds to a question during the roundtable discussion.



Bob Walker (left) and Ron Lauchnor exchange ideas with area contractors.

Q. We don't have a parking brake on our Walker. It was an option when we bought the mower. Do you offer a retrofit parking brake package?

A. Yes, we do. Also, all of our 1995 models except the 11-hp model have parking brakes as standard.

Q. I love my Walker mower, but it doesn't cut as good high as it does low. Is this normal?

A. Generally speaking, it's always a challenge to cut grass high and leave a smooth job thanks in large part to air pressure under the deck. That challenge varies depending on the grass type. Grass that is particularly limber and thin can be difficult to cut at high settings. Cut as high as you can to get the look you want, then avoid mowing any higher. But it really depends on the lawn.

Q. When I bought my MT Walker, it had a 62-inch, belt-drive deck. It does a fantastic job. Do you offer that drive on other decks?

A. The 62-inch deck was designed specifically for rougher mowing conditions. Belt drive is more forgiving than gear drive. We are looking at the possibility of offering a 50-inch belt-drive deck in the near future.

Roundtable

On applications — From snow to nuts

Walkers have built a reputation as a “finish-type” mower. That doesn’t mean, however, they can’t be used productively for other maintenance chores. Ron Lauchnor, owner Gravelly Tractor Agency and a landscape contractor, said he also uses his mowers to remove snow from drives and walkways and to clean leaves from gutters and parking lots.

Other applications? One contractor told how his Walker does a great job on locust leaves. “If you’ve never seen locust leaves, you’d have to be there to believe it,” he related. “Anyway, there are about 150 trees on the property, and the Walker picked up 95 percent of them.”

Another told a story about a friend who vowed he would buy a Walker if it picked up acorns. As the story goes, he was disappointed when the mower only picked up about 80 percent of them. Until he noticed the other 20 percent were rooted in the soil.

On operation — Fingers, muscles and embarrassing moments

Quakertown contractor Howard Barrick said when he first started mowing lawns Ron Lauchnor told him to get the equipment to do the job. That’s when he bought his first

Walker. Yes, it was expensive, he added, but he also agreed with another contractor at the meeting who said, “You have to have the tools. You have to spend money to make money.”

A few of the attendees remembered some difficulty getting used to the Walker controls. As one contractor relayed, “Before I bought my first Walker, I visited a fellow contractor and asked how he liked his unit. While we’re talking his 7-year-old jumped on the machine and drove it around. I figured if she could operate it, so could I.”

Another said he was embarrassed by his son. “I jumped on the mower and began using both hands,” he recalled. “My son laughed at me and told me to use just one hand.”

Pat Carls, owner of a maintenance company that employs all women, reported that many of her customers are amused by how operators control the machine with their fingers only. “I tell them the Walker is a touch machine, not a muscle machine.”

On strengths and weaknesses — Beepers, catchers and decks

“The best thing you’ve done with the Walker is install a beeper on the collection system,” reported a roundtable attendee. Another said, “We like the cut, and when we have to we can

cut lower with our Walker because it doesn’t scalp.”

Most of the participants said they would like to see a larger grass catcher for leaves. Bob Walker reported they had looked at larger catchers but were cautious because users would take advantage of the bigger size to collect grass clippings as well as leaves, and the grass clippings would add too much weight and affect the handling of the machine.

Similarly, there were requests for Walker to develop a combination mulching/bagging deck. In response, Bob Walker told how they literally go through hundreds of deck designs to come up with a deck that does the best job it possibly can for mulching, collecting and discharging. He said the company was reluctant to sacrifice performance for a combination design. Not to mention the fact the decks are easily interchanged.

On future developments — Emissions and deck lifts

Roundtable participants asked for comments on future company directions. From an industry standpoint, Bob noted new emissions standards will force Walker to make a couple of engine changes in the future. It won’t affect current mower models, he added.

Walker Manufacturing is also looking to develop a deck lift system for its mowers. There are also new decks on the horizon, as well as an ongoing effort to improve those already in the field.

The Walker president also shared these facts and figures with attendees — that 25 percent of all Walkers manufactured are sold overseas; 70 percent of all Walker users are contractors, 20 percent are homeowners and 10 percent municipalities; currently, the factory is producing a new Walker every 30 minutes. **WT**



Quakertown contractor Howard Barrick (center) compares notes with two competitors.

The decision was elementary!

Few environments are more demanding for a mower than a school. Trees, hills, entrance ways, ball diamonds and football fields require machines to mow on a variety of landscapes with equal agility. For Humke Elementary, in Nekoosa, Wisconsin, the demands are even more challenging since the school grounds are open in the summer to host baseball leagues.

"In the mowing season, our Walker works eight hours a day, five days a week," tells Dan Gallagher, maintenance custodian at Humke. He's the one doing the mowing . . . along with other maintenance work inside and outside the school.

School daze

Remember back to those elementary days. The janitor was the person who kept the building warm in the winter, walks shoveled, clocks ticking, lights and loudspeaker running. He's the one who cleaned up spills, fixed broken desks and doors and overall kept the place going.



Humke maintenance custodian Dan Gallagher: "If there's a mowing job to do, there's a Walker built to do it."

What does it take to be a janitor? Dan spent 13 years in the building trade prior to Humke. He's qualified to do nearly any chore asked of him. Janitors and custodians are the true "jack-of-all-trades" people.

The day Walker Manufacturing visited the school, Dan was in the midst of a typical day. He was putting up a fence around one of three ball fields, preparing the cafeteria for gym class, checking out a grease stain on a classroom floor and talking with the principal about the heating system. And there was a pile of work orders building up on his desk.

With this kind of schedule, there's no time to mess around with mowing. When there's mowing to be done, you mow, as quickly and as efficiently as possible.

Lock, stock and barrel

Last year, Humke Elementary needed a new mower. The garden tractor it had been using was on its last legs. Dan wanted to upgrade to a professional-type rider but a handicap wouldn't allow him to use a mower with a foot pedal. It was either another garden tractor or finding a rider that would be easy to operate.

"My supervisor saw a Walker at the dealer in town," relates Dan. "The

Humke Elementary School
500 South Section Street, Nekoosa, Wisconsin 54457

October 22, 1993

Walker Manufacturing Company
5929 E. Harmony Rd.
Fort Collins, CO 80525

Mr. Bob Walker:

On October 18, 1993, we had our new Walker mower, model MT, delivered to Humke Elementary School. The first thing I spotted was the sticker "Made in the USA." Your employees' signatures are very impressive. It reminds me of the Saturn commercial on television.

Your machine is the most impressive mower I have ever been on — bar none. The way it handles, the ride, the deck. I could go on and on. I cannot express fully in words the excellent engineering in this machine. Please keep up the quality work. We need this type of pride.

We also have the GHS catcher system that seems to "walk" through leaves regardless of it being either wet or dry.

Sincerely,

Dan Gallagher
Dan Gallagher
Maintenance Custodian

dealer, TT's Small Engine Repair, brought the mower over for a demonstration and he bought it lock, stock and barrel."

"One of the first things I saw when the mower arrived was a sheet of paper with signatures from the factory people who built the mower," remembers Dan. "That tells me the machine was built with pride." Later, the following year when mowing season kicked in, he discovered that durability and pride go hand in hand.

"The machine is real durable, from its engine and transmission to the deck. If you hit the base of the cement foundation of a light pole, the deck is unfazed. And if you hit an object while mowing, two little shear pins act as a safety measure to avoid damaging the mower."

Which only further demonstrates what Dan now believes, "If there's a mowing job to do, there's a Walker built to do it." Coming from a maintenance custodian, that says a lot. **WT**

Dealer SUPPORT

Finding the right dealer is clearly as important as finding the right equipment. The best equipment in the world will fall short of expectations if the selling dealer fails to back it up or offer critical support when the customer is in need.

Before buying your next piece of

commercial equipment, ask the dealer about the support package that comes with it. Find out if you're buying just a mower or a total package that includes parts, service and a thorough understanding of the market in which you operate.

Consider the following when you

buy your next mower. Remember, dealers, just like contractors, have their strengths and weaknesses, and not all of them will offer the same level of support. The key, however, is to do business with dealers who know the market and are responsive to the needs of their customers:

Service commitment — Downtime is money. Look for your dealer to have a priority service program in place for commercial customers, and a commitment to keep downtime to an absolute minimum. Find out if loaners can be made available if downtime exceeds 48 hours.

Understanding — Expect dealers to be knowledgeable about their products and those of the competitors, as well. This knowledge, however, should transcend basic feature/benefit information to include operating cost figures, operating capabilities as well as suggestions that help match a machine to an application.

Parts — There's more to service than meets the eye, and that includes shelves full of parts. But no matter how many parts a dealer stocks, a call will come in for items that aren't stocked. Your dealer should be prepared to emergency order parts. Depending on the circumstances, the cost of this special service may be directed back to the customer.

Programs — Look for dealers to have financing and leasing options available. Find out if you're in a position to establish a line of credit for parts and service, too. Expect a limit to be placed on any line of credit, and accounts will have to be kept current.

Operation — Look for your dealer to have special hours, especially during the busy season. Opening up a couple of hours early a few days a week will give operators a chance to pick up repaired units. Staying open an extra evening or two will allow drop-offs and an opportunity to pick up needed parts and accessories.

Rapport — Dealers aren't educators, but they're in a position to pass along helpful information about the operation and maintenance of equipment. Look for individual instruction as well as formalized classes on topics that range from safe operating procedures to preventive maintenance programs. More than a few dealers also sponsor occasional sessions on local environmental issues and important business topics.

Total commitment — Dealers can't be expected to carry a complete line of commercial products, but within the categories they have, e.g., intermediate walk-behind or riders, expect a full selection of basic deck configurations and drive systems. Expect them to make a commitment to their product lines, as well. Dealers who jump from one line to another find it difficult to provide consistent parts and service support.

There is another area where commercial dealers can offer support. Since equipment is the lifeblood for commercial users, and it is expensive, customers should be able to demonstrate the equipment prior to making a purchase decision. A good dealer will be eager to demonstrate to avoid the disappointment and lost

reputation when a customer buys the wrong piece of equipment. Some dealers will let small hand-held equipment and push mowers out for an hour or two or for a day. Trying out bigger equipment is usually accomplished with the dealer or dealer representative nearby. This doesn't imply a lack of trust. More likely the

dealer wants to be able to familiarize the customer with operating and safety procedures. Often, an on-the-job demonstration is necessary to make the right equipment selection. The best dealers will take the initiative to show equipment operating on the job. **WT**

WALKER NEWS

Factory Day draws large local crowd

The First Annual Walker Manufacturing Factory Day in Fort Collins, November 4, 1994, drew 115 Colorado distributors, dealers and end-users. The guests were treated to a barbecue lunch, service presentations and a factory tour.

Highlights of the event included a Walker Wear clothing and a 42-inch deck giveaway. The latter was sponsored by Secrist Sales and Walker Mower of Denver. Colorado State University grounds crew from Fort Collins was the winner of the deck.

The slightly inclement weather failed to hamper the outdoor area where attendees tested various machines, decks and even snow removal implements.



Factory Day attendees take a close look at a new Walker mower.

Then and Now



The first Walker Mower prototype was built in the summer of 1977. Some of the original ideas on that machine — a compact, maneuverable

tractor with front-mount mower — are still found on today's machine. The prototype had an 8-hp vertical shaft Briggs & Stratton engine, 30-inch single blade mower deck and two planetary clutch/brake transmissions for ground drive. The model in both photographs is the same girl, Bob Walker's daughter Janey.

Two upgrade kits for earlier models available

A removable screen for the grass catcher on Model MD and MT provides quick, easy and thorough cleaning of the screen. Order Kit #7520 for units prior to S/N 94-19387.

New Donaldson precleaner for the Kubota engine on Model MD reduces engine air filter maintenance. Order Kit #7025 for units prior to S/N 94-19443.

New Walker product line brochure

Hot off the press in October is a new 12-page brochure describing the complete line of Walker mowers and attachments. Design features, operating benefits, options, accessories and specifications for all five tractors are included.



FAST, EASY, BEAUTIFUL MOWING™

Grass factory in California

Laguna Hills retirement community mows 450 acres a week

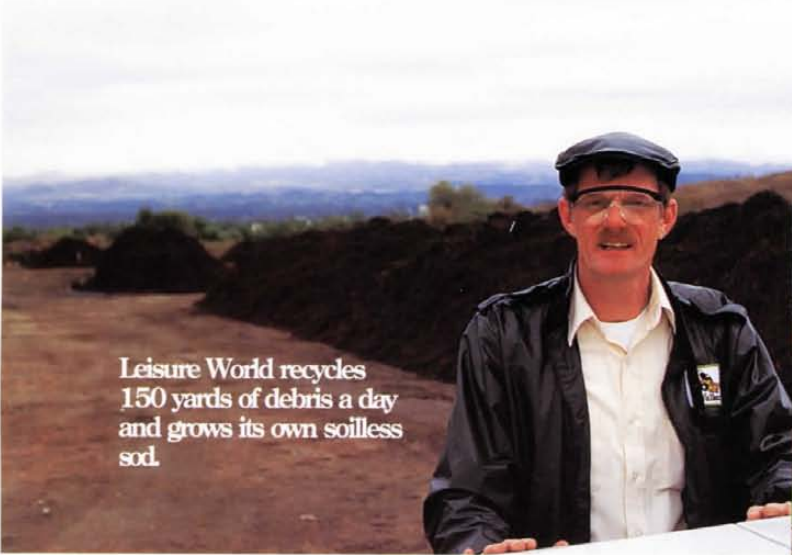


Landscape operations supervisor John Berne looks for ways to improve services while reducing costs at Leisure World.

Picture what the country's largest, gated retirement community looks like. Then superimpose a spectacular setting in Southern California. The image would be Leisure World where 20,000 residents enjoy a living environment second to none. Imagine theaters, 27 holes of golf, tennis courts, riding stables, arts and crafts along with wood and machine shops, a radio station and newspapers, not to mention two dedicated garden centers and a bus line. There's a library, too, and boccie ball courts, lawn bowling . . . and the list goes on.

Imagine, too, 450 acres of turf to mow every week, 52 weeks out of the year and enough trees to rival some national parks. Then there is the equipment to maintain the landscape and the people to operate and maintain the equipment. All of this is orchestrated from the office of landscape operations supervisor John Berne who, in some ways, resembles a factory manager. In this case he's managing the mowing and growing of grass instead of overseeing the manufacturing process. The company he works for, Professional Community Management (PCM), is contracted as the managing agent for Leisure World at Laguna Hills. PCM takes care of all of the retirement community's manpower needs.

Berne moved to Southern California from his native Ohio in 1981. He took a job at Leisure World as an air-cooled engine mechanic and moved quickly up the ranks to land-



**Leisure World recycles
150 yards of debris a day
and grows its own soilless
sod.**

scape operations supervisor. Inventory control, the shop area and recycling also come under his supervision.

Berne rattles off inventory like he's been counting equipment instead of sheep at night. "Forty backpack blowers, 15 reciprocating trimmers, 15 weed eaters, 80 hedge trimmers, 35 edgers, 20 vacuums, 70 hand blowers, 20 push mowers and 40 Walkers." There's more, he adds,

***Recycling saves Leisure World
hundreds and thousands of
dollars in dumping fees and
mulch.***

including four Kubota tractors with 60-inch decks for mowing rough areas, bringing the total to more than 480 pieces of lawn maintenance equipment alone. The landscape department employs 200 people, including those who work in pest control, irrigation, lawn maintenance, recycling, golf course maintenance and the equipment shop, and the arborists.

The grass business

To say Berne is in the grass business is an understatement. It takes nine maintenance crews to mow Leisure World. A mowing cycle is completed in four and one-half days. When clippings and leaves are collect-


ed, the debris is taken to an in-house composting facility that on average recycles 150 yards a day. The green waste is turned into compost to be used for mulching flower beds and control of weeds, for potting soil and to grow soilless sod.

Like all good managers and supervisors, Berne earns his keep by employing procedures that will improve the end product while reducing costs. Composting, for example, has saved Leisure World hundreds of thousands of dollars in dump fees, Berne notes. "The recycling process also provides mulch which reduces water requirements and keeps the weeds down. Plants, in turn, are healthier which means we have to spend less money on pesticides."

The same logic applies to the mowing operation.

"When I first came to Leisure World, we had a mowing cycle of 12 days," tells Berne. The never-ending task was tackled using a collection of 70 to 80 push mowers and walk-behind mowers and eight riding mowers.

"We bought our first Walker, in fact our first eight Walkers in 1987," he relates. "At the time, we were a community of 11,000 backyards. We originally wanted the Walkers to replace our other riders which couldn't fit in some of the tight areas.



What we discovered was they could also go places our 36-inch walk-behinds with grass catchers couldn't."

Berne explains they didn't jump right on the Walker bandwagon, however, because they wanted to see how the mower would hold up. "One of our concerns with any new piece of equipment is maintenance cost," he explains. "When we found maintenance on the Walkers to be low, we bought more."

More indeed! The landscape department has peaked out with 40 Walker mowers. Each is equipped with a 42-inch deck and grass handling system and powered by a 16-hp Kohler. The move to Walker has dramatically reshaped landscape operations. The mowing cycle has been

***"We discovered our Walkers
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substantially reduced and gone are all of the intermediate walk mowers, although the department still has 20 or so 21-inch mowers, "collecting dust," Berne adds. Maintenance costs as well as mowing time have gone down, too. There are now only

four mechanics in the department compared to six when Berne came on board.

Making the grade

Despite their week-long, year-round work cycle, Berne's mowers are expected to last five years, which helps him continue to keep costs in line. They're also expected to perform in other areas.

Part of Leisure World's charm is its setting. Hills, as in Laguna Hills, dominate the landscape and add another twist to the already challenging landscape maintenance operation.

"Having so many acres to mow makes us a convenient target for manufacturers who want to get their mowers in here," Berne explains. "We try them all and none of them negotiate the hills like our Walkers can because they have such a low center of gravity. In fact, a few years ago a company brought out a prototype of a new model, and it just slid right off a 20-degree slope. That was the end of the demonstration since our mowers have to handle those grades on a daily basis."

Leisure World's Walkers can do more than climb and outcut interme-

diate mowers. Ten of them, for example, are equipped with custom-made disc/blade combinations that chip and collect branches up to 1 inch in diameter. Berne claims the innovation saves 14 percent during the pruning cycle. That's a sizable saving, considering the number of people who participate in the operation.

Decks are also equipped with a quick-change gate that, with a flip of lever, transforms the mower from a mulcher to a collector. "We like to

Forty Walkers now do what 80 push mowers couldn't, in less than one-half the time.

mulch or grasscycle as much as we can," Berne relates. "Since clippings are comprised of 80 percent water and 4 percent nitrogen, returning them to the soil also gives back much needed nutrients and water. But residents don't like to see leaves, and leaves are constantly falling around here. So crews mulch when they can and simply flip the lever when they



Specially designed lifts take mower maintenance to a higher level.

see debris that needs to be collected."

Leisure World Walkers are also equipped with electric fertilizer spreaders. Operators simply slip a couple bags of fertilizer in the grass collector and off they go.

It all comes back to finding ways to reduce costs while still maintaining a high level of service. To be sure, since its inception 29 years ago, Leisure World has developed the reputation as one of the premier planned retirement communities in the country. Built in three phases, the complex features single family homes, duplexes and garden homes, the residents of which average nearly 76 years of age. In addition to a long list of services and activities, residents can also take advantage of six club houses and swimming pools. There's also a nature trail inhabited by water fowl, eagles and a roadrunner or two.

Yet despite its size and number of employees, the landscape operation maintains a relatively low profile, thanks in large part to careful planning and instituting small efficiencies that really add up.

Few lawn maintenance contractors and operators around the country can identify with the size of Leisure World's landscape operation. Fewer still produce as much grass as Leisure World where just about everything is done on a large scale. But all contractors can appreciate productivity and how one right move leads to others. **WT**



Line 'em up: Forty Walkers mow Leisure World on a four and one-half-day cycle. Here John Berne checks out a group of 12 just waiting for the next day's assignment.

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"THERE IS NO WAY WE COULD
OPERATE LIKE WE DO TODAY
WITHOUT **WALKER**"



Growing businesses face a common problem. How to handle more work without operating costs skyrocketing. Richard Carbone, **Sunrise Landscaping**, Woburn, MA, told us "Several years ago we started getting more and more mowing accounts, and we needed to get more mowing done without adding more labor. The walk-behinds we were using were 'maxed' out, and so we began to look at riders. Then I saw a Walker in action. Now we operate two Walkers. Walker has decreased the mowing time by numbers approaching one-half the time of the previous mowing equipment we used. The Walker machines have been a welcome addition to our business."

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One of my landscaper friends had purchased one and remarked: "What a great machine." - Richard Carbone



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