

# WALKER TALK

## ONE PROPERTY AT A TIME

Juan, left, and Alex Rodriguez use seven Walker Mowers to earn the respect of their customers.

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## TELL THE TRUTH

**A** favorite saying: “Your best advertising is word of mouth by satisfied customers.” It takes time for “word of mouth” to spread the word, but the results are a solid foundation on which to build the market for the product. There is something authentic about one person freely telling about their experience with a product and telling the truth (both good and bad experiences) to another interested person.

Word of mouth may be a slower way to build the market, and other marketing programs with paid advertising and promotion of products can accelerate sales and build the market more quickly. However, when using paid advertising, truth-telling is often compromised. As a result, the market grows more quickly with paid advertising, but is not sustained. Most of us have experienced the disappointment with a product that did not live up to its advertisement.

Speaking of truth-telling about our products, we have always avoided using paid endorsements or a paid spokesperson for the Walker Mower. Over the years numerous customers, even a few celebrities, have offered to promote the mower for receiving compensation. We have stayed away from that approach simply because we want our customers to tell the truth about the mower, both the good and the not so good. Even the most ethical individuals who are paid to endorse a product often find it hard to tell the truth.

Now with social media in full swing, there are new challenges to truth-telling. You can find virtually any opinion about anything on the internet. In the professional landscape contractor industry, we now have “vloggers” who are making videos of themselves and putting them on YouTube. The videos are free form with the contractor talking about operating their business, telling their experiences, and evaluating the products they use. These “influencer” personalities develop followers, sometimes numbering in the thousands.

Many of these “influencers” have pure motives and are simply trying to be a help to the industry and pass on lessons they have learned (they have integrity and are truth-telling). By contrast, there are a few others who “prostitute” and are being paid by manufacturer’s marketers to say nice things about their products. We have been approached by these “vloggers” who thought Walker would be interested in doing some paid promotion of our product this way. The answer is no. We simply want the truth to be told about our product in real world use. A paid product endorsement is not the way to get the truth told. We will live by the truth.



Bob Walker, Chairman

*Bob Walker*

# A Residential Touch

# ON BIG COMMERCIAL PROPERTIES



TOP: Rising Green has seven Walker Mowers and uses them on the majority of their commercial properties where cleanliness is paramount.

ABOVE: Juan (left) and Alex Rodriguez started Rising Green Inc. in 2011

For some companies, things like slogans and mission statements are nothing more than words on a business card. But for brothers Juan and Alex Rodriguez, the catch phrase plastered on their trailers represents much more than that. In fact, “Mowing Kings, Tulare and Fresno Counties One Property at a Time” has been the guiding principle that has allowed Rising Green to blossom into a highly respected commercial landscaping company over the past 10 years.

“To tell you the truth, it has been a pretty smooth ride so far,” Juan says. “The way my brother and I work, it’s like we have tunnel vision. We don’t look to the sides — we just go straight. Some landscapers tend to focus their time on noticing what the next guy has.



**While Juan oversees lawn maintenance crews and Alex oversees landscaping and irrigation, the brothers have had a fascination with “the yellow machine” since they were youngsters working in their father’s gardening business.**

I hear them saying, ‘I want to be like that guy, or this guy.’ But Alex and I have one focus in mind and that’s it.”

That focus has always revolved around the concept of “one property at a time.” Rising Green now services a variety of properties throughout the San Joaquin Valley in Central California. Roughly 85% of sales comes from commercial accounts such as HOAs, shopping centers, churches, and dairy farms. The other 15% comes from residential accounts which are serviced by a lone crew that is dedicated to residential.

When the Rodriguez brothers were first starting the company in 2011, all their focus was on residential. That started to gradually change as the company’s reputation grew. However, Juan says they have never wavered from that original philosophy of “one prop-

**“The pastor said, ‘Whoa, you didn’t mow this field with the mower you usually use, right? Can you use these ‘new’ mowers all of the time?’**

**– Juan Rodriguez,  
Rising Green, Inc.**

erty at a time.” That is the one thing that helps Rising Green rise above many of the competitors they bid against.

“We have a rule where a crew cannot leave a property until they do a whole walkaround

to make sure nothing got missed or left behind,” Juan says. “We also rake flower beds. We just incorporate a lot of residential-type work into our commercial properties, which a lot of landscapers don’t do because they are just mow-and-blow. But we don’t want to leave clippings, leaves or messes all over the place. Weeds and overgrown shrubs really drive me crazy. We tell our guys over and over that we don’t want to see any of that.”

### **FROM TRACTOR-TRAILER TO TRUCK-AND-TRAILER**

Juan and Alex were taught the value of fine gardening at a young age. Their father and his brothers started their own landscaping company in 1994. Juan and Alex helped regularly, pushing 21-inch walk mowers when their heads were still below the handlebars. Once they got a little older, they were allowed to hop on the Walker Mower, which Juan says they affectionately referred to as “the yellow machine.”

When they reached adulthood, the Rodriguez brothers started to think about an alternative career. They each tried their hand at driving truck. But earning a living from the seat of a tractor-trailer just didn’t compare to the seat of a Walker Mower. So, after a few years, a big decision was made.

“My brother and I got this crazy idea to start doing our own thing,” Juan says. “We decided to go back to our roots and start gardening again. The first months were hard. We were knocking on doors and people were like, ‘Stop bugging me; I don’t want your services.’ But Alex and I both said to each other,

‘We can’t stop now.’ So, we just kept knocking. Finally, we got three clients in a cul-de-sac. Those clients referred us to a few others, and things started taking off little by little.”

### **LEADING BY EXAMPLE AND REWARDING HARD WORK**

Rising Green provides a range of services. Juan oversees maintenance, lawn care and tree care while Alex oversees irrigation and landscape installation. They each spend a lot of time in the field “micro-managing”, as Juan puts it.

“We aren’t the type of micro-managers who are always hounding our employees, though,” Juan is quick to point out. “We just like being out there helping do the work, while also keeping an eye on things to make sure the quality stays high.”

Juan says employees are motivated when they see the owners of the company willing to venture into the blistering Central Valley heat to work alongside them. Hard work and big rewards have been at the core of Rising Green’s recent success.

“A few years ago, we made a decision to offer employees plenty of overtime,” Juan says. “For several years, we did what a lot of landscape companies do: pay a little more than minimum wage and keep every day to eight hours. But we ran into problems with employee turnover. We decided to pay our guys more and let them work lots of hours. It’s hard and it’s hot, but our guys love it — especially when they get that paycheck. Now our employees are staying with us, and the quality of our work is excellent. So, for us, paying more for labor has been a really good investment.”

Case in point, Rising Green has been servicing a certain HOA for seven years now. Prior to taking over that property, Juan says the HOA had churned through half a dozen landscape contractors in just a few years. “I guess we are doing something right,” Juan humbly says with a shrug of the shoulders.

It sure looks that way. Whether it’s frantically searching for a two-inch weed, slightly overgrown shrub, or fistful of clippings on a lawn, the Rising Green staff knows what it means to get it right. Just to be sure, Juan says he and his brother are constantly checking

*“My brother and I got this crazy idea to start doing our own thing. We decided to go back to our roots and start gardening again.”*



**Brothers Juan and Alex Rodríguez have owned Rising Green since 2011. They enjoy leaving a property after using a Walker Mower and seeing that nice clean cut with no clippings.**

in with clients to see how things are going. They also send customer satisfaction surveys in the mail every few months. “Feedback is what helps us continue doing a great job,” Juan says.

Speaking of feedback, Juan had an interesting conversation with the pastor of a church they service. The crew mows the higher-profile areas with a Walker Mower to catch the clippings and leave things clean as a whistle for when worshippers arrive. One week this past summer, the pastor decided to hold an outdoor service. That prompted Juan to deploy all seven of his Walker Mowers to mow not only the high-visibility areas, but also the huge field that is normally mowed with a 96-inch mower.

As Juan recalls, “The pastor said, ‘Whoa, you didn’t mow this field with the mower you usually use, right? Can you use these ‘new’ mowers all of the time?’ Of course, we can’t always put all seven of our Walkers on the

same property at once. But we’ll always use them wherever we can because there really is nothing like them. More than anything, I like driving away from a property and seeing that nice clean cut with no clippings anywhere.”

That is yet another part of the “one property at a time” mindset where a residential touch is applied to big commercial properties. For Rising Green, it’s a mindset that continues to pay off. 🟡



**Whether servicing a residential or commercial property, Rising Green employees are trained to focus on the finest of details.**

# SLC DOING WELL

A typical Scott's Lawn Care maintenance crew has three Walker Mowers, a walk-behind, GHS mower, and a Model B. Pictured here are l to r: operations manager Tony Melendez, owner Scott Hartmann, and assistant operations manager Allen Kasheimer.



Rod Dickens

Scott's Lawn Care isn't having the kind of growth year its owner anticipated, but still yearly sales goals are within sight. A miss would only mean being off by five to 10 percent. That says a lot for a company that lost several days of work right in the beginning of spring startup when the Minnesota governor declared the landscaping to be a nonessential industry. Fortunately, the decision lasted only two weeks before the governor reversed his decision.

"Those first couple weeks of the shutdown caused by the pandemic were difficult and kind of caught us off guard," said company president, Scott Hartmann. "We worked through it and, as the season wore on, we adjusted as did most of our customers."

Internally, he noted COVID-19's biggest impact has been felt on the company's inability to hold large company-wide meetings, although smaller divisional get-togethers keep the communication and training ongoing. Crews did not have to

**"...I decided to see for myself. I went to the Walker Mower booth, saw the mower, and within two weeks I had one of my own."**

**– Scott Hartmann,  
Owner of Scott's Lawn Care**

be downsized to accommodate social distancing because the maintenance division already ran two-man crews.

He explained that maintenance revenue for both commercial and residential customers has remained steady this year. Enhancement add-on sales are down on the commercial side but have experienced an uptick for residential customers who are spending more time at home, telling Hartmann, "I'm home, so let's get it done."

Located in Maple Plain, Minnesota, just west of the Twin Cities, Scott's Lawn Care has been in business since 1998. The company employs 27 people (a number that expands to 37 during snow removal season) in four divisions: maintenance, fertilizing, snow removal, and TLC or landscape

# DESPITE COVID-19

renovation. The company sits on a 20-acre property with plenty of room for a tree farm, mulching operation, and accommodating a testing site for a new venture, a robotic mowing service.

## EARLY START

Like so many successful landscape contractors, Hartmann was introduced to the industry at an early age. As a 12-year-old, he was already mowing neighbors' lawns, and by 16, he had enough work to buy a used 36-inch Snapper walk-behind mower. Before his high school graduation, Hartmann had already purchased a small fertilizing company, and a few years later he added a commercial company to his list of acquisitions.

Along the way he took several classes at two area technical colleges to receive turf establishment and management training, certification as an Outdoor Power Technician, and a Briggs & Stratton Master Certified Technician.

"Looking back, I could have avoided some mistakes by working for another landscape contractor before going on my own," Hartmann said. "On the other hand, lessons learned the hard way have a tendency to stick with you."

Knowing what equipment works best for the application is one area where experience can shorten the learning curve, he added, using as an example his introduction to the Walker Mower.

"I was doing a lot of bagging and was always looking for ways to make it more efficient. While visiting my dealer, I noticed a different bagging system on a mower, and when asked about it, the salesperson told me the design was based on a Walker Mower. I had never seen nor heard of a Walker. Later that summer, at the GIE+EXPO in Louisville, I kept hearing the same comment that 'this bagging unit is based on the Walker design.' So, I decided to see for myself. I went to the Walker Mower booth,

saw the mower, and within two weeks I had one of my own."

Twenty-two years later, he still uses that mower, an MT 20, as a backup during leaf collection. Today, Scott's Lawn Care has more than 20 Walker Mowers (some as backup units), and each maintenance crew is equipped with three of them: a Model MT 25 with a GHS deck, a Model B with a 52-inch side discharge deck, and a bit of history, a Walker Mower walk-behind unit with a 56-inch side discharge deck.

"Our maintenance accounts are divided almost equally between commercial and residential properties. We have five two-man crews, and depending on the property, different mowers are employed," Hartmann explained. "They use the GHS decks for mowing around swimming pools, garden beds, and any other high-profile areas where clippings need to be picked up. The Model B is for larger areas, and the Walker walk-behind for hilly terrain."

Scott's Lawn Care buys three or four new Walker Mowers every year, some to replace existing units and others to accom-

modate growth. Since the Walker walk-behind has not been on the market for several years, Hartmann says he can't buy a new one, but what he can do is buy used ones for their parts.

**Internally, COVID-19's biggest impact has been felt on the company's inability to hold large company-wide meetings... Crews did not have to be downsized to accommodate social distancing because the maintenance division already ran two-man crews.**

All five crews employ box trucks that come in especially handy for handling debris. Clippings and leaves are transported back to base where they are later mulched and used by the TLC crews.



**Despite Covid-19, maintenance revenue for both commercial and residential customers has remained steady this year.**

## MAINTENANCE AND BEYOND

Maintenance accounts for 40 percent of Scott's Lawn Care's revenue. The fertilizing division, including aeration along with weed and pest control, brings in 15 percent. This division also offers structural pest control, something a bit unusual for landscape contractors.

The TLC service adds another five to 10 percent in sales. Despite being offered exclusively to current customers, it is still positioned to be the biggest growth area. Snow removal for primarily commercial clients makes up the rest.

The Twin Cities area averages around 50 inches of snow a year, which translates into 14 plow events and 20 "nuisance events" for Scott's Lawn Care. Approximately 60 percent of the company's commercial customers are on a per push arrangement for snow; the rest are on a seasonal contract. "There's no question that budgeting snow is a challenge. Even in Minneapolis where one thinks it

the space for composting lawn debris or testing a piece of equipment like a robotic mower. This is Scott's Lawn Care's second season with the robot mowers, and it currently has Husqvarna mowers on 12 sites, nine commercial properties and three residences. Currently, the thought is to place them on larger areas where they don't have a lot of obstacles to overcome and where they can either save man-hours or allow crews time to provide additional services.

## LESSONS LEARNED

Even though Hartmann indicated he enjoyed landscaping more than maintenance when he first started his company, he learned quickly that maintenance was ongoing. It is no surprise then that the company's Walker Mowers and its five Ventrac tractors are the company's highest revenue-generating pieces of equipment.

"I immediately fell in love with the Walker Mowers and how the GHS decks handle the lush Kentucky Bluegrass," he related. "The deck variety and the introduction of the Model B give crews even more versatility. Ventrac, with its myriad of attachments, comes in a close second, when it comes to generating dollars."

As the company grew, Hartmann learned how important a good company culture is for an industry that can be labor challenged.

"I call our culture one that is family-oriented. We employ our full-time people year-round, encourage teamwork and having fun, offer bonuses and other incentives, and post customer compliments," he added. "Having a positive attitude is first and foremost among qualities we look for in new hires, because there will

be challenges and days when things don't go well."

Another important lesson? Learn from others. Scott's Lawn Care has been a member of an industry peer group for the last

**"I was a CLIP software user early on to help with job costing and more recently have switched to Service Auto Pilot."**

**– Scott Hartmann,  
Owner of Scott's Lawn Care**

seven years. Throughout the year, participants travel to a fellow member's facility and share best practices. Scott's Lawn Care has hosted two such meetings with the owner, among other things, sharing his thoughts on job-costing. "I've always been focused on job-costing," said Hartmann. "We have manager meetings every Tuesday morning where we track man-hours, actual hours, and overtime. We also hold monthly budget meetings. I was a CLIP software user early on to help with job-costing and more recently have switched to Service Auto Pilot."

When asked about an issue with which the group has helped him, he replied, "Getting out of my own way. I still think it's important to be with crews and show employees you would do anything that you ask them to do." But as he pointed out, the old saying, "you have to learn to work on and not in the business," still makes sense.

Hartmann has plenty of people to help him along the way, including operations manager Tony Melendez, assistant operations manager Allen Kasheimer, accounts manager J.D. Stavlo, and office manager Teri Johnson. His wife Jackie handles accounts payable/receivable and his father Terry, a former developer, helps with sales.

When not working in or on the business, Hartman and his wife enjoy spending time with their three children, 11-year-old twins Joe and Lucy and 5-year-old son Mack. Hartmann also is a lieutenant and EMT for the Maple Plain Fire Department. ●



**Scott Hartmann enjoys being in the field with his crews, but balances that by spending time working on his business and focusing on topics like job-costing.**

snows all winter long, it doesn't. To be safe, we budget for a less than normal snow year," said Hartmann.

The tree farm is a luxury that most landscape contractors do not have, as is

# IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT THE STRIPING

When landscape contractors share their thoughts about Walker Mowers, they usually tout the machines' striping ability, maneuverability, and quality of cut. All these are important for Jeff Craddock, too, but equally important for the owner of JC Lawncare in Strongsville, Ohio, is the mower's return

on investment.

"One of the reasons I was reluctant to purchase a Walker Mower was its cost," said Craddock. "I could outfit a trailer with a couple other mowers and a few weed whips for the cost of a Walker Mower." That was his argument when the late Tom Emmett, a long time Walker dealer in nearby Richfield, Ohio, finally convinced

him to demonstrate one.

"My employees tried the mower and then loaded it back on the trailer after running it maybe a half hour. I returned the mower to Tom, and sure enough, a couple months later he showed up again with a demonstrator, telling me, 'There's always a place on any trailer for a Walker Mower,'" Craddock recalled.



Jeff Craddock with son Austin: Like his dad, Austin started learning the industry and how to operate the equipment at an early age.

This persistent scenario played out for a couple of years until one day Tom dropped off two demonstrators. “He told me to take two mowers off my trailer and put these two on in their place, so crews had to use them,” said Jeff. “I did, and after a week, my employees thought they were awesome. Shortly thereafter, I purchased two of them with 42-inch GHS decks.”

Jeff said his employees were impressed with the mowers’ grass-catching ability. But for someone with a degree in finance and a minor in accounting from the University of Akron, the new mowers proved something else. They dramatically reduced mowing and cleanup time on his HOA properties.

### LEARNING CURVE

Jeff purchased his first Walker Mower

11 years after starting his company in 1995. Before then, at the age of 14, he had worked summers for a small family-owned lawn maintenance company. He carried on with the tradition through college, working for a couple of larger national companies. “It was good experience all the way around,” he related. “Working both part-time and full-time, I became a crew foreman, did some selling, and put on presentations for HOA customers.”

After receiving his degree in 1995, the graduate looked at the job market and found that nothing appealed to him. Sitting inside in a cubicle all day was not what he wanted to do. As an alternative, Craddock decided to leverage his landscaping experience. He formed JC Lawncare and with two employees began installing patios and

irrigation systems and offering some maintenance services.

Three years later his business model changed when JC Lawncare subcontracted with True Green Chem Lawn to provide maintenance for its fertilizer customers. Jeff sold off his skid steer loader and other equipment used for installations and concentrated on maintenance. Overnight, his company went from doing 70 percent installation and 30 percent maintenance to focusing almost entirely on maintenance.

Craddock said it was a period of huge growth for his company, but it came at a cost. Over the next five years, he put on five maintenance crews and employed upwards of 14 people to handle the subcontracting work. “I was working seven days a week and bringing home less money than before,” he



said. “So, I gave up the subcontracting work and concentrated on growing my company, offering full-service landscape services to HOAs, residential customers, and commercial properties.”

Today, the HOAs make up the lion’s share of business, accounting for half of sales revenue. Residences at 30 percent and commercial properties at 20 percent bring in the rest. Crews have been reduced from five during the apex of his subcontracting years to three, and employees now number between six to eight full-timers depending on the season.

### DOLLARS AND SENSE

JC Lawncare was a favored subcontractor because of the quality of its work. Even companies that provide exemplary service, however, can fail if profitability eludes them. Thanks to his finance and accounting background, Craddock was not going to let that happen.

The owner has developed spreadsheets on all of his properties that illustrate how much time it takes to mow, trim, and provide additional services on each of them. From this picture, he can then extrapolate just how a few efficiencies and time savings can make a difference over the course of a month or even a season. “Three minutes may not seem like a lot of time to save on a property, but if you save that on every property, on every crew, over the course of the entire season, it really adds up,” he emphasized.

This approach helped justify his first Walker Mower purchase and ensures they are part of his equipment lineup today. JC Lawncare has gone from running 42-inch to 48-inch GHS decks and has even added a Hi-Dump attachment on one of them. “After doing a time study on the attachment, I found it would pay for itself in less than a year in man-hours saved,” Jeff added. “Then there is the safety issue, too, of not having to get off a machine and lift heavy bags of

**“After doing a time study on the [Hi-Dump] attachment, I found it would pay for itself in less than a year in man hours saved.”**

**– Jeff Craddock,  
Owner of JC Lawncare**



**HOAs make up the lion’s share of JC Lawncare’s sales revenue.**

wet grass into the back of a truck.”

Spreadsheets, time studies, and labor-saving equipment all came in especially handy this year in Strongsville. Because of Covid-19, area landscape contractors were virtually shut down from mid-March to late May. They were allowed to do some things (e.g., mow lawns that were unsightly and provide a few other lawn care services). Even then, they could only allow one person per truck. JC Lawncare rearranged its crews from three to one, purchased a few more trucks, trailers, and equipment, and tried to get the work done as efficiently as possible. Crew size restrictions were partially reduced in May, allowing two people in a truck, but some obstacles remained.

“It has been a tough year for landscape contractors, and continues to be difficult,” Craddock conceded. “We are fortunate to have good customers, and our employees really knuckled down to get the work done.”

He noted that in the lawn care industry, there is always work, but being successful depends on so many factors. “Understanding your financial posi-

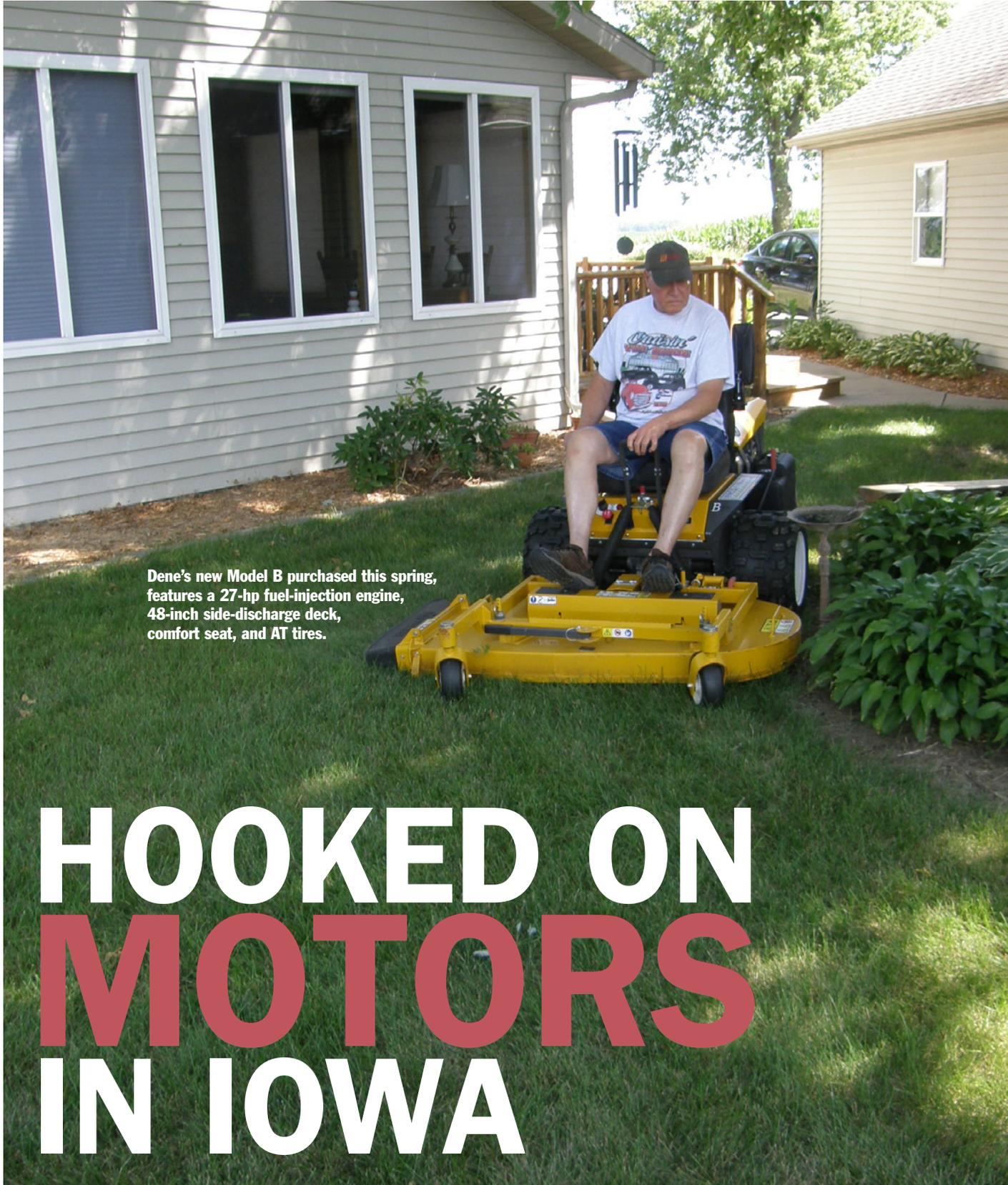
tion is important, but so too is developing a good reputation, doing quality work, building relationships with customers, hiring and training good people, and ensuring that crews are knowledgeable to be able to answer customers’ questions.

“The last thing you want is for a customer to ask a crew member a question and then hear, ‘I’ll get back with you tomorrow with an answer,’” Craddock said. “Our crew members, many of whom have been with me eight to ten years, are knowledgeable to the extent they have become our salesforce for add-in services.”

One of them is Jeff’s son, Austin, who, at age 26, is an account manager. Like his dad, he started learning the industry and how to operate the equipment at an early age. He’s there with other company veterans to help out when Craddock is off at his second full-time job as operations manager for his father-in-law’s manufacturing company, something he’s been doing since 2003.

“I don’t worry about things getting done when I’m not here,” Craddock emphasized, referring to his lawn care business. “My employees have been empowered to make good decisions and they do.”

Splitting time between two full-time jobs seems laborious to most, but Craddock takes it in stride. “Having two full-time positions isn’t bad when one of them, operating a lawn care company, is your passion,” he said. ☺



Dene's new Model B purchased this spring, features a 27-hp fuel-injection engine, 48-inch side-discharge deck, comfort seat, and AT tires.

# HOOKED ON MOTORS IN IOWA



**W**hen Dene Rath retired at age 55, he wasn't concerned about having something to do. To the contrary, the free time gave him the opportunity to enjoy his lifelong passion, motoring around. May it be a "souped-up" car, off-road bike, snowmobile, or an ATV, you name it, he was game. When he and his wife, Marsha, aren't motoring around on the ground, they take to the air and sea to visit faraway places like Machu Picchu, Peru, and the Galapagos Islands



**Here, a younger Dene Rath tests his skills on an off-road bike. "Being able to finish is important, whether you are racing or mowing."**



in Ecuador, take a riverboat excursion down the Danube, or fashion a tour of Iceland. Their most recent trip took them to Egypt to see the pyramids.

Even "Star Trek's" Captain Kirk, actor William Shatner, whose "future birthplace" is in Rath's hometown of Riverside, would likely take notice of the couple's adventure-some spirit. When not on the move though, they spend plenty of time on their two-acre property and in the house they built there in 1977.

Rath said he first became interested in cars in 1956 when, at the age of 12, he purchased an issue of Hot Rod magazine from the local drugstore. He later came to terms with his "motorhead" tendencies while attending nearby University of Iowa.

"I was more interested in cars than getting a degree," he recalled. "So, I left school early and held several jobs while pursuing my passion."

His last job was working for Proctor & Gamble in quality control and later in IT and data processing. Rath worked there 33 years before retiring in 1999.

"Throughout much of that time, I was hanging around my brother-in-law who was also into cars and racing," he said. "I also developed an interest in off-road motorcycle racing, and still recall the fun our group had holding what we called 'hare scrambles,' where we scoped out a closed course through the woods and along the river."

Rath purchased his first motorcycle in 1969 and sold his last one in 2013. His list of cars is long, as well, and includes a 1968 Dodge Dart on steroids and a 1939 Chevy he rebuilt and stores in his garage right next to a new Model B Walker Mower.

### **OBSTACLE COURSE**

Some would say that maintaining Dene and Marsha Rath's property could be an adventure itself. In addition to being very hilly, the landscape features more than 85 trees, nearly half of which are black walnut trees. Last year, the couple removed 997 pounds of walnuts from their lawn using a long-handled nut-gathering tool.

Then there are the hills.

"This is a lawn you don't want to walk to mow," Rath emphasized. "I've had several different riding mowers over the years, includ-

**Rath purchased his first motorcycle in 1969 and sold his last one in 2013.**

ing a 30-inch rear-engine rider that I flipped over backwards. Fortunately, I was able to push myself out of the way before it landed." A dent on his garage siding tells of another time when a mower lost traction on a steep embankment.

Even for an off-road enthusiast, enough



**In addition to being very hilly, this challenging landscape includes more than 85 trees, nearly half of which are black walnut trees.**

**RIGHT: When not seeing the world, Marsha and Dene enjoy spending time around home and tag-teaming the mowing operation.**



is enough. “In 2009, I invited a dealer to demonstrate a zero-turn mower on that same hill and it couldn’t keep its traction,” Rath related. “Then my current dealer brought out the Walker Model B and it worked great on the bank.”

Since then, the Rathes have had three B’s — including a new one they purchased this spring with a 27-hp fuel-injection engine, 48-inch side discharge deck, comfort seat, and AT tires.

The tires, along with being seated over the top of them, deliver great traction. “It’s amazing,” said Rath, noting that it still takes nearly four hours to mow the yard, whether he or Marsha is doing it alone or they are tag-teaming the operation, which they sometimes do.

Harkening back to his motorcycle “hare scramble” MX days, Rath emphasized that off-road competitors had to have bikes that

were not only speedy, but reliable. As he put it, you could have the fastest bike at the start of the race, but if it didn’t finish, it couldn’t win.

“Being able to finish is important, whether you are racing or mowing a lawn,” Rath added. “I know a little about the latter, too, since I started mowing lawns when I was 10 or 11 and, at one time, mowed seven yards in one day.

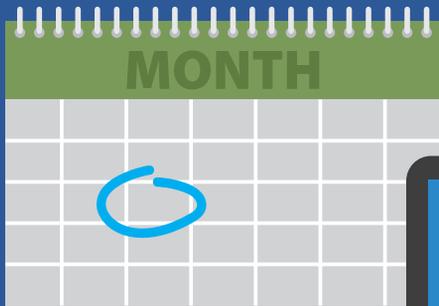
“Reliability is one of the things I like most about my B,” he continued. “I love the engineering and technology. It’s well built, and there are grease fittings everywhere.”

He said he has never considered a mower with a GHS deck because he leaves the clippings on the ground, and having that extra stability the Model B provides on hills is a requisite.

Rath mentioned that this is probably the last Walker Mower he will ever own, unless the company comes out with a newer model with features he cannot resist. He is already eyeing a new attachment or two for next year, though, but he is keeping them close to his vest. Maybe he is holding out hope for an attachment that picks up black walnuts.

The Rathes have two children, a son who has a career in the aircraft industry and a daughter who is a college career counselor. The couple makes the most of their retirement, enjoying their family, and putting to rest any thought that the golden years are a special time to sit back and put their feet up. —

# IS AUTOPAY FOR YOUR COMPANY?



**W**ant to save some time and improve cash flow? If you answer yes, then consider doing what Chase Coates did two years ago. That was when the owner and president of Outback Landscape in Idaho Falls, Idaho, instituted autopay. The move was so successful, he will not accept new customers today unless they participate in the program and have a credit card on file.

Coates, whose 18-year-old company employs 75 people, made the move for a couple of reasons. “I was tired of chasing \$40 accounts, and I wanted our design/build and landscape maintenance business, and a newly acquired lawn care company, Lawn Buddies, to ‘catch up with the times’.”

As he noted, nearly all his residential customers use autopay for Netflix, I-tunes,

and Amazon. Why not take advantage of it for field services like landscaping and lawn care? In other words, introducing autopay was not just a benefit for his company and its cash flow, it was a benefit for customers, as well.

“We want to simplify their lives and not just by providing landscape management services,” Coates said. “We want that to carry over into how they interact and do business with us.”

## HOW IT WORKS

Outback Landscape sends an email invoice to customers every Monday for the work done the previous week and charges their cards on Wednesday. The company uses a software program called Service Auto Pilot to schedule and manage accounts and process payments. If a card

is declined, e.g., the expiration date has expired, the program automatically emails customers notifying them their card has been declined while providing a link where they can update their cards. If cards have not be updated within five days, the program automatically sends a follow-up. If it has been paid, the customer is knocked out of the follow-up reminder.

Outback has a mix of commercial and residential customers. While its residential customers are required to take advantage of autopay, commercial clients are not, although several who are on seven-month or 12-month contracts opt in, as well.

“The program is especially attractive to larger full-service customers and commercial clients who want to take advantage of premium credit cards that offer cash back, points and other benefits,” Coates related.



**Jordan Webb, owner of Two Seasons Services, used to bill his lawn maintenance customers once a month. Now, with autopay, they are billed at the end of the workday and funds are in the company's account the following day.**

“Instead of billed weekly as homeowners are, commercial customers are billed monthly on a flat rate.”

### **CHALLENGES**

Coates' biggest challenge using autopay has been getting his office staff comfortable with asking customers for their credit card

number.

“It is all in how you present the service to them,” he said. “We assure them asking for their credit card number is not because we don't trust them or that we think they might not pay their bill in a timely fashion. Instead, we explain that autopay, which is a convenience for them not having to write and mail

a check every month, is another way we can help put their life on autopilot.”

Despite their initial concerns, Outback's staff has received little push back from customers. As for the card service fees, Coates projects what credit card sales will be for the coming year and puts the service fee, which averages close to three percent,



with Service Auto Pilot a year after he launched his company eight years ago. The landscape maintenance company services more than 1,400 customers in and around Gilbert, Chandler, and Mesa. DeCausmaker also owns and operates an overflow answering service for his company and others in the service industry.

Unlike Outback Landscape, Little Johns Lawns' customer base is comprised almost entirely of residential customers who receive a variety of landscape maintenance services, including mowing, trimming, cleanup, fertilizing and weed control, and irrigation repair.

"Having as many customers as we have, autopay saves us a lot of time, but that's not what sells them on the program," DeCausmaker emphasized. "It is a convenience to them."

"We had growing pains at first, becoming familiar with the program and educating our customers that getting on board would be beneficial to them," he added. "Once we were up and running, customers asked us why we didn't start the program earlier."

### BIG PICTURE

When asked if many other contractors in his market take advantage of autopay, DeCausmaker said, "No, not really. Some landscape contractors don't want to pay the card service fee, but you have to ask them how much is their time worth to track down money, track down customers, and then wait for a check."

Jordan Webb, owner of Two Seasons Services in Anchorage, Alaska, agreed.

"I know that some landscape contractors don't want to pay the additional 2.75 to 3.25 percent service fee that cards charge, but using autopay is well worth the cost in time savings and being assured that you will get paid," Webb said.

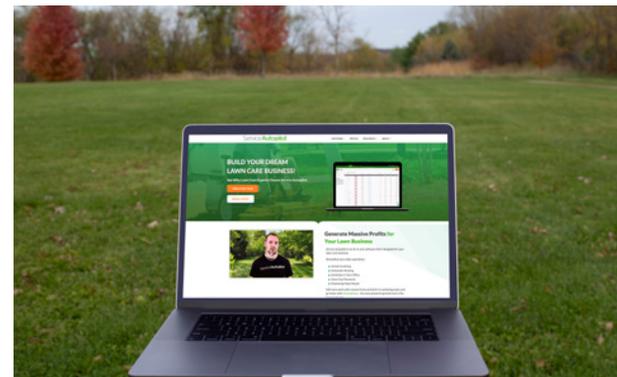
Coates, DeCausmaker, and Webb are part of a Service Auto Pilot peer group that meets four to five times a year. Webb started his company in 2008 and purchased the software program four years later. His business, which is all residential, is divided 25 percent lawn maintenance, 25 percent snow removal, and 50 percent building decks.

"Before using autopay, we billed once a

month. It was a lot more manual than using Service Auto Pilot; it was slow going," said Webb. "Now, our lawn maintenance customers are billed daily, at the end of the workday. Funds are in our account the following day. This compares to waiting 30 to 60 days like we used to wait."

He noted that per push snow removal customers are billed similarly, after the service has been provided. Those on a monthly installment plan are billed monthly. Design-build billing is more manual.

Mowing and maintenance customers



### Startup costs for using Service Auto Pilot's autopay feature are very reasonable.

are billed 22 times a year, the same for snow removal customers, added Webb. "We basically have two seasons, summer and winter. Hence our company name," he noted.

Using autopay is part of an ongoing effort by all three company owners to further automate their operations.

At Outback, for example, the company's autopay software is also synced to its QuickBooks, which, said Coates, together with its other features, has virtually eliminated one person in the office.

"You don't have to own a large company to take advantage of autopay," he emphasized. "Small and mid-size companies also appreciate how important it is to save time, and every company can benefit from better cash flow."

Outback's owner mentioned that startup costs for using Service Auto Pilot's autopay feature are very reasonable and depend on the number of customers you have and whether or not you want additional features like being able to sync with QuickBooks. ☹

directly into the budget as a hard cost to be recovered in overhead. Outback accepts the three major credit cards, American Express, MasterCard, and Visa, including those premium cards with cash back and other benefits.

John DeCausmaker, owner of Little Johns Lawns in Gilbert, AZ, signed on

## WALKER NEWS & PRODUCTS

### MODEL MB23 ADDED TO MB FAMILY

The Model MB23 installs a carbureted 22.5 HP Kohler CH680 Command Pro engine in the new style MB27i chassis. This model offers an entry level machine for commercial and fleet operators with pricing like the legacy MB18.



### 48-INCH MULTI- DECK AVAILABLE

Introduced in the 2020 season, the Walker Manufacturing 48-inch multi-function deck operates with collection (GHS) and side discharge functions and features quiet and durable operation with belt-driven blades. Bolt-on baffles allow operators to easily change the function of the deck. The deck fits all GHS tractors except MS14i.



### MODEL B27I INTRODUCED

This higher horsepower version of the Model B provides a simplified design and improved performance. It uses a 26.5 HP Kohler EFI engine and Ogura electric blade clutch with Soft Start for convenience and durability for the operator. The simplified chassis, with integrated fenders and seat pan, eliminates the front body used on earlier Model MB. It is also available with an optional utility bed.



### NEW VERSION DS56-2 DECK

The 56-inch side discharge deck has been redesigned to improve cut quality, side discharge performance, and increase durability. The deck housing, carrier frame, and cutting blades have all been changed. In addition, the housing has a LH replaceable wear edge and new baffling, a reinforcing rod added on the front and a molded rubber discharge shield. The cutting blades are flat with an extended cutting edge. The LH caster wheel on the carrier frame also has been repositioned to improve cut quality.

## WALKER FIVE STAR DEALERS FOR 2020 ANNOUNCED

Walker Manufacturing introduced the 2020 class of Five Star Dealers recently at their 36th Annual Distributor Meeting in Beaver Creek, Colorado.

Five Star dealers are nominated by their distributors and chosen by Walker leadership for their ongoing commitment to year-over-year sales and leadership in marketing and technical services. In addition to attending the annual distributor meeting, dealers are given four-night, all-expense paid trips to the Four Seasons hotel in Vail.

For 2020, the Five-star dealers are: **Union Farm Equipment** of Union, Maine (Ken and Debby Keiran), **Price Small Engines** of Opelika, Alabama (Steve and Karen Price), **Blueline Equipment** of Pasco, Washington (Gregg Marrs), **Amarillo Outdoor Power** of Amarillo, Texas (Mark and Valerie Huber) and **G&G Equipment** of Frederick, Colorado (Will Giefer).

All five dealers attended the meeting and were recognized by Walker Manufacturing for their outstanding performance.

The 2020 selections represent the fifth annual class chosen for this prestigious dealer award. See all Five Star Dealer recognition videos at [walker.com/dealerlocator](http://walker.com/dealerlocator).



### FIVE STAR DEALERS



## SALES MANAGER JOINS WALKER FACTORY TEAM

Walker Manufacturing is pleased to introduce Bob Clancy as our new Sales Manager. Bob assumed the Sales Manager role in early August.

Bob grew up in the Chicagoland area and was a competitive downhill ski racer and enjoyed drag racing while growing up. He moved to Fort Collins to pursue a degree at Colorado State University, and after graduating with a degree in finance and a minor in economics, he moved back to Chicago and joined Wells Fargo as an analyst in their corporate banking group.

For the past 12 years, Bob has worked in the banking industry, and most recently was a commercial banker for Independent Bank serving mid-sized businesses in Northern Colorado. Bob and his wife of ten years, Maggie, and their two daughters, June and Charlotte, live in Fort Collins.

## WALKER SALES INCREASE IN 2020

Despite the twists and turns of 2020, Walker Manufacturing retail sales have increased at a good rate over 2019. Like many businesses affected by the Covid-19 virus, sales dropped precipitously in the springtime, but rebounded nicely in the summer and fall. Using retail financing deals and warranty registration of sales for comparison, retail sales increased 12 percent and 10 percent respectively in 2020.

At the factory level, sales for 2021 are looking encouraging, both with order forecasts and orders placed. Factory output is being ramped up to meet indicated increased demand.



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## My Special Place

*Everyone has a special place, for some it might be a park, a chair or even a town. My special place is a little different though, it is in the operator's seat of a machine worth upwards of eleven thousand dollars. I have put in long hours, blood, sweat and tears for my special place. The Walker Mower B23i has always been a goal for me in my landscape company because I have worked for it, I have a passion for Walker Mowers and I have made tons of money on it.*

*I first started my landscaping company in the fifth grade, as a scrawny kid who could barely use a push lawnmower. I had one thing that others did not though—ambition. My parents always knew that I would go on to be a businessman from a young age. They did not realize that by the time I was fourteen, I would be paying taxes on what I made. I have always had the work ethic that allowed me to reach any of my goals, especially on this machine. It took me three years of hard work to purchase the B23i, but I finally did it.*

*Ever since I first walked into the Walker Mowers dealership, I knew what I had wanted: a Walker B23i. I have always had a passion for Walker Mowers, but I never knew just how far it would go. I bought my first Walker in the summer of 2019 when I had saved up three thousand dollars to buy an extremely used mower. I have since bought another Walker a year later, which is my special place. Walker has not just made me more money than a teenager could ever imagine, it has also grown my passion for helping people and my passion for mechanics.*

*The final reason why the operator's seat of the Walker Mower B23i is my special place is because of the money it has made me. It is said that if you love what you do, you will never work a day in your life, and that has become a true statement in me. I love working with my hands and with machines, but it is even better when you're getting paid for what you love. My machine has at times made me one hundred twenty dollars an hour for eight hours at a time.*

*In conclusion, it has become quite clear that the Walker Mower B23i is my special place, or it could even be said that it is my special thing. The combination of making me work hard, growing a relentless passion for what I do and making me fathoms of money for a teenager is why this is my special place. I never knew just how large my passion would grow for what modern society is lacking if I did not have this special place.*

Essay written by Ben Kohler (8th Grade),  
Kohler Lawn & Landscape, Amarillo, Texas

