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OSHA compliance and reducing back injuries should top your safety agenda.

For more information on the PLANET advantage sponsors listed in this issue, please visit the following Web sites:

STIHL: stihlus.com
BOBCAT: bobcat.com/landscape
JOHN DEERE:
  JohnDeereCredit.com
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PLANET: LandcareNetwork.org

Cover photo: The owner of this Atlanta residence wanted a backyard with a “Key West” theme. Photo is courtesy of Scapes, LLC, Atlanta, Georgia.
Being safe is the right thing to do, ALWAYS

Jim Martin, CLP
PLANET President

A few years ago, one of our employees suffered a serious back injury. Two years and three surgeries later, he was on the mend, an injury claim was settled, and yes, our insurance company had dropped us. We were forced to go to the marketplace and find a new carrier.

The accident occurred in 2000, and the claim was settled in 2002. In 2003, the annual costs from our new insurance company jumped $50,000. At about the same time, members of PLANET’s safety committee and a representative from CNA Insurance met to discuss safety concerns within our industry. That meeting led to the birth of PLANET’s STARS (Safety Training Achieves Remarkable Success) Safe Company Program. Free to all members of the green industry, the program outlines a comprehensive safety strategy (see article on page 20) and requires all participants to sign a safety pledge. The rest, of course, is up to owners and managers to follow through on a safety initiative that will make their companies a safer place to work. CNA and Husqvarna are sponsors of the STARS program.

Since becoming a STARS member, safety has become one of our company’s top priorities. A few of the steps we have taken to reduce our accident risk include having an even more active and engaged safety committee, measuring and tracking accidents, and tying upwards of 30 to 35 percent of an employee’s annual salary adjustment to his or her safety record. We have what our associates call a “Wall of Shame” where the current and previous year’s accidents are posted and days since the last injury are prominently displayed. Every pay period, 26 times a year, associates receive a safety stuffer in their paycheck envelope. The stuffer details a timely safety topic in both Spanish and English. Having recipients sign off that they have read and understand the safety message creates a degree of accountability that wasn’t there previously.

Certification training has been and continues to be part of our company culture. If you’re familiar with PLANET’s Certified Landscape Technician-Exterior (CLT-E) test, then you know that wearing the proper safety gear and following all the right safety steps are requisites for passing the exam. If you fail to follow safety protocol, you fail to receive your certification.

Our company is also a smoke-free, drug-free environment. After any accident, both the person at fault and the victim (if there is one) are given a drug test. Additionally, we hold regular safety meetings and keep the topic at the top of our agenda whenever we have company gatherings.

With that said, we still have a long way to go to become as safe as we want to be — as we need to be. Creating a safe work environment is like practicing “lean management” principles. Being safe — truly safe — requires a commitment to the concept of a continual, relentless pursuit of an ever-more safe workplace.

Safe companies pay less for liability and workers’ compensation insurance. They are more productive because they have scrutinized and standardized job tasks, and they have minimized or eliminated their loss-time accidents. They are also revered by clients who can ill afford to engage the services of high-risk companies.

All these reasons pale, though, to the thought that one of our associates and friends could be seriously injured or killed on a job. This is unacceptable for any business owner, which means that being safe is the right thing to do, the right way to work, always.
I started my landscaping business by myself, part-time in 1998. After finally quitting my engineering job in 2000, I became a full-time business owner. In 2003, I joined PLANET and hired my first employees. Every year since then, my business has grown 30 percent, and I attribute this growth to being a PLANET member and using its resources.

As a design/build contractor, I have read PLANET's *Blueprint for Success* and keep it handy as a reference. My insurance costs have gone down every year, thanks to being a part of PLANET's STARS Safe Company Program. This year, I was lucky enough to be chosen to receive a Trailblazer mentor. The first advice he gave me was, “Get yourself a copy of the *Operating Cost Study.*” I have even placed the PLANET ethics statement in the front page of our employee manual and in a frame on our office wall. The statement goes out with every proposal, and it is displayed prominently on our Web site to let people know the high standards our company adheres to.

In addition to all the resources, I take advantage of numerous networking opportunities and have even partnered with another PLANET member on jobs that were too big for my company.

I started my company in my home with just a dream and a little bit of my own money. Now, we have moved into new offices after outgrowing our first location and are expanding into installing hardscapes. We're still small by any measure, but as I tell all my landscaping associates who are not yet members, “You don’t have to be big to be a PLANET member.” PLANET has helped me turn my love for plants and respect for the environment into a healthy, growing business.

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*PLANET advantage* is sent complimentary to PLANET members and other green industry professionals nationwide. If you are a green industry service provider that specializes in lawn care, design/build/installation, landscape management, or interior plantscaping and are not a PLANET member, call Gail Rogers in the Membership Department at (800) 395-2522 today.
MENTORS MAKE A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE

Because the job market for new graduates has become more competitive, we are a bit more selective with our internship program. We are bringing in fewer interns, but making more of an effort up front to determine if they would be a good match with our company.

Like other programs, ours runs for 12 weeks. Each intern is assigned a mentor who acts as a guide and confidant throughout the intern’s stay. Mentors have interned here, too, so they can anticipate questions and readily identify with an intern’s situation.

Before interns arrive, we develop a spreadsheet that literally documents what they will be doing from the time they walk through our door until they leave 12 weeks later. We send the draft spreadsheet to the intern and the intern’s professor for comments, make appropriate changes, and then ask the mentor to use the spreadsheet as a roadmap.

Four weeks before the program ends, I host a luncheon for all the interns and their mentors. During the gathering, I ask the interns about the program — if the experience was everything they anticipated, if there was anything they would like to change about the program for future interns, and if there is something they would like to do in their remaining four weeks that isn’t in their schedule.

The program works for us, and I believe it works for our interns, too. Having a mentor with internship experience has been a great help, and the luncheon has helped us improve our program over the years.

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OUR INTERNS RECEIVE A BROAD VIEW OF THE INDUSTRY

We began our internship program three years ago after becoming involved in Student Career Days. Since day one, our goal has been to provide our interns with a hands-on approach to operating a landscape contracting business. With that regard, during a 12-week period, our interns rotate through a six-module program. Module one involves a day of orientation, two days observing general operations, and two days working with our business development staff. The rotation continues with two weeks spent working with the estimating department (module two) and one week with the purchasing department (module three). Module four consists of six weeks devoted to field production, with interns working two weeks each in landscape installation, irrigation, and maintenance.

Interns close out their programs with modules five and six. In module five, they spend three days working with our service shop technicians and two days with a branch safety representative. Module six involves two days learning about payroll, accounts payable/receivable, and other administrative processes as well as three days working with the nursery staff learning about production, order processing, and plant identification.

Last year, two out of four interns became permanent employees. Although our program has become an important recruiting tool, its main purpose remains the same — to broaden the view of students who are considering a career within our industry. Vila & Son is committed to giving interns a solid, hands-on experience that will be valuable to them in the future regardless of where they chose to develop their careers.

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Keeping lines of communication open is important

We've had an internship program for more than 15 years and our current expectation is to hire five interns every summer — two for our design/build production team, two for our maintenance production team, and one designer. We want them to work like a true team member and have them rotate in and out of the various teams based on our needs. When interns are assigned to a field crew, we still bring them into the office at least one day a week to work with management staff.

Over the years, we've learned a few valuable lessons. We realize that we need to be flexible to allow our interns to gain the kind of experience they are looking for and to make their 12-week tenure with us an overall great experience. Interns write a daily journal that includes who they've worked with, what they've learned, and any constructive criticisms they may want to share with us, and they meet weekly with a senior staff member. It is extremely important to keep the lines of communication open throughout their stay with us.

We also understand that nonwork activities play an important role in the overall appreciation of an intern's time with us. Therefore, we schedule off-work activities, such as an early summer celebration, a group outing to a Cubs game, and a company picnic.

We hire interns with the full expectation that they one day may want to work for us. Understanding our culture is paramount for them (and us) to make the right decision. Having different internship experiences with other companies is equally important. Once interns have worked with us, we encourage them to work elsewhere during their college years before deciding about our company once they graduate.

Interns have also become an important part of our ongoing recruiting effort. When we go on recruiting trips to a college, we take along a PowerPoint presentation with photos of past interns from that school. Viewing an image of what individuals were doing during their internship is a powerful incentive for students and an important recruiting tool.

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We give interns a full range of experiences

Our internship program is at least 15 years old. Depending on the year, we will bring in anywhere between 10 to 20 interns. They come to us via our fall recruiting effort, from professor referrals, and through our participation at Student Career Days.

One of our goals is to give interns a broad view of our company and its service offerings. We do this by rotating them through each of our departments, encouraging them to participate in company events, and exposing them to many of the same experiences of full-time employees.

The rotating schedule (typically two weeks in a department) accomplishes several things. It gives interns a taste of what it would be like to provide landscape management, installation, irrigation, and other services, and gives us an opportunity to see how they handle the mental and emotional challenges associated with meeting new people and learning a new job every two weeks.

Just how many different experiences interns have depends in large part on what they want to get out of the program. Our program is designed to accommodate their needs. If they’ve never interned before or had any experience working for a green industry company, then we would recommend a full rotation through our departments. If they’ve had some experience and want to concentrate in certain areas, we try to accommodate them.

I believe you have to challenge interns, while at the same time make sure they have a good experience. The last thing any company wants is for an intern to return to school and give fellow students a bad review of the company or its internship program. As a former intern at Chapel Valley, I know how valuable a program like this is to students who are trying to find a company that matches their career goals. Our goal is to find the right fit for them and for us, and having an effective internship program is a good place to start.

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If you’ve ever attended PLANET’s Green Industry Conference (GIC), then you know how the networking sessions, seminars, workshops, and trade show can benefit you, your employees, and your company. In fact, over the last couple of decades, the GIC has proven to be a truly significant event for all members of the green industry, an event that conveys important information about ways to increase your company’s productivity and profitability.

“This year’s GIC promises to be bigger and better than any of its predecessors,” says Bob Grover, CLP, CLT, chairperson of the GIC Committee. “One good reason for anyone to attend this year’s GIC is to have the opportunity to walk the trade show. Thanks to an alliance between the Green Industry Expo (GIE) and the Outdoor Power Equipment’s Louisville EXPO, this year’s trade show will be more than twice as big if not three times bigger than the GIE. That means attendees will be able to see more products and services than ever before and talk with vendors that represent every segment of our industry.

“If that isn’t incentive enough to make a trek to Louisville,” Grover adds, “consider this: The GIC, with its educational workshops, the ever-popular Breakfast with Champions networking and learning sessions, and dozens of informative seminars will present a powerhouse of opportunity to learn from industry experts and veterans. To give you a taste of what to expect, well-known and respected personalities such as Kevin Kehoe, Judy Guido, Jim Paluch, Marty Grunder, and Monroe Porter will talk about ways to improve your profitability, differentiate yourself from the competition, drive out waste, sell by building relationships, and increase your level of service.”

And there’s more. Charles Vander Kooi will explain how to effectively recover overhead cost. Roger Cook, from “This Old House,” will discuss industry trends. Green industry safety consultant, Barb Mulhern, will provide insights into ways to reduce OSHA exposure by implementing a proactive safety program.

“The list goes on,” says Grover. “We truly have a star-studded field of individuals who will address nearly every major issue facing landscape management contractors, lawn care operators, design/build contractors, and other industry members. Our educational tracks will be similar to the ones that were so successful last year. We will repeat many of the high-profile seminars to give as many people as possible an opportunity to attend them. The GIC Committee has also consolidated the educational sessions so attendees can better budget their time, take in more of the larger trade show, and enjoy the sights and attractions Louisville has to offer.”

He continues, “We’ve kept what has worked very well for past conferences and added in several new twists with new speakers to continue to pique attendee interest. This is a conference that will appeal to veterans and new attendees alike. It’s bigger than ever, and an event that anyone serious about competing in this competitive and exciting industry should not miss.”

The 2007 Green Industry Conference platinum sponsor is John Deere. The conference and GIE EXPO will be held October 24–27 at The Galt House/Kentucky Exposition Center, in Louisville, Kentucky. For more information and to register, visit the PLANET Web site at GreenIndustryConference.org or call (800) 395-2522.
EATS BIG LAWNS FOR BREAKFAST. AND LUNCH. AND DINNER.

The John Deere 997 Diesel Z-Track™ Mower was built for one purpose: to gobble up big stretches of lawn, fast. Its high-torque, 31-hp diesel engine drives a deep-dish 7-Iron™ deck that’s up to 6 feet wide.* So you can hurry even in the rough stuff, 10 hours to a tankful. Got an appetite for big profits? Get a free Z-Trak demo. Call your John Deere dealer, or visit www.MowPro.com.
Portland, Oregon, beckons visitors with beautiful rose-filled gardens, mild weather, and an abundance of recreational opportunities. To the east, Mt. Hood stands majestically only an hour from downtown. Looking west, one can almost sense the presence of the Pacific Ocean, another hour or so away. The city is also situated on the northern edge of the Willamette Valley, one of the most productive agricultural regions in the country.

It’s in this environment, favorable to visitors and residents alike, that Dennis’ Seven Dees has evolved from a small design/build company in 1977 to a multimillion dollar, full-service design/build and landscape management company, today.

“We’ve come a long way in 30 years,” says company president David Snodgrass, CLP. “In the first year, we brought in $70,000 in sales, all from residential design/build projects. We quadrupled that figure the following year and continued to grow exponentially until we reached the million-dollar mark. Then, five years ago, when we were sitting at $10 million in sales, I challenged our team with the vision that we crack the $25 million barrier. Here we are today standing very near that threshold.”

If you know David Snodgrass, you know that he considers dollar signs to be only one measure of success. He defines true success as having a business that provides exemplary service to customers and growth opportunities for employees, in addition to one that makes a healthy profit. A successful business also garners the respect of the community and, in his words, “carries with it a sense of pride about the work it does.”

Dennis’ Seven Dees roots stretch back to 1927 when David’s grandfather, Bernard Esch, launched a one-person mowing business, and later lived a dream by owning a wholesale rhododendron operation. In 1956, Esch’s daughter Merle met Robert Snodgrass. The two were married and had seven children, all with first names beginning with the letter “D.” Robert operated the family garden center, nursery, and landscaping business, which he called Seven Dees, until 1975 when sons Dennis and Drake took over. Two years later, David, along with brothers Dean and Drew, purchased the landscape portion of the business from Dennis.

Today, there are two Seven Dees operating in Portland: Dennis’ Seven Dees, which David, Dean, and Drew operate, and Drake’s Seven Dees, which is run by brother Drake. This story, though, is about Dennis’ Seven Dees, a company that employs 300 people and has an annual revenue stream of more than $20 million. Residential design/build and commercial build account for approximately 60 percent of the sales. Landscape management services for residential and commercial customers and four garden centers account for the remainder of the business.

Best foot forward

When asked how his company achieved its growth and reputation, Snodgrass thinks for a moment and then brings up the word pride again. “It all begins with pride,” he emphasizes. “If you have pride in your appearance, in your work, and in virtually everything you do, you will enjoy what you do … and success will follow. I truly believe this, and when our people take pride in their work and operation, they will surprise customers by delivering a service that goes beyond their expectations. Then, we have customers for life.”

Pride alone, however, doesn’t fuel growth and success, he relates. Having a culture that creates a feeling of trust among employees and empowers them to make decisions is another important requisite. “I credit our employees for the growth of our company,”
says Snodgrass. “So much has changed over the last 30 years that we simply couldn’t grow and thrive without everyone pulling together in the same direction. Projects are bigger and more complex. Now, we install landscapes on high-rise rooftops, design and build elaborate water features, and pay more attention than ever before to sustainable practices and wetland preservation. Compared to today, it was easy to be in business 30 years ago. Now, we have to be smarter about doing business and pay more attention to all the details.

“Risks are greater and profit margins are tighter, too. Landscape companies cannot afford to assume the additional risk that is being pushed in our direction. We cannot afford to go into a large commercial project without paying close attention to very specific scope, insurance risk transfer, and the overall clarity of the contract’s language. We have learned the importance of challenging any contract that is not fair, and have learned the value of good communication prior to signing. It all comes back to having team members you can trust to deliver during all stages of a project.”

Snodgrass admits that his company has made many mistakes along the way. What is important is that the owners have openly talked about and learned from them. “We’re not practicing lean management principles per se,” he notes, “but we have been and continue to be on the road to continuous improvement. We constantly look for better ways to get the job done, to deliver an even higher quality product.

Residential design/build and commercial build account for 60 percent of Dennis’ Seven Dees sales.
to our customers. Internally, we focus on fine-tuning our reporting systems and getting accurate figures in time to recover if costs are exceeding estimates.”

He continues, “Technology has played a huge role in our success, allowing us to operate at a higher level than ever, and it’s not just number crunching where this hi-tech excels. Our Web site is paying back dividends, as is our presentation materials. Customers expect to do business over the Internet and to see a project in living color before agreeing to a design.”

**Watershed moments**

This landscape contractor identifies several key moments in Dennis’ Seven Dees history. One occurred eight years ago when the company introduced a formal, rigorous training program. The management team identified and documented 120 topics for training and conducted training sessions as necessary to ensure foremen and new hires attended. “The program had a tremendous impact,” says Snodgrass. “Just getting everyone together has been a great exercise in team building. The training has also helped us standardize procedures and develop a higher level of consistency.”

The next key moment occurred a year later when the owners challenged employees to reach for the $25 million mark. “We didn’t stipulate a time limit, we just put the figure out there to open people up to the possibilities … sort of permission to think big,” says Snodgrass. “It’s amazing what people can do when you give them a goal, along with the tools and the freedom to reach it. We also strive to promote from within, which creates another incentive for employees to excel.”

When asked what he and his brothers will do for an encore dollar goal, Snodgrass smiles. “That goal,” he says, “will likely come from within and not from us. Our company has reached a point where it is growing on its own momentum. Key employees are already making important decisions, and they will be instrumental in determining and directing our future growth.”

This growth potential was given a shot of adrenaline five years ago when Dennis’ Seven Dees moved from a collection of mobile offices into a new 19,000 square-foot facility. The 19,000 square-foot structure did more than eliminate a cramped working environment. According to Snodgrass, it also allowed the company to have a home office that matched the work its employees were delivering. He explains:

“There’s something wrong about working hard all day to install beautiful landscapes on prestigious properties and then returning to a less than inviting office environment. Our new facility made employees feel better about their jobs and workplace, and it helped customers make the connection between us and the quality of work we do. If we had it to do over, we would have built the facility five, possibly 10 years earlier. Sure, we might...
have outgrown it, but its value to the company would have been well worth the cost and effort.”

**Green roots**

Three years ago, Dennis’ Seven Dees purchased the garden center business (three locations) from a retiring Dennis Snodgrass. A year later it added another garden center in nearby Seaside to bring the total number of retail outlets to four.

“The move back into the garden center business has been a watershed event for us, as well,” says Snodgrass. “Yes, it’s where our roots are, and we enjoy the business. But even more significant, the garden centers have allowed us to more fully serve our customers, to be a one-stop resource for them.

“Most of our landscaping customers start owning a simple home and doing their own landscape. Our garden centers, which are open seven days a week, give us an entrée into that market, to start developing a relationship with customers early on. We get the opportunity to do more than sell them products. We can help them design their projects with our “Planscaper” Program. Other garden centers have similar programs, but we have the ability to tap into the expertise of our in-house landscape designers. For the garden center do-it-yourselfer, if they purchase their product from us, the design is free.

“Retail is challenging in a different way from designing, installing, and maintaining landscapes. It has opened up a new world of opportunity for us, and the stores have become a source of leads for our design/build and landscape management departments.”

David, Dean, and Drew are very hands on in the business, yet thanks to a culture that fosters trust and a sense of pride in employees, a powerful momentum from within the company drives growth. The brothers, no doubt, wonder if their grandfather had any idea where his dream would lead.

**A STRETCH IN TIME**

In 1993, Dennis’ Seven Dees management team was invited to attend a logging industry presentation on stretching. Three years earlier, the company had formed a safety committee to help reduce back injuries and overall improve safety. The stretching presentation piqued the committee’s interest; and how!

The committee soon implemented its own stretching program. Every morning, crews gather to enjoy a 10-minute warm-up exercise before work, and before long the regimen grew to involve all company employees. Today, passersbys will see Dennis’ Seven Dees parking lot filled with associates stretching, bending, and enjoying the morning start together before moving on to their day’s activities.

“I cannot say enough about what stretching has done for our safety program and our company,” says company president David Snodgrass, CLP. “Stretching and warming up has definite physical benefits, but the exercise has demonstrated returns that go far beyond the physical. In addition to being another good team-building event, the morning stretch encourages participants to see themselves as being safety conscious — a perception they carry with them throughout the day.

“In other words, stretching in the morning created a safety culture that has literally driven our safety program. We have an active safety committee that involves people in all our departments. Safety is a topic at every company meeting. We report incidents and time-loss accidents, enter PLANET’S Safety Recognition Awards Program every year, have a strong back-to-work program, and we translate all written and verbal communication into Spanish. We are also a member of PLANET’s STARS Safe Company Program.

“Our current record for days without a time-loss accident is 390 (previous record was 1,867 days). Our experience modification (MOD) rate is .74, significantly below the industry average of 1.0. We pay less than the industry average for workers’ compensation, and clients look favorably on us as a safe company to work with.

“I’m not overstating the case at all when I say that implementing a 10-minute stretch in the morning was one of the smartest moves our company has ever made. I’m proud to be a champion of stretching and what it can do to improve a safety culture.”

Dennis’ Seven Dees employees share a stretching moment.
Green Industry Competitions
Groom Tomorrow’s Workforce

With green industry jobs projected to increase by 22 percent in the next 10 years, preparing young people for budding “green” careers is more important than ever. Recognizing this, educational organizations including the Professional Landcare Network (PLANET) and the National FFA (FFA) are partnering with outdoor power equipment manufacturers like STIHL to recruit and train tomorrow’s leaders through annual student career events.

PLANET Student Career Days
PLANET Student Career Days is an annual three-day networking and recruiting event that attracts college and university students from around the country to compete in interior and exterior, horticulture and landscape, and lawn care activities. Combining academic, physical and work related competition, with an outstanding career fair at its center, it is the largest gathering of green industry qualified recruits and recruiters in the nation.

Nearly 1,000 students from 55 universities nationwide competed in PLANET Student Career Days in East Lansing, Mich.

National FFA Annual Convention
FFA’s annual convention hosts more than 50,000 high school students with four days of activities, competitions and displays in conjunction with an industry-wide career fair. Participants compete in knowledge-based areas such as plant identification and resource planning, as well as in business areas including salesmanship, business letter writing and team project solving. Winners of the prestigious Nursery and Landscape Career Development Event are invited to preview PLANET’s collegiate-level career days.

These national events, combined with the local and regional competitions leading up to them, are vital to cultivating a qualified pool of future industry workers.

“Today’s young people are more concerned for our environment than at any time in our past. Through events like PLANET’s 31st Annual Student Career Days, they are also growing more aware of the diverse career path opportunities our industry offers,” said PLANET President Jim Martin, CLP.

In addition, he noted that the effectiveness of career events is dependent on industry-wide collaboration.

“By partnering with STIHL, the Ariens Company, and FFA to present the 2007 Student Career Days, we were able to create laser-like focus on the industry’s exciting and unique opportunities available to young people. For the FFA students who attended the event, this was an exciting glimpse into the future and an important step in their career development.”
PLANET 360°

PLANET Student Career Days is making a positive impact on the industry. Following is a roundtable perspective from participants at all levels of the event:

Jim Martin, CLP, President, PLANET

“As the association of members who create and maintain the quality of life in communities across America, PLANET is dedicated to ensuring a bright future for the green industry. From creating beautiful new landscapes to managing restored wetlands, students are learning why this career choice is being discussed as one of the top five career choices for students pursuing college educations. They are learning why this industry is being referred to as the environmental stewards of the built and natural landscape.”

J.R. Peterson, Team Leader for Corporate Contributions, National FFA Foundation

“With the help of STIHL, Ariens and PLANET, we have been able to send our top-level students from the National Nursery and Landscape Career Development Event to PLANET Student Career Days. This is an incredible opportunity for these young people to see how the skills they have developed can lead to a successful and rewarding career in the green industry.”

Laura Kalfs, Minnesota West Community and Technical College Student

“It was an AMAZING experience to be a part of SCD. As a future horticulturalist, I found it very promising that so many students and industry associates not only have such a passion for this field, but are also willing to share their abilities and talents.”

Matthew Early, North Metro Technical College Student

“I am part of a family business that we work to grow on a day-to-day basis. After attending an event like Student Career Days, I am able to apply everything I’ve learned here instantly.”

Roy Peterman, Grounds Director for Brigham Young University and Team Coach

“I’ve seen the evolution of Student Career Days through the years and am impressed by the nature of the industry mixing with students. Providing a hands-on experience as an augment to education is one of the more valuable things in a student’s education, particularly in the landcare industry.”

Roger Phelps, STIHL Inc., PLANET and FFA Sponsor

“Manufacturers have significant resources they can use to make a positive difference in the lives of young people and the future of our industry. Our contributions and participation with PLANET, FFA and other educational programs stem from our belief that we have a role in the education of our nation’s future leaders.”

Get Involved!

Career fair events offered by FFA, PLANET and other organizations offer prime recruiting opportunities for landscape contractors and other green industry professionals like you. To learn how your company can get involved, contact:

• PLANET Student Career Days, landcarenetwork.org, annademoret@landcarenetwork.org.
• Tree Care Industry Student Career Day and Student Skills Competition– www.tcia.org, cyr@TreeCareIndustry.org
• SkillsUSA – www.skillsusa.org, (703) 777-8810
INDUSTRY’S “BEST KEPT SECRET” BUILDS MOMENTUM

31st Annual Student Career Days

It’s roll call time. A brief calm settles over the Lansing Convention Center auditorium until the first name of the 53 schools in attendance is called. Then, shouts of pride ring out. One after another, students stand upon hearing their school’s name, and yell out a well orchestrated and boisterous cheer. When the shouting subsides, students are supercharged and more excited than ever to begin two of the most important days of their career lives.

This was the scene at the opening ceremony for the 31st Annual Student Career Days (SCD), held March 29-April 1, 2007, at Michigan State University in East Lansing, Michigan. If the loud refrain was any indication, the “best kept secret” in the industry was long “out of the bag.” In fact, nearly 800 students and more than 100 green industry companies, 200 volunteers, and a score of faculty members and SCD sponsors made sure of that, temporarily transforming down-town Lansing and MSU’s 5,200-acre campus into the center of the “green” universe.

Fair time

With roll call behind them, the students descended upon the Career Fair. For four hours, the main floor of the convention center was bustling with activity, with students asking questions about companies and the disciplines they represented.

“It’s amazing to see how energized the students are and how involved their faculty members are in helping them along in their job search,” says Brian Pattie of the Pattie Group, located in Novelty, Ohio. “We recently hired two students who we first contacted here a year ago, which underscores the fact that having a booth here is just as much about building relationships as it is about recruiting interns and employees.”

Maria Candler, CLP, president of James River Grounds Management in Glen Allen, Virginia, agrees. “SCD is a natural continuation of our company’s recruiting program,” she notes. “We often visit with many of the same students we talked with throughout the year or that we have met at a previous Student Career Days.”

Candler takes a moment to usher a student over to a laptop computer where he downloads his resume via a small flash drive. She continues. “Coming here is also about selling students on your location. Just look around the Career Fair and see how many of the booths have signage that promotes area activities.”

Both the Pattie Group and James River Grounds Management have exhibited at previous SCD Career Fairs. Many other companies, though, were first-time exhibitors, giving testimony to the event’s ever-increasing popularity. “This is our first time here and my first look at Student Career Days since I was a student at Michigan State seven years ago,” says Aaron Dykstra, service manager for D.J.’s Lawn Service, located in Grand Rapids, Michigan. “It’s a lot bigger than I recall, but the students are just as enthusiastic about finding jobs and competing as they were back then.”

More than a competition

A handful of competitive events kicked off after the Career Fair closed at 1:00 p.m. on Friday. But the majority of them, including all the outdoor competition, took place the following day.

“All the schools getting together and competing is so cool,” relates Jon Meier, a
senior at Michigan State who was competing in two events. Adds Ben Bullard, one of 28 students from Auburn University, “I enjoy coming here to meet new friends, and the industry treats us very well.”

“Our school shows tremendous support for SCD,” says Gary Ashley, a freshman at Sandhills Community College. “I want to find an internship and then one day run my own company.” Heidi Moss from Colorado State University was competing in two events. “It’s my first time at a Student Career Days,” she notes. “I already have an internship for the summer, but I came here to learn more about the industry. One day I hope to have my own company, too.”

SCD brought together a cross-section of students from all corners of the country. Some were competing in one or more of the 24 competitive events. Others focused on getting their name out in the marketplace at the Career Fair. Others still were soaking up information at student workshop sessions and three SCD Tech Presentations put on by industry professionals.

Most of the students took the advice of SCD Chair Jennifer Buck when she encouraged them at the Opening Ceremony to go “above and beyond” during their stay in Michigan. “Talk with as many company representatives as you can,” she told the students. “Make the extra effort to research companies by picking up as many brochures as you can. After the competition is over, be sure to thank event sponsors and your professors, all of whom make SCD possible.”

Also speaking at the opening ceremony was John Keeler, national training manager for STIHL, the event’s Platinum Sponsor. He put the event in perspective for students, telling them that the competition was not about winning or losing; it’s about building relationships and having the opportunity to showcase their talents. PLANET President Jim Martin, CLP, encouraged students to make the most of their choices during the event, and then choose to continue to support SCD by relaying their Michigan State experience to fellow students and others who may have an interest in the green industry.

**Gaining momentum**

Later, during the competitive events, STIHL’s Keeler observed that SCD was gaining tremendous momentum, bringing in more schools, more students, more faculty members, more sponsors, more industry...
representatives, and more volunteers every year. Dr. Greg Davis, a professor at Kansas State University, shared a similar sentiment when he remarked during the competition that Student Career Days was the highlight of his academic year. Says Davis, “SCD gives our students valuable exposure to the industry, and it helps them gain confidence. We’re also developing alumni instead of graduates; students who participate in Student Career Days generally want to stay involved with the event and our school.”

Nowhere is that more pronounced than at this year’s host school. “Many of the volunteers are graduates of our horticulture program here, including several who work for area companies,” says Dr. Brad Rowe, Associate Professor, Department of Horticulture, Michigan State University. “Without their help and equipment and the generous contributions of time and money from other industry members, this event would not be possible.”

Rowe teaches three courses at MSU, including landscape construction and, new this year, sustainable landscape practices. He is also the undergraduate program coordinator. Rowe says that he values the relationships MSU has with its graduates, with faculty members from other schools, and with the industry, adding that hosting Student Career Days helps to further strengthen all of them.

“We’re a relatively small department in a very large school,” he adds. “We have 120 full-time horticulture students in our four-year program and 100 in our two-year landscape nursery program. Student Career Days draws attention to the green industry and gives our department valuable exposure.”

With that said, Rowe gets on his way to support the 19 MSU students competing in the various events and to monitor the momentum that has been building for 31 years.

Auburn University student Ben Bullard likes meeting new friends at SCD, and says he was impressed with the way the industry treated students.

Kansas State faculty member Dr. Greg Davis: “SCD gives our students valuable exposure to the industry, and it helps them gain confidence.”

Buck points out that the host school is responsible for all logistical planning on campus, including making plans for shuttle service, meals, competitive events, and classrooms. PLANET assumes responsibility for promoting the event, event registration, interacting with sponsors, and holding the Career Fair.

The host school’s lead professor(s) participate as members of the SCD Committee for three years — from two years prior to their show to a year after. The SCD chair is active for five years — one year in training, three as SCD chair, and one year helping to train the new chair.
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Four years ago, PLANET launched a safety initiative called STARS (Safety Training Achieves Remarkable Success). Since then, more than 800 companies have enrolled in the program. In so doing, they have taken advantage of the many safety resources and training materials provided by STARS and signed a pledge toward improving their safety record.

The program, sponsored by CNA and Husqvarna, originated to improve the safety record of an industry that has one of the highest OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration) hazard rates in the United States. Working with STARS, companies have become safer and reduced their injury/incident rate and insurance claims.

“STARS has been awesome for us,” says Miles Kuperus Jr., CLP, owner of Farmside Landscape & Design in Wantage, New Jersey. “Our company joined right after its inception. Since then we have saved several thousand dollars in liability and workers’ compensation insurance premiums, and the program has elevated our company’s safety conscience.” Farmside now holds a company-wide safety meeting every Monday using PLANET safety tips written in both English and Spanish. His company has also found a valuable partner in its insurance carrier.

“After enrolling in STARS, we had a well-organized discussion with our insurance agent and told him about our involvement with PLANET and the STARS program,” Kurperus relates. “He learned that we were making a serious commitment to improve our safety record, something he shared with the underwriter.”

For two years in a row, Farmside has also received a PLANET Safety Recognition Award, and it sends award announcements to the local newspaper. “We like to share the results of our safety initiative with the general public,” Kuperus adds. “Several customers have commented on the awards and applauded our efforts to make our company a safer place to work.”

The New Jersey company was growing a safety culture prior to enrolling in STARS, however. In fact, six years ago Farmside developed a safety incentive program for crews. Each crew member was allocated $250 from which any equipment damage would be drawn. A three-person crew would have a $750 “damage cushion.” Any money left over at the end of the year would be divided up among the crew members. The incentive program alone reduced damage payout from an average of $20,000 a year to under $4,000.

“Being safe, though, is not about the money or the increased productivity that comes from working in a smart, safe manner,”
Green Acre’s safety training included one day of classroom instruction and one day of hands-on demonstrations. Like Farmside, Green Acre holds monthly safety talks, and it also includes safety topics in a monthly newsletter that is distributed to employees.

As these individuals point out, being safe requires more than having tailgate talks and posting warning signs. An effective, comprehensive safety program involves having an active safety committee; being prepared for emergencies; educating employees on equipment; reporting, documenting, and tracking incidents; constantly reminding everyone about safety issues, and more. The list is not as daunting as it appears, especially when employees buy-in to the program and start working with the STARS.

To learn more about the STARS program, contact PLANET at (800) 395-2522 or visit the PLANET Web site, LandcareNetwork.org.
Both skid-steer loaders and compact track loaders have their own advantages. And when you’re a landscaper, it’s good to know what they are so that you can choose the best loader for the job.

Nearly a decade ago, Bobcat Company introduced the first compact track loader with a solid-mounted track undercarriage manufactured in United States. Its unique tracked undercarriage design caught the attention of many, and today, there are several compact track loaders to choose from.

Bobcat manufactures five models, ranging from the narrow T140 with a 1,400-pound rated operating capacity to the large T300 with a 3,000-pound rated operating capacity. A landscaper might use the biggest and most powerful compact track loader, the T300, for grading large areas, land clearing and for lifting large stones and pallets of sod, pavers and other heavy materials. The T140, the narrowest compact track loader manufactured by Bobcat, might be used to easily maneuver and gain access to confined residential areas. Some new homes being built today leave less than 60 inches of access to the backyard.

**Increased Digging and Pushing Power**

Not only does the track undercarriage minimize ground disturbance, but it also increases the loader’s ground-to-surface contact, which optimizes the machine’s power and performance on rough terrain, soft and sandy surfaces, and in wet, muddy conditions. It also enables operators to easily push heavier loads, making Bobcat® compact track loaders ideal for grading applications, Fitzgerald says. With compact track loaders, landscapers can excel at pushing down hardened piles, dozing tons of dirt and cutting swales.

Being able to work in wet and muddy conditions enables some landscapers in certain regions to extend their working season. Ofentimes,

**Tracks Exert Low Ground Pressure**

A compact track loader might be the best option for landscapers who work mostly in dirt and on established lawns, because the machine’s track undercarriage provides a lower ground pressure and improved flotation and traction, says Mike Fitzgerald, Bobcat loader product specialist.

Compact track loaders are somewhat heavier than skid-steer loaders, but due to the undercarriage design, ground pressure is significantly lower. Because the tracks distribute the machine’s weight across a larger area, Fitzgerald says ground disturbance is minimized. This feature is especially beneficial to landscapers who work in established residential areas and who are concerned about causing damage to their customers’ lawns. No longer must landscapers position plywood to drive across in order to prevent ground disturbance. With a compact track loader, fewer repairs to existing surfaces equate to lower on-site costs and more profit.

Low ground pressure also helps landscapers produce a smooth and even finish grade. And because the machine’s tracks provide flotation, they reduce the need for rework and minimize the amount of hand labor needed to finish jobs.
The improved productivity that Bobcat compact track loaders provide is a reason landscapers add these machines to their equipment fleet. The heavier weight of compact track loaders ensures greater pushing force and allows large loads to be lifted. The pushing force of Bobcat compact track loaders is second to none due to direct-drive motors, a solid-mounted undercarriage and a balance between machine weight and horsepower.

At the same time, by distributing the machine weight over a larger area, C-pattern rubber tracks produce a smoother ride. Bobcat compact track loaders ride over the top of rough terrain, such as ruts and potholes, and improve ride quality without sacrificing either grading performance or durability.

Unmatched Durability and Versatility

Durability has always been a hallmark of Bobcat compact equipment, and Bobcat compact track loaders are no exception. They have fully enclosed steel undercarriages with very few moving parts to minimize maintenance costs. Steel rollers and idlers are permanently sealed and lubricated, requiring no routine maintenance. Even the exclusive C-pattern rubber track has steel cables and imbeds to increase service life.

Compact track loaders can also be used with more than 40 approved Bobcat attachments for immense versatility. An optional Power Bob-Tach™ mounting system, available on skid-steer, compact track and all-wheel steer loaders, enables landscapers to easily switch between attachments within moments and without leaving the comfort of the machine's cab.

So if you're a landscaper looking for a machine that can excel in dirt work while minimizing disturbance when traveling across established landscapes, you should look no further than a Bobcat compact track loader.
Being in compliance with Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) regulations and reducing back and other ergonomic-related injuries are two key safety issues facing the green industry.

OSHA has identified landscaping and horticultural services (this includes landscape companies, professional lawn care companies, and tree care companies) as one of the seven highest hazard industries in the United States. As a result, the federal agency is paying special attention to green industry service providers, and OSHA investigators are inspecting companies both large and small.

Owners and managers can take several steps to help ensure their companies are in compliance with regulations. These steps include implementing a written safety program and holding regular safety training meetings and “tailgate” meetings (brief 5-to-10 minute oral sessions on a single safety topic).

To ensure a safe work environment and OSHA compliance, owners and managers should also:

• Train Spanish-speaking workers in a language and manner they understand.
• Enforce all company safety rules, and hold supervisors and crew leaders accountable for enforcement.
• Conduct regular safety audits (inspections for hazards) of your own property and job sites.

Preventing back injuries

Because of the nature of the work, back injuries are common in the green industry. Back and other lifting-related injuries are not only painful and costly, they often recur. Furthermore, they can result in lengthy and expensive workers’ compensation claims.

To minimize the risk of these types of injuries, assess employee tasks and determine where (under what conditions) back or other ergonomic-related injuries are likely to occur. Where practical, provide workers with manual and mechanical lifting devices (e.g., carts, dollies, forklifts, and so forth). In addition:

• Prohibit employees from lifting loads by themselves that weigh 50 pounds or more.
• Train workers in “safe lifting” practices.
• Consider implementing a mandatory “warm-up, stretching” exercise program for 5 to 10 minutes at the start of each workday.

Taking the right steps to 1) be in compliance with OSHA regulations and 2) reduce the risk of back- and other ergonomic-related injuries will go a long way toward creating a safe work environment. Having a safe work environment is good for you, your employees, and your customers.

PLANET has numerous safety resources to assist members and others in the green industry with safety and OSHA compliance. The new SafetySAVES listserve at SafetySAVES.org is a forum for green industry professionals to learn from the experiences of others, share best safety practices, and ask questions. Other resources include: the STARS (Safety Training Achieves Remarkable Success) Safe Company Program — a FREE program for green industry companies that pledge to a higher level of safety; a cooperative alliance with OSHA, through which English-Spanish tailgate training materials have been developed (visit LandcareNetwork.org, click on “Programs,” then on “Safety Programs); a PLANET-OSHA Alliance Web site at osha.gov/SLTC/landscaping/index.html, where solutions to common hazards and applicable OSHA standards are available; and numerous safety-related CDs, DVDs, and other materials (visit PLANET’s bookstore at LandcareNetwork.org).
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Specialty Symposium
August 24-26, 2007
Indianapolis Marriott Downtown
Indianapolis, Indiana
The Specialty Symposium is designed as an educational opportunity for both owners and managers to take an in-depth look at specific aspects of running a green industry business. This year’s theme is “growing your business.” The event offers specialized education in design/build/installation, landscape management, and lawn care. Green industry professionals will lead the presentations and discussions, sharing their expectations and approaches to facing the changing business climate. Event Sponsor: John Deere. Specialty Symposium attendance qualifies for two education points toward renewing your PLANET certification.

Green Industry Conference & GIE EXPO
October 24-27, 2007
The Galt House & Kentucky Exposition Center
Louisville, Kentucky
This dynamic, information-packed conference is designed to provide all green industry business owners, managers, supervisors, and employees with a wide range of exciting educational and networking opportunities. This year’s Green Industry Conference (GIC) will be headquartered at the Galt House. The GIC will equip attendees with the tips, techniques, and “how-tos” to increase their business success in this fast-paced industry. Plus, attendees will have the chance to view the vast array of products, technology, and services on display at the GIE EXPO. Housing information for GIC is in the “Events” section of the PLANET Web site, LandcareNetwork.org. Platinum Sponsor: John Deere. Green Industry Conference attendance qualifies for two education points toward renewing your PLANET certification.

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