

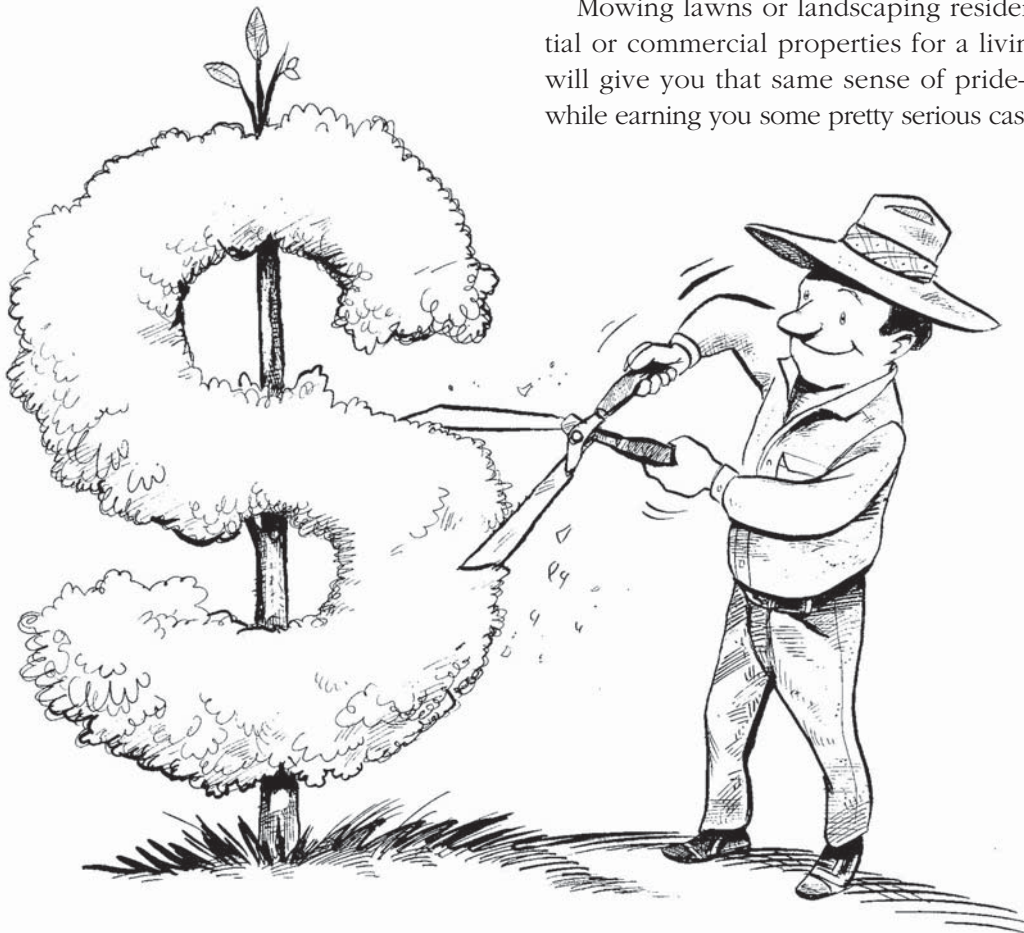
Chapter 1

The Green, Green Grass Of Home

When you think back to the long, lazy summers of your youth, chances are your recollections are full of achingly nostalgic memories like an oversized tire swing under a big shady tree. Tall frosty glasses of lemonade wreathed in pearls of moisture. Crickets and tree frogs throatily singing their sweet night song. And the high-pitched whine of lawn mowers carrying on the warm summer breeze.

If you're like a lot of people, you were trudging along behind one of those mowers back then, pushing with all your might and sweating profusely, just so you could make a few bucks to buy some baseball cards or a really cool bike. You may have occasionally mowed down a few pansies or zebra-striped a lawn, but you sure were proud when the homeowner came to the door, surveyed your handiwork, and forked over the agreed-upon fee.

Mowing lawns or landscaping residential or commercial properties for a living will give you that same sense of pride—while earning you some pretty serious cash.



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THE GREEN SCENE

There are many advantages to running a homebased lawn care or landscaping service. You're master of your own destiny, and you can devote as much or as little time to the business as you want. You have a short commute to work if you're based in your own community. You can work at your own pace and at virtually any time during regular daylight hours. You also can enjoy the fresh air, get a good cardiovascular workout, and bulk up your muscles.

The price of all this freedom and body contouring is relatively low—so low, in fact, that many new lawn service owners and landscapers use their personal credit cards or small personal loans to fund their new businesses. Once you invest in the tools and toys you need to manicure lawns or install landscaping professionally, you're generally set for years. You don't need much in the way of office equipment, either, and you can set your office up in a corner of the den or a spare bedroom rather than laying out extra cash for a commercial space.

REALITY CHECK

This all sounds pretty appealing, doesn't it? But of course, every Garden of Eden has a serpent, and lawn care and landscaping businesses have quite a few of their own coiled up and waiting to strike. To begin, you have to be a lot more adept at mowing, trimming and pruning than the average person. That means you'll have to invest some time in learning gardening basics and techniques. You'll have to be a disciplined self-starter who can ignore the call of a glorious spring day and diligently service your clients rather than heading for the lake or golf course. You have to be physically fit and able to handle the rigors of the job, which can include lifting heavy equipment off and onto trailers, and wielding

Stat Fact

Satellite studies by NASA's Ames Research Center in California estimate that lawns cover about 128,000 square kilometers (about 50,000 square miles) of the United States and are the largest irrigated crop in the country. Lawns are not a natural indigenous crop: Without irrigation or fertilization, the only places they'd grow are a few areas in the northeast and the Great Plains.



bulky handheld implements for hours at a time. You'll be handling potentially dangerous machinery and hazardous chemicals. And you'll have to be a very savvy business manager who can administer cash flow, invent advertising and marketing campaigns, and implement a survival plan that will take you through the lean winter months.

But even with such obstacles, it is possible to prosper in this industry. In the chapters ahead, we'll show you how to lay the groundwork to start a thriving lawn care service or landscaping business. We'll cover day-to-day responsibilities and the various tasks integral to running this type of business. We'll also touch on the myriad issues a new business owner will face, such as tax, insurance and financing matters. But perhaps best of all, we'll share advice and words of wisdom from successful lawn care and landscaping business owners who have made their personal dreams of prospering in a business they love come true.

And by the way, what we won't do in this book is teach you how to mow or fertilize or design landscapes. Frankly, that type of teaching is best left to the pros.

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Rather, we'll give you all the insight you need to set up your business in a way that will give you the best chance for success.

INDUSTRY SNAPSHOT

But before we get into the nitty-gritty basics of running a professional lawn care or landscaping business, let's take a look at the green industry as a whole and the opportunities it presents for aspiring entrepreneurs like you.

According to the Professional Landcare Network (PLANET), an international association serving lawn care professionals, exterior maintenance contractors, installation/design/building professionals, and interiorscapers, there are an estimated 10,000 individual lawn care service providers and approximately 12,000 landscapers in the United States. These run the gamut from independent operations to franchises and divisions of large corporate chains. It's believed

Do You Have The Right Stuff?

Ask yourself these questions to see if you have what it takes to become a successful lawn service or landscaping business owner:

- Are you motivated enough to work without a bear of a boss breathing down your neck?
- Can you resist driving your sit-down mower over to the park for some R&R on beautiful summer days?
- Do you have the stamina to slather on sunblock regularly and spend a lot of time wrestling with flowering trees in gigantic pots under the blazing sun?
- Can you train your computer mouse to click on "Landscape Illustrator 2005" when it really wants to go play in "Final Fantasy XI: The Vana'diel Collection"?
- Can you tell the difference between turf and Astroturf in a blindfolded test?
- Can you develop a viable sideline business to support any unbreakable habits you may have (e.g., paying the mortgage, buying groceries, etc.) during the winter?
- Do you know what the keys numbered 0 to 9 on an adding machine are for?
- Can you keep your 4-year-old from answering your business telephone line with, "Hi, can you come over and play?" during working hours?
- Are you willing to wear a personalized company T-shirt in colors that blend tastefully with your landscaping equipment?
- Are you willing to work long hours in the hope of earning big bucks?

Total your "yes" answers.

Scoring:

8-10 = Congratulations! You are truly the Blade Master.

4-7 = The force is with you. Work hard and prosper.

1-3 = It's a good thing you bought this book.

0 = Maybe you should try a career in floral design or culinary arts instead.

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that the number of businesses could actually be significantly higher because there are so many people doing lawn and landscape maintenance informally and on a cash basis. What is known for sure, according to the *Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2006-2007* (U.S. Department of Labor), is that almost 1 out of every 4 landscaping, groundskeeping, nursery, greenhouse and lawn service workers is self-employed and provides maintenance services directly to customers on a contract basis. Of these, about 1 out of every 6 works part time.



Stat Fact

A recent study by the National Gardening Association indicates that the average amount spent by consumers on lawn and garden activities in 2004 was \$449.

The market they serve is huge. A 2005 survey by *Irrigation and Green Industry* magazine concluded that the U.S. green industry, which includes lawn and landscape maintenance, landscape contractors, landscape architects, irrigation contractors, and lawn and landscape product suppliers, generates \$67 billion to \$69 billion annually. Additionally, PLANET estimates that the landscaping services sector alone generates 704,000 jobs and \$35.6 million in value-added services annually.

Who's driving this industry? The 77 million aging baby boomers, many of whom are affluent homeowners. They recognize the value of a well-kept lawn and beautifully designed and landscaped yard, but they often don't have the time or the inclination to do the maintenance themselves.

"Year after year, lawn and landscape

maintenance continues to be the top service hired by homeowners," says Tom Delaney, PLANET's director of government affairs. "Homeowners benefit from the economic and environmental benefits of turf, and save time by hiring a lawn and landscape service. When you factor in that a well-maintained property can add anywhere from 5 to 15 percent to a home's value, you quickly realize that hiring a service is a sound investment."

Of course, baby boomers aren't the only ones whose fingers do the walking online or through the phone book to find a reputable lawn or landscape professional. Other potential customers include:

Landscaping:

- Homeowners who don't have the vision, skill or tools to design their own landscaping
- New homeowners who wish to update the existing landscaping
- Homeowners who plan to put their home on the market and want to improve its curb appeal with fresh or updated landscaping
- Builders of both residential and commercial properties who don't already have their own landscaper on staff

Lawn maintenance:

- Homeowners who are frequently out of town on business
- Retirees who don't care to do their own maintenance any longer
- "Snowbirds" with winter homes in warmer climates
- Golf course managers who may need help with maintenance
- Rental property or condominium association managers who are personnel-impaired
- Facilities managers for botanical gardens, historic buildings, municipalities and other government entities, universities, cemeteries and other public places with green spaces

OK, we have to admit that some of these

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commercial contracts may already be spoken for. Or these organizations may already have a long-time, qualified person on staff, thank you very much. But let's face it: You never know when an opportunity may arise, either because a potential client is not happy with the service he or she has been receiving, or because someone retires or leaves an organization.

That's where you come in. Later in this book, we'll discuss the various ways you can market your services so you're in the right place at the right time when an opportunity pops up. Then, by offering the right mix of services, you'll be able to clip off a neat little piece of this business yourself.

Exactly how much can you earn? The sky's truly the limit. The lawn care and landscaping business owners we interviewed for this book earned anywhere from \$5,000 to \$50,000 in their first year, and as much as \$160,000 to \$250,000 once they were in business a few years. They offer services ranging from basic mowing and trimming to landscape design, installation and maintenance, and chemical application.

Lawn & Landscape magazine's 2005 *State of the Industry Report* offers additional insight into how much a lawn and landscaping company owner can earn. In a survey of *Lawn & Landscape* readers who own companies of all sizes, the average salary of the owner/president whose company revenues were less than \$200,000 during 2005 was \$31,273. Owners/presidents in companies with revenues above \$200,000 earned \$68,859 on average.

Types Of Green Industry Service Businesses

There are numerous ways to get into the lawn and landscaping industry. The basic types of lawn and landscaping businesses include:

- Lawn mowing/maintenance
- Sod installation/hydroseeding

Fun Fact

According to the Gallup Organization, the top things consumers look for when choosing landscape and lawn care professionals include: good references and reputation, satisfaction guarantees, free estimates, longevity, local ownership and operation, and insurance and bonding.



- Weeding or fertilizer and/or pest control application
- Landscape care/maintenance services
- Landscape design/contracting services
- Landscape architecture services

We'll discuss all these types of businesses and the services they typically offer, as well as a few others, in the respective lawn and landscaping chapters. In the meantime, it's important to note that while many entrepreneurs choose to specialize in a particular type of service, it's also not unusual for a business owner to offer a selection of complementary services. For example, landscape maintenance companies also may offer irrigation services (lawn sprinklers, fountains, etc.), in addition to trimming, mulching and other common landscaping services. Or lawn service business owners may choose to offer snow removal services during the winter as a way to generate an income year-round.

Other Opportunities To Get Green

Although we are assuming for the purposes of this book that you are planning to start your own lawn and/or landscaping business from the ground up, it's worth mentioning that there are a number of green industry franchises that can help you establish your own business. There are turnkey

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operations for lawn and landscaping, irrigation, deck construction, concrete installation, and many other green industry-related businesses, all of which can require a fairly substantial capital investment. We've listed contact information for some of them under "Franchise Opportunities" in the Appendix in case you'd like to check them out.

MEET THE ENTREPRENEURS

A number of lawn care and landscaping business owners graciously agreed to be interviewed for this book to give you a true insider's view of the industry:

- **Nathan Bowers** is the owner of Premier Lawn Services Inc. in Sykesville, Maryland. Although he founded the business in 1990, he has been involved in grounds maintenance services since he was 14, when "dad handed me the Craftsman hand mower and said, 'Why don't you go make a few bucks mowing the neighbor's lawn?'" Bowers says. He attended college for a few years before deciding to make lawn care his full-time job.
- **Michael Collins and Karen Deighton** are owners of Celtic Lawn & Landscape LLC, which was established in Livonia, Michigan, in 2005. This mother-and-son-in-law duo brings different skills to the cutting table, so to speak—Collins is the lawn/landscape/snow meister, while Deighton handles the administrative side. He earned a degree in business administration in workforce management from the University of Michigan-Dearborn and most recently was a human resources generalist, although he did lawn and landscape work while in college. Deighton received a bachelor's degree in mathematics from Madonna University in Livonia, Michigan, and works full time as a controller for a construction company.
- **Steve Mager** has been the owner of The Cutting Crew in Mendota Heights, Minnesota, since 1998. He offers chemical services in addition to lawn maintenance for commercial and residential accounts. He

holds a bachelor's degree in education from St. Cloud State University in St. Cloud, Minnesota, and previously was a property maintenance supervisor for a company that managed 30 residential group homes for the mentally disabled.

- **Lowell Pitser** is the owner of Lowell's Lawn Service in Stanwood, Washington. He previously worked as a land surveyor and literally fell into lawn maintenance as a career—he sustained a bad fall on the job that hurt his back, so on the advice of his doctor, he sought new employment. Because he couldn't even push his hand mower anymore, he borrowed a riding lawn mower one day to cut his own lawn, and within the hour was approached by a couple of neighbors who asked if he could do their lawns, too. "Every time I'd mow, someone else would ask if I could do his lawn, too, and I realized there could be a lot of money in this field," he says. And he was right—he had 35 customers the first year and eventually added an employee to help with the business.

- **Mike Rosenbleeth** is the Niceville, Florida, owner of Grass Roots Lawn & Landscape Inc. After retiring twice, once from a 20-year career in the U.S. Air Force, where he earned the rank of captain, and then from a 10-year second career with a defense contractor, Rosenbleeth started his

Smart Tip

Using native plants in landscaping schemes whenever possible is the surest way to avoid maintenance problems and ensure they'll flourish. Because they're adapted to the locale, native plants also usually need less care, watering and fertilizing.



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Smart Tip

Do your part to be environmentally friendly by recycling both used nursery containers (which are usually made of nonbiodegradable plastic materials) and the old potting soil they contain. Nurseries are usually more than happy to take the empty containers off your hands and will reuse them for new products.

green business in 2002 because he wanted to do something as different as possible from his previous jobs. In addition to a bachelor's degree in aerospace engi-

neering from Texas A&M University, he holds a master's degree in aeronautical engineering from the Air Force Institute of Technology at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio.

● **Albert Towns Jr.**, a graduate of Michigan State University with a bachelor's degree in turfgrass management, has owned Albert's Lawn Service, a part-time green business in Detroit, since 1994. He has been a full-time employee of Ford Motor Co. for 30 years and is a group assembly leader in the paint department. During his busy season, he services 70 clients.

Although they all come from diverse backgrounds, what these entrepreneurs have in common is their dedication to and success in the industry. It's possible for you to achieve this kind of success, too. So turn the page and let's get started.