

Full Circle Provider

Culvers Lawn & Landscape Provides the Full Spectrum of Green Industry Services with Its Fleet of Compact Loaders

By Jay Barnett

Todd Culver is a man on a mission.

That mission began at the age of 12 when he started mowing grass. Today, 22 years later, he is president of Culvers Lawn & Landscaping — a 95-employee operation that sits on 25½ acres in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

“We’re a full-circle provider,” says Culver. “We have four landscape designers, nursery, greenhouse and a full range of equipment. Our customers look to us as a partner who can plan, install and maintain anything they need.”



A Caterpillar skid steer loader moves material in one of Culver's greenhouses.

When those customers call Culvers Lawn & Landscaping, they are met with a wide spectrum of company departments: garden center, residential landscaping, commercial landscaping, fertilizer and weed control and ponds and waterfalls. Culvers is a growing business with a whopping 100 percent annual growth for the last five years. Culver credits that growth to, “Staying ahead of the curve, whether you’re leading it or being chased by it.”

A new 32,000-sq ft service area building is now in the works, which currently shares a building with the retail garden center — a part of the company that has grown beyond expectations. Once the new building is in use, the garden center will expand from approximately 49,000 sq ft to more than 81,000 sq ft.

Culver estimates that half of the firm’s business is commercial landscaping: “We go for big jobs where we’re there for two or three months.”

While the company covers eastern Iowa, it has taken on jobs as far away as Omaha, Neb. (more than 250 miles from

Cedar Rapids) and Sioux City, Iowa (more than 300 miles away).

“We don’t shy away from anything,” notes Culver. “We do any kind of retaining wall, pond gates, you name it. A lot of our commercial jobs are with excavating companies who bring us in. And, of course, we’ll bring in an excavating contractor if a job goes beyond our equipment.”

Culver prefers that arrangement over renting or purchasing bigger equipment. At one time, the company owned a used track-type tractor, but now that’s work it hires out.

“We like to stay with what we do best and let others do what they do best. In our mind, a landscaping job becomes an excavating job when we don’t have the equipment to handle it.”

And when it comes to equipment, Culver knows each machine, what it can do, what it can’t do and how it will be of value to the company.

“I operate everything before we buy it,” he says. “That means everything down to trimmers and blowers.”

Though he will admit: “Sometimes you buy a machine and it doesn’t work like you want.”

Case in point is a tractor he bought to use as a power wheelbarrow. Problem was that it spilled too much during load operations and never really worked out. Undeterred, his mechanic fabricated a sod installer and put hydraulics



Soft underfooting is no problem with a multi terrain loader, working at the company's site on the east edge of Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

on it. Now the company has a machine that cuts the time for sod installation in half.

Culver's largest piece of equipment is a 17½-ton hydraulic excavator. While the fleet also includes the typical landscape firm's arsenal of rollers and tractors, the heart of the operation is his seven skid steer loaders (including three Caterpillar 262B units purchased last spring) and three Caterpillar multi terrain loaders, suspended on rubber track undercarriages for low ground pressure operations.

"You can't be in this business without a skid steer loader," explains Culver. "You just can't be a landscaper without it. It's the first piece of equipment you buy."

Crews use the skid steer and multi terrain loaders for a variety of tasks, both at the headquarters and on jobsites. Key uses are transporting fill, grading and moving palletized materials. The company also has a line of work tools for the loaders that includes tree augers, forks, tree grapples, landscape fork and a rake for rough grading.

"We've had different brands, but we're in the process of standardizing on Caterpillar loaders," says Culver. "They have more power, the tracks wear better, they're smoother and they're the best for operator comfort. They're definitely the machines our operators prefer."

Those operators are responsible for greasing and filling fluids. Any other needed work is provided by the firm's full-time mechanic, who finds maintenance easier on the compact machines, largely because of better access.

The company purchases three or four trucks a year, and Culver says that a next machine purchase could be a wheel loader with a 3½-yd bucket. While those operators and the

mechanic may have different tasks than their fellow employees, they all have one thing in common — individual mission statements.

"Each employee has a mission statement that he or she develops," says Culver. "It's based on the company mission statement and it's part of their employee folder. I keep them all on index cards."

The firm had a mission statement for eight or nine years, but earlier this year Culver decided it was too long and thought employees may find it difficult seeing how it applied to them. Since June, the mission statement of Culvers Lawn & Landscaping is just two words — a phrase Culver is hesitant to share.

"Everyone understands it and knows their role in achieving it. We all have to be on the same page and have the same goal in mind. This is everybody's future."

Jay Barnett is a freelance writer for Barnett Solutions, Normal, Ill.



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CE Calendar

2004

September

- 22-23 Rehab Road Show, Cincinnati, Ohio, Ph: (330) 467-7588; Fax: (330) 468-2289; E-mail: ttmag@ttmag.com; Web: www.rehabroadshow.com.
- 24-26 International Lawn, Garden & Power Equipment Expo, Louisville, Ky., Ph: (800) 558-8767 or (812) 949-9200; E-mail: expocomments@sellersexpositions.com; Web: www.expo.mow.org.

Sept. 30-

- Oct. 3 AGC Mid-Year Meeting, Scottsdale, Ariz., Ph: (703) 548-3118; Fax: (703) 548-3119; E-mail: info@agc.org.

October

- 2-3 Truxpo (Western Canada's Largest Truck Show), Abbotsford, British Columbia, Canada, Ph: (604) 888-5319; Fax: (604) 888-2941; E-mail: info@truxpo.com; Web: www.truxpo.com.
- 2-6 WEFTEC 2004 Annual Conference & Expo, New Orleans, Ph: (800) 666-0206; E-mail: confinfo@wef.org; Web: www.weftec.org.
- 4-5 Managing Snow and Ice Control Operations, Madison, Wis., Ph: (800) 462-0876; Fax: (800) 442-4214; E-mail: custserv@epd.engr.wisc.edu; Web: epdweb.engr.wisc.edu/webG414.

- 6-9 The Remodeling Show, Chicago, Ph: (972) 536-6313; Fax: (972) 536-6389; Web: www.remodelersshow.com.
- 17-19 IFMA (International Facility Management Association) World Workplace, Salt Lake City, Ph: (713) 623-4362; Fax: (713) 623-6124; E-mail: ifmahq@ifma.org; Web: www.worldworkplace.org.
- 19-21 Sunbelt Agricultural Exposition, Moultrie, Ga., Ph: (229) 985-1968; Fax: (229) 890-8518; E-mail: info@sunbeltexpo.com; Web: www.sunbeltexpo.com.
- 20-22 Metalcon International, Las Vegas, Ph: (617) 965-0055; Fax: (617) 928-1670; E-mail: metalcon@psmj.com; Web: www.metalcon.com.
- 25-27 2004 Rental Rally, San Diego, Ph: (800) 272-7400; Fax: (916) 922-4242; E-mail: info@craonthenet.org; Web: www.rentalrally.com.
- 25-27 AUSA (Association of the U.S. Army) 2004 Annual Meeting & Expo, Washington, D.C., Ph: (800) 336-4570; E-mail: ausa-info@ausa.org; Web: www.ausa.org.
- Oct. 29-
Nov. 2 ASLA (American Society of Landscape Architects) Annual Meeting & Expo, Salt Lake City, Ph: (202) 898-2444; Fax: (202) 898-1185; Web: www.asla.org.