

Supplement to:

October 2008

Lawn & Landscape

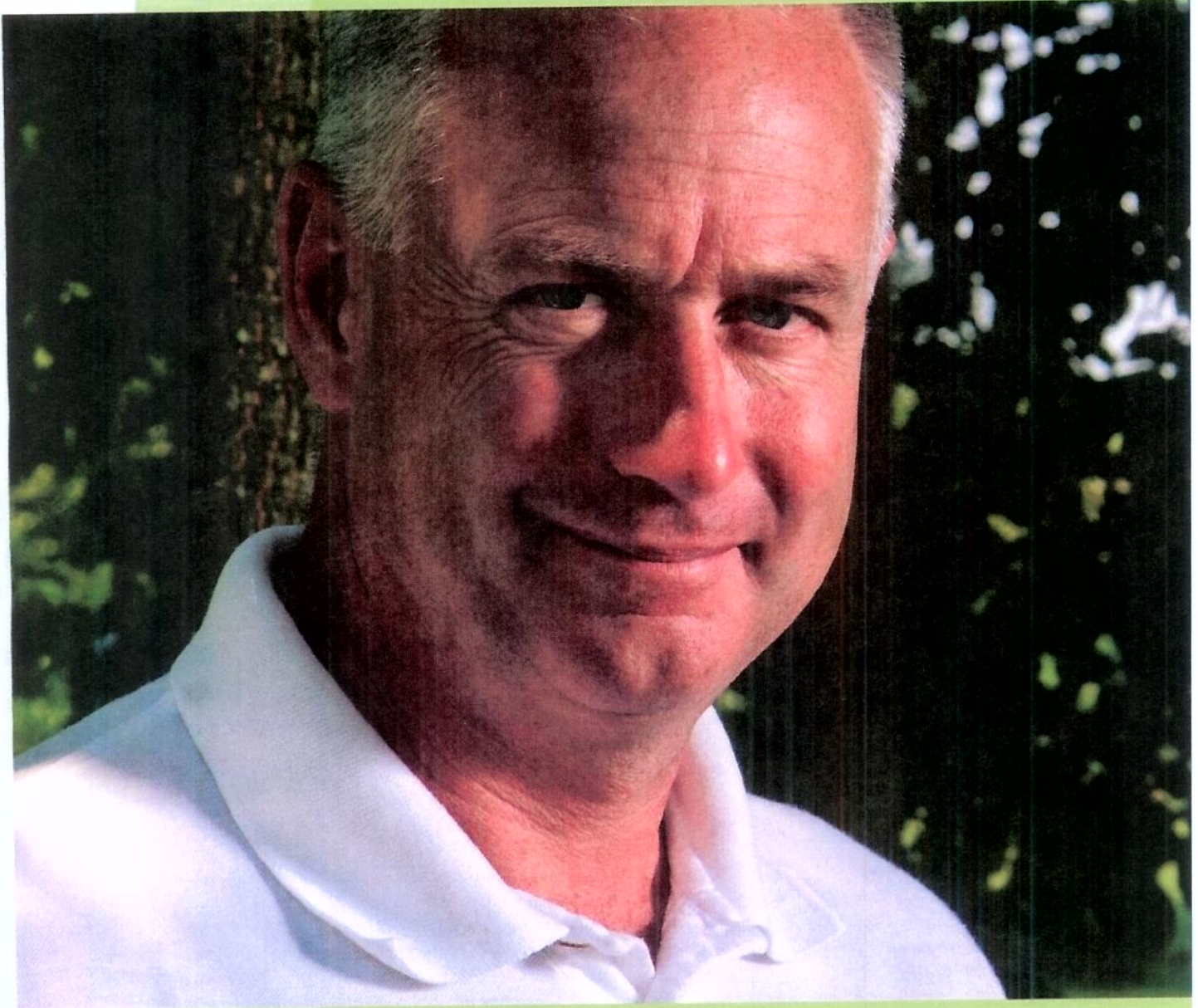


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F R O M T H E



G R O U N D U P

Craig Ruppert stays close to his

roots in the tree planting and

landscape management business.

By Heather Wood Taylor

Those who meet Craig Ruppert for the first time outside his work environment are led somewhat astray. When asked what he does for a living, Ruppert often says he's a landscape contractor.

While this technically is true, there's a little more to it. Ruppert actually is the CEO of Ruppert Nurseries, a Laytonsville, Md.-based landscape and nursery company that's one of the top revenue earners in the industry. President Chris Davitt would love to tell these people who Ruppert really is. He says those who are set straight about Ruppert's position and his years of dedication to his company, his employees and the industry can begin to piece together a picture of someone who got where he is by jumping in wholeheartedly and not forgetting where he started.

JUST A JOB. Thirty years ago, it would have been accurate for Ruppert to describe himself simply as a landscape contractor. He started a lawn care business as a high schooler, mowing the neighbors' lawns with a used lawn mower he bought.

Mowing lawns didn't exactly excite Ruppert. But being one of eight children in his family, he knew if he was going to receive an income, he'd have to earn most of it himself. The business morphed from a way to make weekend spending money to a profession Ruppert not only loves, but immerses his life in.

"I stuck with it long enough and gradually the company grew and evolved, and somewhere along the line you realize you like it, you might be good at it and you might be better off doing what you know than something else," he says.

Chris Davitt was one of Ruppert's first employees. Ruppert was a friend of Davitt's older brother and Davitt was 11 – seven years younger than Ruppert – when he started working for him. Luckily for Davitt, Ruppert didn't mind mowing for \$3 an hour; he was excited to be graduating to a power mower from a push mower.

Ruppert had a knack for the business side of the venture. He decided to leave college and go full-time with Ruppert Landscape Co. The early days were a learning process for Ruppert, recalls his wife, Patty. "I seem to remember he asked if I would help do his quarterly taxes, and I didn't know the first thing about such a thing," she says.

But Ruppert stayed with it. He credits his brother, Chris, for helping him get the operation off of the ground. From the original business sprouted Ruppert Nurseries in 1990, of which Ruppert is CEO and Davitt is president. The company houses the landscape division. Ruppert Nurseries is under the umbrella of Ruppert Cos., which also includes Ruppert Properties (commercial real estate), and Ruppert Ventures (capital and real estate investment), both founded in 1999. Ruppert is the CEO of those entities, but doesn't work as closely with them.

BIG MOVES. The company had its ups and downs but mostly saw steady growth to the point its revenues reached \$45 million in 1998. It was around that time that Ruppert began to be concerned about how the industry was changing. "The future was uncertain," he says. "We perceived a higher level of threat in the marketplace from the emergence

Photos: John Spaulding

"We try to build a company culture that is built around people and recognizes those people as our most important assets dedicated to growing the business as long as we can do it profitably – our real goal is to grow for our people." – Craig Ruppert



of a large company. We had the opportunity to sort of shake up the industry from within and be a part of a larger company."

The larger company was TruGreen-ChemLawn, which shook the industry by acquiring LandCare USA and becoming a mega company. For the first time, serious consolidation was happening in the industry. Ruppert became a player shortly before this mammoth deal took place.

"We really didn't consider selling until six to eight months before we sold," he says.

Ruppert liked the idea that, as part of a larger company, his employees could have the opportunity to grow and even play leadership roles. He sold the landscape management division of Ruppert and became senior vice president of the landscape management division at TruGreen.

Ruppert doesn't stay awake at night thinking about the what-ifs – he says he has no regrets. "I think we made the right decision at the time we made it," he says. "I don't think anybody could have really predicted it accurately before. I don't look back and regret the decision – it was a learning opportunity in many ways."

Ruppert also doesn't regret leaving TruGreen after about five months. His time spent away from the business that followed helped to shape his personal life, he says. "During those years I had much more free time," he says. "My four kids were all at the age where spending more time with them was very worthwhile, fun and rewarding for me. I coached every sport you can coach with every kid. I wouldn't have traded that time for anything."

His wife, Patty, wouldn't have traded

it, either. "All of a sudden he had more time and got involved in the kids' activities to a degree they hadn't been used to," she says.

But Ruppert couldn't stay away from the business forever. Not too long after Ruppert's noncompete agreement with TruGreen expired in 2003, he got the itch to get back in, forming a landscape division in Ruppert Nurseries.

But it did take all of those five years before it occurred to Ruppert he wanted to be in the business full-time again. "I think we missed all that goes with the successes and failures that come with running a service business," he says. "We also saw an opportunity in the marketplace for us to potentially return."

In short, Ruppert realized he was better at running a business than he thought. Seeing how a large corporation ran and watching other companies in the business helped Ruppert find his fit in the market. The recipient of an MBA, Ruppert can't deny his strong entrepreneurial spirit.

COMBINED EFFORT. Ruppert Nurseries went on to grow rapidly in the five years it's been back. The company went from a revenue of \$45 million when it sold in 1998, to a revenue of approximately \$65 million this year, Ruppert says. That's a faster pace than many of the industry's top companies. The business jumped from No. 26 to No. 15 from 2007 to 2008 on *Lawn & Landscape's* list of the Top 100 revenue-earners in the industry.

True to his nature, Ruppert doesn't take credit for the growth. "The most important thing about our company is our people," he says. "We've been successful because of

Craig Ruppert on branding . . .

While Craig Ruppert, CEO of Ruppert Nurseries, says he doesn't think in terms of branding, he acknowledges his company has a brand in the community and has an idea of what it looks like.

Q. What do you think are the strengths of your business brand in your market?

A. Most service companies would have the same answer: good quality, good value. We're certainly like everyone else in that aspect. Customers will pick us because we're capable of delivering what they want: quality service at what they perceive to be a good value.

Q. What have you found are the best ways to market your brand message and why?

A. We try to be visible in the community, and we send press releases and articles that help create our public image – our image on the road, in the community and what people say about us. We don't advertise. We do a small amount in the tree growing division; other than that, we never really have. Way back in the early days we put fliers on doors when we were cutting the grass. Our efforts are directed more directly to our customer to build those relationships.

Q. What do you do to make sure your brand has consistent equity, personality and/or reputation in the minds of your customers?

A. We want our customers to think of us as being a professional company with good people. By professional, I mean well-equipped, in uniform all the time, with clean trucks. We're perceived as professional and customers are impressed with our people.

Q. How often do you evaluate your competitors' brands to determine their possible advantages in the marketplace and be proactive in positioning your company accordingly?

A. We periodically look at our competition, but what we sort of realized – and what's most important – is what we do. Our biggest challenge is to execute; to do what we want to do effectively. Someone once said competition is within. Our focus is internal – to improve what we're doing.

There's not one company that doesn't do something better than we do. We don't spend much time paying attention to what our competitors are doing, but we do watch and try to learn. But we're most focused internally on our own execution.

Q. What advice would you give to other landscape professionals who are attempting to establish winning brands in their markets?

A. Know who you are and try to represent who you are. A lot of us learn from each other. We see little things in the market and if it's a good idea we try to implement it. I think all companies do it. But at the end of the day, every company is unique. Be proud of that. Don't try to imitate the competition. Be you, be who you are and try to communicate that message constantly.

I don't consider myself an expert on branding – just in the grass cutting and tree planting business. Cutting grass and planting trees – that's what they pay us to do.

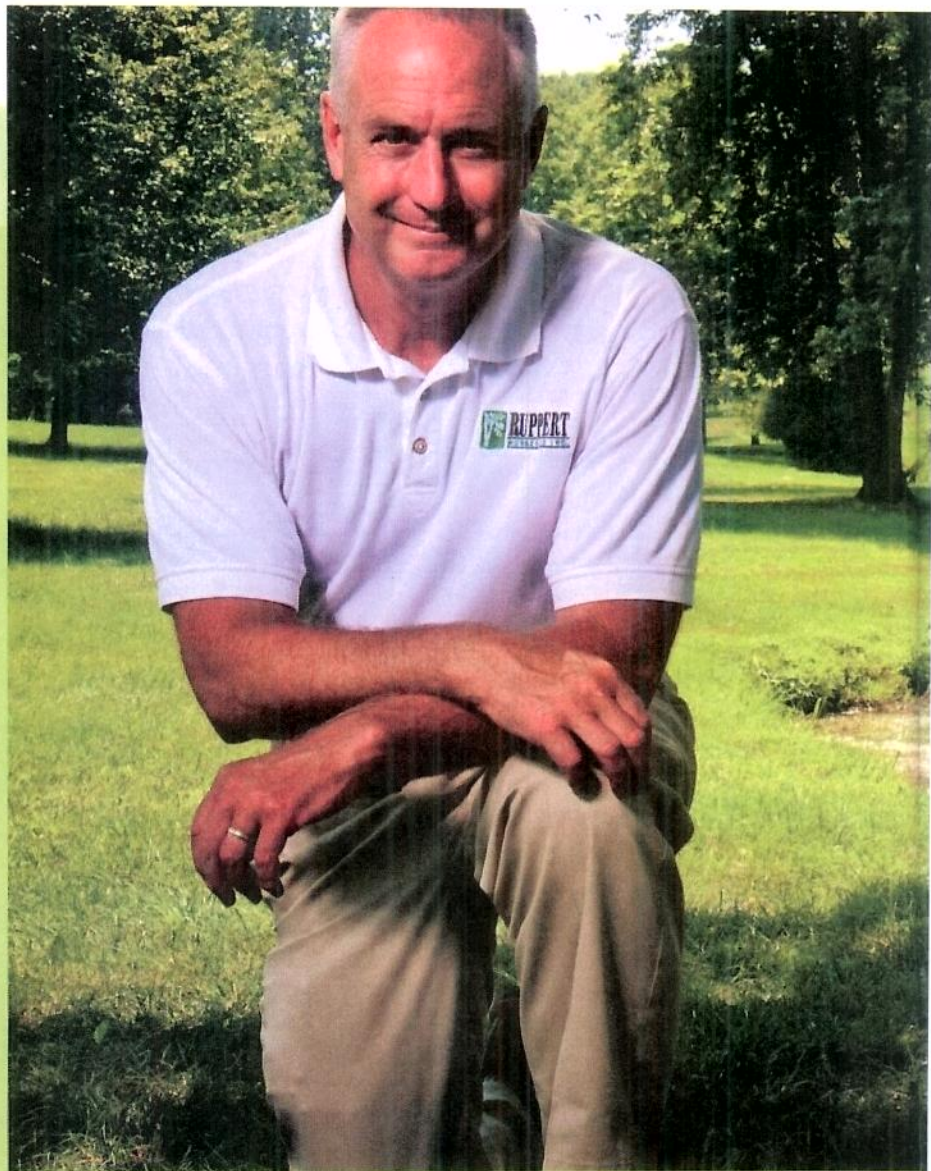
them,” Ruppert says. “We try to build a company culture that is built around people and recognizes those people as our most important assets dedicated to growing the business as long as we can do it profitably – our real goal is to grow for our people.”

Ruppert is a firm believer in transparency in the company. He holds town hall-style meetings to let the employees know what’s going on in the company. He also believes in rewarding employees and letting them know they’re valuable. He shows it by having picnics and parties throughout the year and by giving awards for service and safety. He makes these exercises a top priority.

“It’s not easy to do these things all the time because there are other things that need to be done, but by structuring them and making sure we have them regularly I think we’re doing a better job in the company and making sure people are taken care of,” he says. “There are still plenty of challenges, but the real people who deserve the credit are the ones who work in the field every day; they’re the ones who allow me to receive awards on behalf of the company.”

The fact that the employees are able to be the driving force behind the company is due to Ruppert’s ability to shape them professionally, Patty says. “I think he understood early on that the power of business in terms of relating to other people, relating to the world, becoming who he was going to become over time and developing people into who they’re supposed to become,” she says.

LIFE’S WORK. Patty describes Ruppert’s ability to motivate people and get them excited about even the most menial tasks. She likens it to Tom Sawyer’s ability to get boys excited about painting a fence. “He has



a way of making a project seem so great and fun that people throw themselves into it,” she says. “We have some of the best people working for the company. They make the company – no question about it.”

Davitt and Ruppert talk a lot about the company’s employees as their greatest asset. In fact, Ruppert considers one of his crowning achievements to be the company’s high retention rate. Many employees have remained there for 15 to 20 years, starting with the existence of Ruppert Landscape Co. and returning with the forming of the new landscaping division in 2003. “The biggest measure of our success is the ability to keep those people and get them to continue their trust in us,” Ruppert says.

Maybe employees’ trust in Ruppert has something to do with the fact that he comes to work dressed in a polo shirt with

the company logo on it and khaki pants, just like everyone else. “As managers, we try to lead by example – this is very important to us,” Ruppert says. “We try to work the same hours, drive the same vehicles, have the same basic offices, and as much as possible we make sure to try and feel the same experiences similar to what our employees are feeling, so we can really be connected.”

His brother says Ruppert will occasionally work in the field with crews in the nursery to remember how he got started in the business. “I don’t think he ever forgets his roots,” says Chris Ruppert, who was the company’s president before recently retiring.

Patty agrees that Ruppert deeply invests his life in the company. All of their children – the youngest of whom is now 18 – were raised on the campus where the business sits. “They all grew up around landscape equipment”



Craig Ruppert's wife, Patty, says Ruppert "told me decades ago he never plans to retire; that he wants to die on his tractor. I can just see him with grandchildren on the tractor."

she says. "They all have had their own pair of pruners from an early age with a holster carrier with their name on it. Craig would name blocks of trees after each of the kids."

Chris Ruppert doesn't mind spending his time away from work but can't envision his brother ever becoming this way. "Craig doesn't do the things he used to... but he will always stay involved," he says.

Patty agrees. "He told me decades ago he never plans to retire; that he wants to die on his tractor," she recalls. "That was back when he was young enough that it didn't worry me at all. But, honestly, I don't think he'll retire. He'll definitely make room for the next generation. We have our kids growing up and they're looking at the possibility of becoming involved in a more possible way. I can just see him with grandchildren on the tractor." 🌿

"LEED"ERSHIP STARTS AT HEADQUARTERS

Craig Ruppert, CEO of the Ruppert Cos., is showing he can be a leader in the environmental movement.

This past summer, the company constructed a corporate headquarters on its 16-acre Laytonsville, Md. campus that's certified by the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) program. The company built a new corporate office for Ruppert Properties, as well as a new building for the nursery division and two of its local landscape and landscape management branches, and it aims to meet the highest LEED standards on all of them.

"Our thinking has something to do with the belief that man has something to do with the fact that the environment may be changing," Ruppert says. "Besides, it makes good sense to reduce our energy use and costs."

The other reason behind the construction is due to the belief that a healthier environment leads to happier employees and greater productivity. "We want this to be an organization our employees are proud of," says Chris Davitt, president of Ruppert Nurseries.

The company offers services that are considered part of the green movement. There hasn't been much consumer demand yet for such services in the regions where the company does business, but Ruppert suspects it will catch on soon, and the experience that came from constructing the campus will come in handy when it does. For example, a green roof will be constructed on one of the buildings, and it can be used to educate prospective customers about the installations.