

# PLANET NEWS

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**Going green**  
*Sustainable choices can be  
good for the environment  
and for your business*

## **ALSO INSIDE**

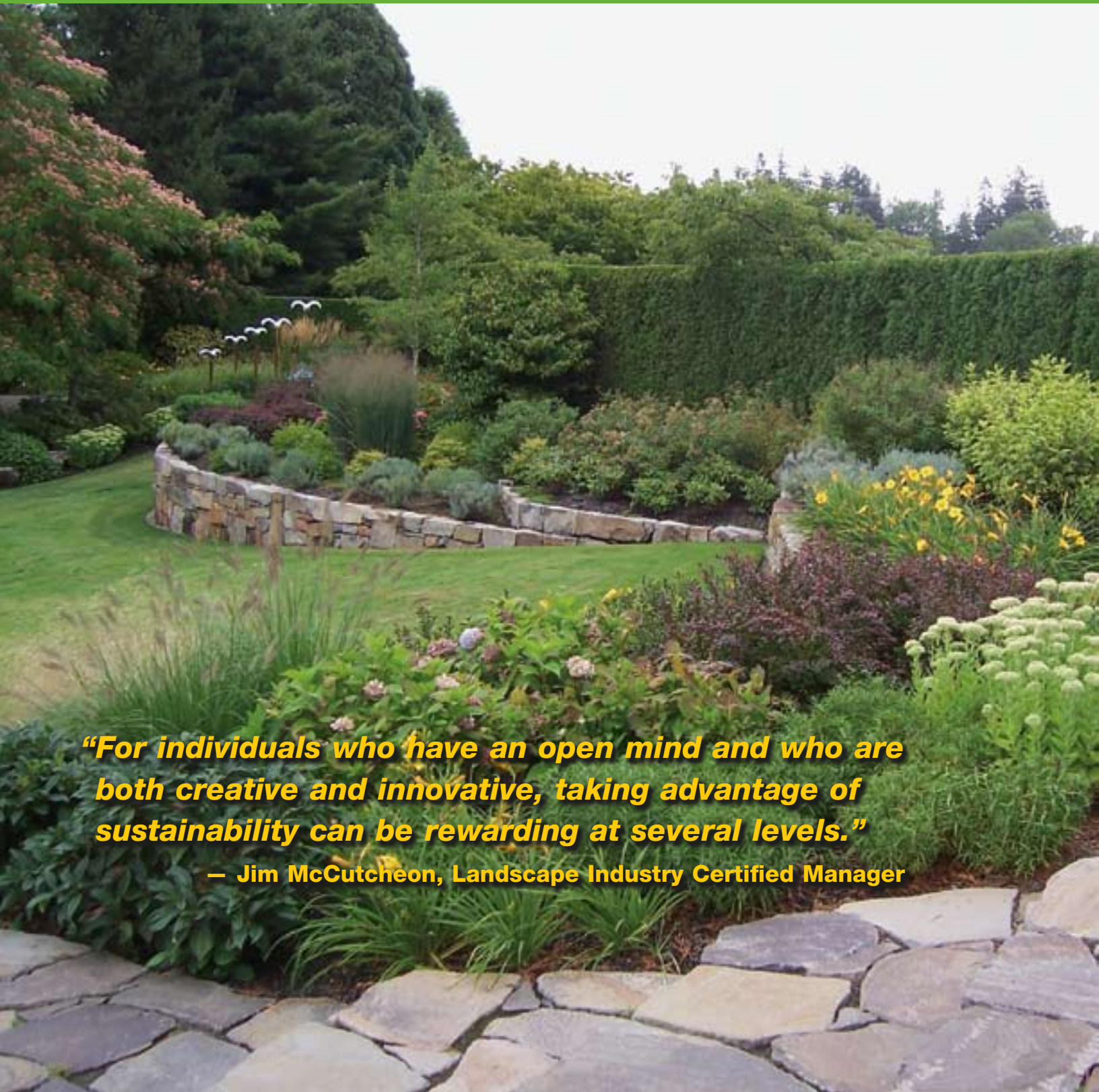
Lawns, the environment, and sustainability **20**

Promote the importance of 'green' **22**

The worst boss I ever had **29**

# Going green

*Sustainable choices can be good for the environment and for your business.*



*“For individuals who have an open mind and who are both creative and innovative, taking advantage of sustainability can be rewarding at several levels.”*

— Jim McCutcheon, Landscape Industry Certified Manager

“Sustainability,” says Jim McCutcheon, Landscape Industry Certified Manager and chair of PLANET’s Crystal Ball Subcommittee, “is kind of a chewy, esoteric word that is massively overused. Because of the rhetoric attached to it, few if any of us understand exactly what it means and, more specifically, what it means to our industry.” It was with this assumption that McCutcheon and his Crystal Ball Subcommittee developed the premise for Crystal Ball Report #29, *Green Industry ECONOMICS: Innovating Toward a Sustainable and Profitable Future*.

“From the subcommittee’s perspective, we wanted to put together a report that would help readers define sustainability and determine if it makes good business sense to go down this road,” McCutcheon adds. “We didn’t spend time discussing the efficacy of global warming; instead, we focused on both the challenges and opportunities the sustainable, green movement brings to our industry.”

What the subcommittee chair and his team learned (and later reported in Crystal Ball Report #29) was that sustainability can be a good business opportunity for most PLANET members and a truly exceptional opportunity for those who think outside the proverbial box. Says McCutcheon, “For individuals who have an open mind and who are both creative and innovative, taking advantage of sustainability can be rewarding at several levels.”

He points to what has become known within PLANET circles as the 3 P’s — People, Profit, and Planet. “Most of us associate sustainability with the environment, but, as a couple of Crystal Ball participants pointed out, it also relates to people, especially our employees, and our businesses (i.e., out bottom line). After all, without sustaining and taking care of our employees and ensuring our businesses are profitable, we won’t be around to help preserve our natural resources by designing, installing, and maintaining sustainable landscapes.”

### A thousand ways

Despite the fact that “sustainability” is just now gaining popular traction, McCutcheon notes that the industry has long been a leader in sustaining our natural environment. “One of the challenges we face as an industry is that literally a thousand companies out there are already practicing sustainability and the 3 P’s in one shape or form. One of PLANET’s charges, then, is to collect, package, and share these ideas with members.”

He continues: “Still, when talking to PLANET members about sustainability, I go back to how important it is to be innovative and proactive. A few years ago, our company created a sub-brand of products to deal with the water crisis in the Atlanta area. By being a little creative and proactive, we were able to actually grow our irrigation division while other companies were losing business. Looking back, we were able to turn an environmental challenge into an opportunity for our business, help conserve a precious natural resource, and add to the bottom line.”

McCutcheon refers back to the Crystal Ball Report #29 when citing other examples of companies being proactive and creative. Two are outside the industry. Two are landscape contractors. All four were members of the Crystal Ball Subcommittee.

### Big picture

Joel Eaton, an employee of Mineral Visions, helped introduce the 3 P’s concept. A member of his company’s Environmentally Responsible Products and Processes (ERPP) team, he reminded subcommittee members that the sustainability concept goes beyond the borders created by soils, plants, and waters. His company has a Health & Wellness program, and management engaged employees and other company stakeholders early on in ways to help it (and its parent company Fairmont Minerals) become one of the most environmentally friendly and socially responsible mining companies in the United States.

Among innovations, Fairmont Minerals developed an inexpensive sand filter for drinking water, now being used worldwide in underdeveloped countries, and the company has been recognized for restoring and increasing the beauty and biodiversity of its former product sites. Eaton encouraged subcommittee members to avoid a narrow definition of sustainability. Instead, look at the concept from a broader perspective and engage employees in ways to bring it to life.

In Florida, nursery owner James “Jay” Fraleigh is bringing plants to life with an innovative sustainable solution. He has patented an automated drip irrigation system that ensures only the optimum amount of water reaches container plants, saving what he reports to be 85 percent in water usage compared to traditional irrigation systems.

◀ Pesticides have not been used on this landscape in more than five years.



As Fraleigh explained to subcommittee members, each plant is watered with two drip irrigation lines on top of the containers; another line travels down the middle of the bed helping to maintain the proper temperature for the root system. In addition to saving water, his innovation, under the name Gro-Eco Growing System, reduces chemical and fertilizer runoff. Says the inventor, “We are literally finding out the minimum amount of water a plant truly needs to thrive.”

## Be pragmatic, too

DeSantis Landscapes is regarded as a sustainable landscape leader in Oregon’s Willamette Valley. Among its initiatives, the company markets an “Earthsense” program. “The program came out of a strategic planning session we held about six years ago,” company owner and President Dean DeSantis, Landscape Industry Certified Manager, recalls. “It was during the meeting that the facilitator noted that our company had a clear passion for the environment and sustainability. From that point forward, we looked at our operation to see how we could incorporate this passion into our facility, our business practices, and our service offerings.”

Among those changes, DeSantis Landscapes operates biodiesel-fueled service vehicles, has reduced its use of herbicides by 50 percent, and gets a portion of its power through the solar photovoltaic panels on its office roof. Staff members have become experts in edible landscapes, the brewing and uses for compost tea, and stormwater management solutions.

“Our focus on sustainability has kept interest up about our company in the marketplace,” says DeSantis. “Probably three out of four people who call mention our commitment to being green. It’s got to be real, though. The marketplace is awash in natural and sustainable claims, and consumers will quickly lose patience with someone perceived to be disingenuous with these claims.” He gave an example of how his company aligns with prevailing “green” sentiments in Oregon.

“One of our salespeople sat down with a chain of restaurants here and learned how locations are pushing the envelope on sustainability. For instance, their french fry oil gets converted into biodiesel, which we run in our service trucks. Running biodiesel made from their recycled oil creates a PR opportunity, and there’s also real, tangible environmental benefit by reducing carbon dioxide emissions.

“Like any other business strategy,” he went on to explain, “it has to make financial sense, not only for your landscape business, but also for your clients. If you can show your clients the return on investment (ROI) of a sustainable service choice, you’ll have an easier time selling these services. If you’re able to find ways to reduce resource use within your business, be it fuel, paper, or energy, you’ll have more money dropping to your bottom line. Sustainable choices can be good for the environment and good for business.”

McCutcheon agrees, referring to another case study in the Crystal Ball Report. Kurt Bland, Landscape Industry Certified Manager & Technician, and his brother Matt operate North Carolina-based Bland Landscaping. They run the company on three principles engrained by their parents: Be socially responsible to the community, be environmentally responsible, and be profitable.

Part of the profitability equation is the money the company saves by managing its service fleet and outdoor power equipment. Switching to more fuel-efficient vehicles, reducing idling time, making routing more efficient with GPS, and switching to alternative fuels created the biggest opportunity to reduce unnecessary fuel use and expense, Bland explained. He noted that considerable savings were also uncovered in the equipment arena by using diesel-powered mowers and more fuel-efficient blowers. The new blowers, says Bland, were 40 percent more fuel efficient than other two-cycle models, and they also produced fewer emissions — another step in the company’s ongoing commitment to sustainability.

“Despite our best efforts, our company’s carbon footprint is still way too big,” Bland emphasizes. “As we go forward, we will continue

▲ Constructing a bioswale that will help manage stormwater.

◀ The completed bioswale.



to reduce our footprint and find ways to market ourselves as a more sustainable alternative. Sustainability is not a trend; it is a genuine concern for all businesses.” Among initiatives this year, Bland Landscaping will put six electric push mowers into production and continue to raise awareness among employees and other landscape contractors about the importance of being more sustainable at all levels of operation.

This past Christmas, for example, customers received a letter from Bland Landscaping noting that funds traditionally used to purchase gifts for them were instead being sent to an area food bank. “Customers responded very positively about this,” says Bland. “Although they said they appreciated the gifts, they were happy with our decision.” Bland employees will also donate 500 hours of their time this year toward community service projects, including the PLANET Day of Service. As this contractor points out, being sustainable is more than being profitable, environmentally friendly, and a protector of the community. It’s all three.

## PLANET can help

PLANET’s Crystal Ball Report #29 shares the above stories with readers and illustrates how other innovative and creative companies leverage the concept of sustainability, relates McCutcheon. He notes that PLANET is helping members address the subject in other ways, too, including offering a sustainable track of seminars at the Green Industry Conference (GIC) last October.

“Expect more sustainable topics at this year’s GIC,” he says. “In addition, expect Crystal Ball Report #30 to be a companion to #29. Report #30 will look at the role innovation plays in developing sustainability programs, along with enhancing other service offerings within our industry.”

In the meantime, the Crystal Ball Subcommittee chair expects PLANET to stay on the cutting edge of sustainability within the green industry by encouraging members to share ideas and collaborate on ways to expand on the 3 P’s — People, Profit, and Planet. ~



The DeSantis Landscapes Corporate Headquarters’ 3.8KW solar photovoltaic array provides over 15 percent of the office’s energy needs.

## Growing gardens on rooftops

In Sandy Spring, Maryland, there’s a very attractive brick colonial office building. The landscape surrounding this building is equally attractive. If you look up at the rooftop of this building, you may see the green edges and flowers of the building’s most cost-effective and environmentally sound asset — its green roof. This, however, is much more than the typical green roof with traditional succulents. This is a green roof that’s a garden. Building owners across the country are beginning to learn that they too can have a real garden on their roofs. Not only is it a huge aesthetic improvement over traditional green roofs, but it also conserves more energy, sequesters more carbon, and captures rainwater.

This new technology that Premier Plantscapes of Burtonsville, Maryland, is using is called “Aqualok” — proprietary, patented growth matrix panels which provide a perfect growing medium for plants and require no soil, minimal water (watering cycles of 30 to 60 days, and beyond), and a much reduced need for fertilizer. The material was invented by Joe Byles, an aerospace engineer and Master Gardener who discovered an oxygen ratio in the product that was extremely beneficial for plants. Byles has used the material on green roofs around the country, including California where plants were exposed to 100-plus degree temperatures and the Santa Anna winds. “I knew that when the plants continued to grow in these conditions this was a great new technology,” Byles explains.

Patrick Cullen, with Premier Plantscapes, is now working on his third green roof in the Washington region. “The results with this new technology are amazing,” says Cullen. “Green roofs are now beautiful gardens with much more environmental efficiency and a pricing structure that allows everyone to turn their rooftop into a green roof.” ~

