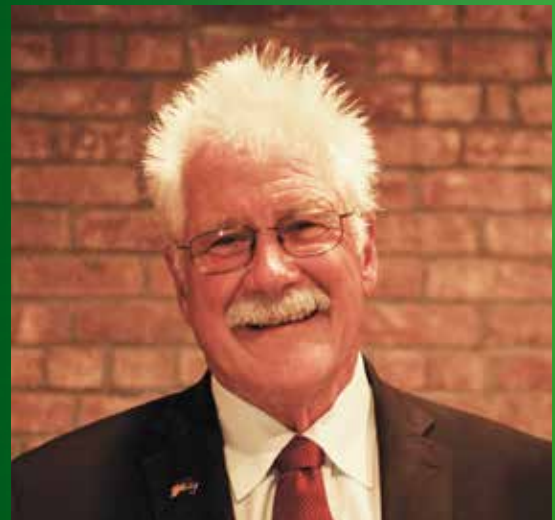


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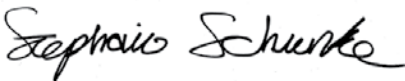
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Stephanie Schwenke



Turf Market Manager
Syngenta Lawn and Garden



**STEPHANIE
SCHWENKE**

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DESTINED TO DESIGN

What started with a toy designed for kids took Paul Fields to the top of a multi-million-dollar landscaping company.

By **Brian Horn**

ALL PAUL FIELDS NEEDED FOR ENTERTAINMENT as a child was an Etch A Sketch and tiller. But it was his mother's taste in magazines that really got him thinking about a career in landscape architecture.

One day after school in the mid-1980s, Fields came home and picked up a copy of his mother's Southern Living magazine. He came across an article about a garden that was designed by a landscape architect.

A landscape architect?

Fields had no idea what those two words together meant, but they combined two hobbies he loved: drawing and working in gardens.

"I did a little more research and found out there was actually a career called landscape architecture," says Fields, who is president and director of design at Lambert Landscape Company in Dallas.

"The next year, senior year, I started looking at possibilities of different universities that offered degrees in landscape architecture and ended up suddenly at Mississippi State getting my degree in landscape architecture."

What started out as fun stuff for a kid turned into a storied career in the landscaping industry where he took a well-established company and

made it even more successful. "Lambert's had been there a long time, but when Paul came along they really went to the next level," says Michael Hatcher, owner of Hatcher Landscape in Memphis, and a friend of Fields.

"He really took the company to the next level with the clients and the designs that he had put together."

Dirt and drawing

For as long as Fields can remember, he loved drawing and wanted to be an architect.

As a first-grader, he loved drawing floor plans and buildings, and would use an Etch A

Sketch to create the drawings. Fields was so proficient at using the Etch A Sketch as a first-grader that his parents would want to save them.

"I remember drawing a full three-dimensional rendering of the family room of my parents' home and them just being amazed," he says. "They put it up on the mantle and wouldn't let me touch it."

When he wasn't sketching away on his toy, he was helping his grandfather, who was a farmer, and his father, who grew up on the farm, with landscaping and gardening projects.

"My grandfather gave me

his old tiller," he says. "I can remember coming home from school and the first thing I would do – and the handlebars were about at eye level on the tiller – I could work and work and get it started, and loved to till the garden when I got home from school in first grade."

As Fields got older, his love for both drawing and landscaping didn't wane, but became more intense, especially after he realized he could make a career as a landscape architect.

In high school, he had a vision of owning a nursery and design/build firm, and while in college, he found that company already existed.

"I ran into someone from Lambert's, got to talking to him, and he encouraged me to come over to their booth," he says.

"And he told me more about the company, and I got this eerie feeling at the time. I'm like, 'Wow. That sounds exactly like the company I've envisioned in my mind that I want to build.'"

After three internships with the company, Fields was hired

full time, but little did he know those internships would eventually lead to becoming president of the company.

All eyes on you

Frank Mariani, owner of Mariani Landscape in Chicago, has known Fields for almost 25 years, and often refers to Lambert's as "Mariani West" and vice versa.

Both companies service high-end clientele, and Mariani says Fields' love for the industry, specifically landscape architecture is evident in his company's work.

"His passion and his attention to detail are something that I find inspiring and hard to emulate," he says.

"He will focus in on the most minute detail just to make a project perfect. It's what takes a project from being very, very good to excellent."

While that passion has helped Fields, who bought the company with two other partners in 2005, become a top-notch landscape architect, it has made the transition to president somewhat difficult for him.

"It's been really challenging for me, primarily because I

"I remember drawing a full three-dimensional rendering of the family room of my parents' home and them just being amazed. They put it up on the mantle and wouldn't let me touch it."

Paul Fields,
president and director
of design, Lambert
Landscape Company

can't focus solely on the thing I enjoy most, which is designing," he says.

The biggest surprises he encountered when stepping into the role was how much money went to overhead.

"As an employee, you always look at what a company charges and think, 'Oh, my gosh, the owners are making a killing,'" he says.

"But when you actually get into the nuts and bolts, so to speak, of the financial side of

a business, it really shows you how there's a small fraction of every dollar we earn that actually goes to the bottom line."

There is always pressure to grow the bottom line and, as vice president, the spotlight wasn't on him to make a final decision on how that can exactly be done.

"Everybody's looking at you for direction, and sometimes you just have to admit you don't always have the answer," he says. "You have to start reaching out to different people that you know."

That is one personality trait Mariani says serves Fields well in a leadership role.

"He's not afraid to seek outside help and he recognizes where he is weak," Mariani says.

"Any entrepreneur can gain from that because some entrepreneurs make the silly mistake of thinking they need to be all things to all people. I think the best entrepreneur is a team-builder."

Being the boss

As if the pressure of making crucial decisions for the company wasn't enough when transitioning to president, Fields also had to come to the realization

that he was now the boss. "I try to approach everyone as a peer, but people look at you differently when you're in the actual leadership role," he says.

"I guess that was the hardest thing for me to kind of understand. I don't know that I still fully get it or grasp it."

Fields says it was easier to solve personnel or organizational issues when he wasn't president because people were more open with him at the time and more willing to talk about the issues.

"Sometimes they're not always as open or willing to admit there are issues or problems to somebody who's in that leadership position," he says.

So, he tries to take an employee to lunch on days that he doesn't have something on his calendar.

"I love to eat, so it's kind of a fun thing for me to get an employee away from the office and just talk a little bit about what's going on in their life personally, but also delve into the professional side a little bit," Fields says.

"It gives me a little better insight to the day-to-day goings on in the company, as well."

Eventually, Fields would like to relinquish control of the day-to-day operations, while still designing and serving in a visionary role.

"Titles don't mean much to me," he says.

"I'd be perfectly happy if someone picked up the president title and ran with the running of the day-to-day business and allowed me to do those other things."

Magical meeting

FIELDS HAS ONLY WORKED one other place as a professional, and that was an internship at Disney World after his freshman year at Mississippi State University. An advisor/professor told Fields he thought he'd be a great fit for the company and discovered last minute they were on campus that day. After spending two long nights in a row working on a project, which gave him no time to

shower, Fields got word that if he could interview immediately, they would meet with him.

"So, not having had a shower, I was dressed in shorts and a T-shirt, didn't have anything with me other than the roll of drawings that I was going to present that project on," he says. "I walked in and she said, 'You know what? I think you'd be a great fit for us,' and hired me for an internship at Disney."

"(Zach is) all about exposing his kids to different parts of the world and different kinds of lives," says Kristen Fefes, executive director of the Associated Landscape Contractors of Colorado. "Until you get to know him, you don't know how deep he really runs. It's really impressive."



GIVING BACK

THE INDUSTRY IS EVOLVING, and more and more companies are seeking out employees with horticulture degrees that they hope will carry on the green industry legacy. In order to achieve this, industry members need to take the time to guide future industry leaders.

One person doing so is Zachary Johnson.

Zachary Johnson spends his time in the industry molding the minds of others around him.

By Katie Tuttle

Currently, Johnson teaches a program at Colorado State University – a program he took when he was a student there. That previous knowledge, as well as his industry experiences, provide him the chance to give his students a unique look at what opportunities are out there for them.

As part of the program, Johnson has a class called Professional Landscape Practices, which he started with the late Todd Williams, former president of Terracare Associates. Every week, the class invites industry professionals to come do a guest lecture on a variety of landscape topics ranging from landscape design to finances.

“It’s a way for students who have been in the philosophical, theoretical world learning about these things, to hear from business owners,” says Kristen Fefes, executive director of the Associated Landscape Contractors of Colorado. She knows Johnson through the ALCC, which he’s been a member of for more than 20 years.

Fefes says real world experience for the students is something the ALCC board has been trying to work on with the university. Because of this, the ALCC helps fund the program.

“We think the outcome is so important,” she says. “And so is the idea behind it.”

“While university study is important, it’s just a piece,” Johnson says. “I think it’s cool to get that perspective from people who have been out and done that. It benefits the students.”



“While university study is important, it’s just a piece. I think it’s cool to get that perspective from people who have been out and done that. It benefits the students.”

Zachary Johnson,
professor, Colorado
State University

This program is his brainchild, and it earned him ALCC’s Person of the Year Award.

“I’ve had the occasion just here and there to be around him in his classroom or see him interact with his students,” says Becky Garber, communications director with the ALCC. “It’s very clear that his students respect him and it’s just fun to watch him interact with them.”

Peer focused

Education in the industry shouldn’t just be limited to students, and Johnson is playing a role in that.

Next Level Network is one of Bruce Wilson’s peer groups

that Johnson is involved in. Each year, a handful of professors come to the annual meeting and have the opportunity to educate members on how to better recruit students and new employees.

“We work with them and help them understand that each generation is a little different,” he says.

Fefes credits Johnson with sometimes being the voice of reason at association board meetings.

“I think he is one of the smartest people in our industry,” she says. “He’s incredibly thoughtful, meaning he really thinks through things.”

In 2014, the PLANET Academic Excellence Foundation named Johnson Outstanding Educator of the Year.

RIGHT: Johnson is an avid bicyclist, sometimes taking his bike with him when he travels.



When a topic is being discussed, Johnson will often focus on the other side of the conversation or ask the group if they were really talking about the bigger picture and how it would affect members and the industry.

“We teased him sometimes around the board table of being the contrarian,” Fefes says. “At ALCC he was not always out front in the most vocal way, but he did it from behind to make sure the right discussion was being had.”

Sustainable partners

Johnson also chaired a group with the ALCC that started



a program called the Green Strategies Program. “It’s a program where companies and businesses can actually become what we’re calling sustainable partners,” he says.

Each year, participants go through a series of classes, with different presentations on design, construction and maintenance ideas to make projects more sustainable.

“It’s a way to really look at our profession in a way that demonstrates that we do good things,” he says. “The reality is a lot of things we do aren’t good for the planet. We drive around trucks all day long, we drive around mowers all day long. At the end of the day, there’s a lot of offsets in terms of what we’re doing.”

He says the key idea to the program is to improve a company’s bottom line in terms of fiscal importance, and in terms of environmental practices.

The Green Strategies Program is part of the ALCC, but Garber credits Johnson with taking the lead starting it.

“Zach has had a vision for

quite some time to promote our industry doing things in terms of its practices,” she says. “And promoting those things (that are sustainable) to companies and clients.”

For the program, the first step was to create a blueprint for how to become a sustainable company, specific to Colorado. Johnson directed and facilitated the document into writing, and his involvement in the program earned him his second Person of the Year from the ALCC in 2015.

“I think it’s remarkable that Zach’s vision has actually resulted in building a wave of momentum within our industry and within our membership that really looks at and cares about sustainability,” Garber says. “It’s not just marketing; it’s serious. We want to do this. We want to do more and get this message out to our clients and help them understand it.”

Out of the office

Just because Johnson can’t be found in his office at CSU, doesn’t mean he’s not on the

job. This fall he’ll be traveling to Costa Rica to help students work on a project to design wetlands that help clean up water.

“Costa Rica has a reputation as a pristine place,” he says. “(But) the water just gets drained out to small streams.” They plan to clean up that water by designing simple wetlands so it’s done sustainably.

The university also sends him to different campuses around the world, including one being built in Mexico.

Johnson says he loves to travel, and his family – including his wife, Ellen, 13-year-old daughter, Juno, and 11-year-old son, Leo, – travel a lot. He’s also an avid cyclist, something which connects him to the environment he cares about so much.

“I was in New Zealand and took my bicycle down there,” he says. “It’s amazing, you see things so much differently. When you’re in a car it’s one speed, but a bike is a different speed.”

Fefes says that his travels serve a double purpose: work and the thrill of showing his kids other cultures.

“Until you get to know him, you don’t know how deep he really runs. It’s really impressive,” she says.

Garber agrees.

“It’s just been great to be on the sidelines and watch him develop from the young designer who is learning the ropes to now being this imminent person within the university and the industry,” she says.

“We don’t often get to see that: someone cross all those lines in their career.”



Larry Ryan started Ryan Lawn & Tree in 1987 and is now a minority owner of the company.

CHIEF ENCOURAGEMENT OFFICER

Although Larry Ryan doesn't own most of his company, he still puts his entire heart into the operation. **By Katie Tuttle**

PHOTOS COURTESY OF RYAN LAWN & TREE

MOST PEOPLE WILL SAY that the best jobs they had were the ones where their boss, CEO, owner and other higher ups knew them and took the time to make them feel like a part of the work family.

This can be said about Larry Ryan, founder of Ryan Lawn & Tree.

“Most people who were around the office felt very free to pop in and say something to Larry,” says Chris Senske, president of Senske Services, who visited Ryan’s company for business reasons. “And it didn’t matter whether it was a manager or a service technician, a field person or office person. He knew them all by name, which I think is awesome.”

Started by Ryan in 1987, Ryan Lawn & Tree has a unique setup in that it’s now an employee stock ownership plan (ESOP).

“If you told me 29 years ago that we’d had this today, I would not believe it,” Ryan says.

Ryan says the idea to have the ESOP came from his bank. One of the employees told him how they owned part of the bank, and he decided to look into it. Previously, Ryan Lawn & Tree had shared profits in a similar situation with its employees, but Ryan liked the idea of giving more to his team.

“They were growing the company so shouldn’t they share the rewards?” he says. Every year, employees are given stock based on profitability. As the current owners, Ryan and his wife had to sell off part of the company, which they did at a time when it was small enough that shares didn’t cost much.

At one point, the Ryans sold \$3 million of the company to their more than 240 employees for the price of \$1 million. The couple then donated part of that money to local charities,

which in return use Ryan Lawn & Tree for services. Ryan and his wife now own 40 percent of the company.

“My wife’s and my goal is to not get rich out of this deal,” he says. “It’s to create an environment where our employees turn into owners of the company.” He likens it to a farmer passing on the family farm to his children.

Ryan does admit that it’s not always a perfect setup to no longer fully own his company.

“I don’t want this to sound like utopia,” he says. “It’s in-

credible, but every day I have to realize I’m losing control of the company. So you have to work with that side of yourself. Are you really willing to live being the giver?”

In company meetings and in day-to-day activities, the associates come up with ideas to make the company better. They also work together to plan their days, maintain and purchase equipment, and brainstorm how to solve problems for upset clients.

Those ideas are helping. Ryan says they expect the

company to reach \$100 million by 2030 through both organic growth and acquisitions of other companies.

About the team

Focusing on employee needs is something Ryan does a lot of.

“His main concern is making sure our futures are secure and that we have a fulfilling career,” says Debra Warner, staffing coordinator with Ryan Lawn & Tree. “There are few multi-million dollar companies where the president is accessible and works just as hard as his employees either in the field or in the office. Larry challenges all of us to be the best version of ourselves.”

“I’m an encourager,” he says. “One of my jobs that I feel very strongly for is to encourage the people who join us – to thank them.”

He makes an effort to show new employees what a job with Ryan Lawn & Tree can give them. He shows them that they can raise a family with



As an ESOP, the majority of the company is owned by its employees. Ryan and his wife own 40 percent.

this job, and that it's a way to start a career.

"Their job will grow. Their salary will grow. There's a future for them," he says.

And a future in the business for his employees is something he strives to nurture.

"Every single person has got to believe in what we do and who we are," he says. "That is better than any training you can do."

Training is important, which is why Ryan Lawn & Tree has a training center with a coordinator to handle all the training requirements for new and current crew members.

However, Ryan says a good employee starts with the hiring process.

"Selecting the right people is a huge part of the whole equation," he says. "We spend a lot of time selecting the right people."

But according to Senske, it's not just about selecting the right people. Ryan also puts in an extra effort to build relationships with employees.

"He knows all his employees and all of the things going on in their lives," Senske says. "There wasn't a single one we bumped into that he didn't ask about a wife, or somebody's surgery or how they're healing after an injury. That kind of thing."

When Ryan says "selecting the right people," he's not just talking about new hires. Ryan Lawn & Tree also does a number of acquisitions, which is important for him because those companies' employees become Ryan Lawn & Tree owners.

"At the end of the day, every



More than 30 of the company's associates have more than \$100,000 of value in Ryan Lawn & Tree.

"I'm an encourager. One of my jobs that I feel very strongly for is to encourage the people who join us. To thank them."

Larry Ryan, founder, Ryan Lawn & Tree

single associate becomes the face of Ryan," he says. "If a person doesn't fit, there is no magic."

Before acquiring a company, Ryan makes sure the current owner and employees are willing to continue operating under the Ryan Lawn & Tree format. After an acquired company joins Ryan, he tries to visit that new branch frequently.

"Branch visits are very important. You can't visit a branch two times a year and have the associates in the branch understand who you are, have your values or get

your culture," he says. "Visits need to be frequent and the newly acquired associates need to see your sincerity."

Thomas Tolkacz, CEO and owner of Swingle Lawn, Tree and Landscape Care, says Ryan has a passion for the industry, but it might be trumped by his passion for those in it.

"I think behind this person, who is sincerely dedicated to the green industry from a horticultural standpoint, there is a very intuitive, well read, sharp, driven, savvy business person who likes to be a winner, he says.

"It is rare you find someone who, I think, has combined their avocation and their vocation so closely together, not only to their own personal success and benefit, but to the team members and community."

On the job

Because he's not technically a majority owner of the company, Ryan could easily spend the majority of his time outside of the office, managing from afar.

He doesn't, however, instead choosing to be immersed in

the company culture with his employees.

His day typically starts at a branch, where he'll take time to talk to the crews and see how they're doing. His hands-on approach continues as he usually will then ride with one of the technicians for the day, keeping his finger on the pulse of the company as he's out in the field, experiencing what the crews are doing.

The rest of his day is spent reading articles and talking with different people to figure out who Ryan Lawn & Tree is and where the company is going.

"The real key ingredient, I think, is the passion for the business and the compassion for employees," Senske says. "And building that business based on sharing and everybody participating."

Although Ryan can't take all the credit for himself, it's safe to say he plays a large role in how Ryan Lawn & Tree impacts the industry.

"We have been so blessed for 29 years," he says. "We work every day to try to be a role model company."

"We know we can't change the industry or other companies," he says. "If we put all our energy into the Ryan organization, we have a chance to affect some change. The first words in our mission statement are 'Serve God.'"

"We only do this when our people feel good about what they do, take those good feelings to our clients, and at the end of the year, get pay checks that allow them to live a worthwhile life."



UNITE & CONQUER

Larry Wilson has spent years bringing New York lawn and landscape professionals together to fight harmful regulations.

By Kate Spirgen

WHEN BURDENSOME RULES and regulations hit the New York legislature, Larry Wilson is the man to call. For the past 16 years, Wilson has worked tirelessly to fight legislation that would harm or hinder green industry companies, and he's had great success.

A late start

Wilson did some landscape work in college, but he never really thought of a career in the industry. He eventually went on to own a wine store, but after he turned 40, he decided he wanted a career change.

When Wilson's father-in-law asked him to watch his business, Lawrence Landscape Design, while he dealt with an illness, Wilson agreed and realized he loved it. So in 1990, when his father-in-law retired, Wilson took over the business.

"I wanted to express myself," he says. "I never really thought of doing that through horticulture but it soon became a passion for me. I enjoy seeing my work and I enjoyed making mistakes because I made a lot of mistakes and it was very enlightening to me."

Wilson says he suffered from a lack of confidence when he was first starting out, but through the New York State Turf and Landscape Association, he learned how to succeed.

"I would be nowhere without them," he says. "They taught me everything I need to know."

He says that through his positions as first director, then vice president and then president, he gained the confidence he needed to feel comfortable speaking with other people, writing communication and running his business in lower Westchester County.

A taste for politics

Wilson became president of the New York State Turf and Landscape Association in 1997 but really got passionate about green industry politics in 2000 when the state of New York passed the Neighbor Notifica-

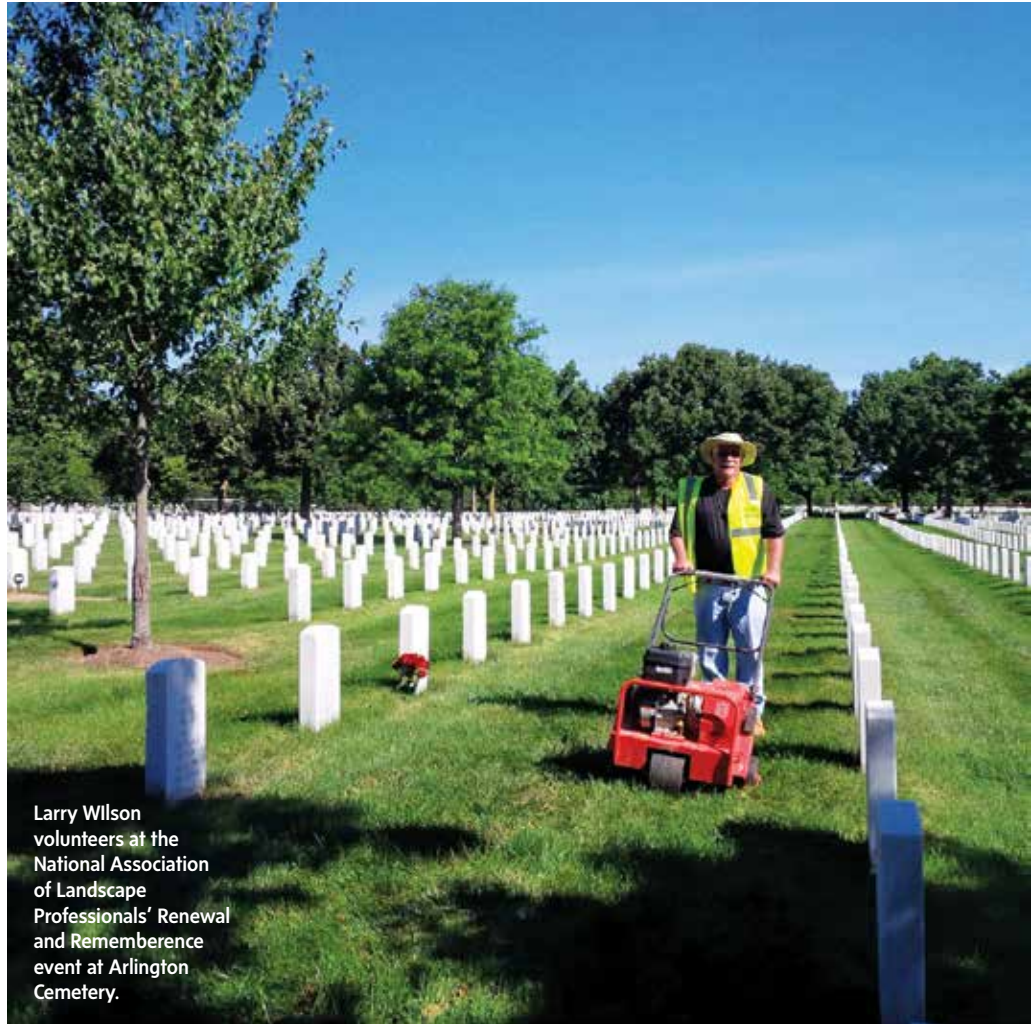
tion Law, requiring applicators to post notifications and notify neighboring properties when applying down pesticides in participating counties.

“We knew there would be more coming our way and the industry all of a sudden said, ‘We need to get together here. We need to be unified,’ at the time and I was sort of a facilitator,” he says. He called the right people, organized meetings and started the fight against crippling legislation.

Elizabeth Seme, executive director of the New York State Turfgrass Association, has worked with Wilson on legislative issues for more than 20 years and says that no one works harder than he does. By keeping up to date with issues, keeping industry members informed and involved, raising funds and making the right strategic moves, she says he’s a uniting force lobbying for lawn and landscape operators.

“He made good inroads, he communicated and he started to compile all of this and use his connections and his influence to kind of pull the state together,” she says. “And he’s been able to do it, with help, of course. He keeps us moving in the right direction. And I think we’ve even gotten stronger in the last five or six years.”

Wilson brought together 12 different trade organizations through the New York Alliance of Environmental Concerns, where he serves as chairman, and started making great progress on the legislative front. Wilson’s area is a hotbed for legislative activity and so he was on the forefront of the



Larry Wilson volunteers at the National Association of Landscape Professionals’ Renewal and Remembrance event at Arlington Cemetery.

“As a volunteer, you do not see anybody that is more tenacious, dedicated and loyal to an industry than Larry.”

Elizabeth Seme,
executive director,
New York State
Turfgrass Association

action. He says he didn’t expect to be the leader, but when he was asked, he stepped up to the plate.

“We were basically angry,” he says. “We were angry we were really being ignored by the legislature. They would ignore our story and they couldn’t care less about passing laws. They were listening to those that knew nothing about what we do and that still aggravates me a great deal. Being so well educated, it was disconcerting to me to hear someone telling

me that we didn’t know what we were doing. That was a great motivating factor to get involved in the legislature.”

And thanks to his efforts, the organizations have been working together for years. By staying on top of the issues, taking the time to effectively communicate and fight legislation pesticide issues, applicator fees, applicator reporting, pesticide use, fertilizer regulation and more.

“The biggest thing is that under his leadership we’ve main-

tained a communication base within the government and regulatory arenas of the state and we have either stopped legislation from coming through or lessened the impact of it or in some cases, we were able to get some of our own agenda items through so that's a pretty big statement right there," Seme says.

Continuing the fight

Now, at the age of 68, Wilson is still as passionate about his work as chair of the New York Alliance for Environmental Concerns. "If I don't stay on the cutting edge, I'm going to go over it. And I do sometimes fall asleep at night on the computer doing my job and helping others do their jobs," he says. "I'm proud of the fact that I've stopped 16 years of onerous legislation."

He does it to defend the best interests of businesses in the state of New York, particularly because New York is such a bellwether state for pesticide legislation. And he has plenty of work to keep him busy. Right now, there are more than 100 bills in the legislature dealing with the application, storage, use and transportation of pesticides.

"As a volunteer, you do not see anybody that is more tenacious, dedicated and loyal to an industry than Larry," Seme says.

Through the New York State Turf and Landscape Alliance, Wilson helps organize all kinds of seminars and educational sessions for applicators since the state of New York's applicator licenses

"When I see people walk in and tell us how to do our jobs and tell us what we're doing wrong without the basis of any experience, without even knowing the challenges that we face and how we work, that still aggravates me."

Larry Wilson, owner, Lawrence Landscape

require continuing education credits.

Working with Cornell University, the University of Connecticut, the University of Massachusetts and others, the organization works hard to make sure those credits are available.

Even after many successes in his years fighting for the lawn and landscape industry, Wilson still gets fired up at the current state of politics in his sector.

"When I see people walk in and tell us how to do our jobs

and tell us what we're doing wrong without the basis of any experience, without even knowing the challenges that we face and how we work, that still aggravates me," he says.

The end of the year

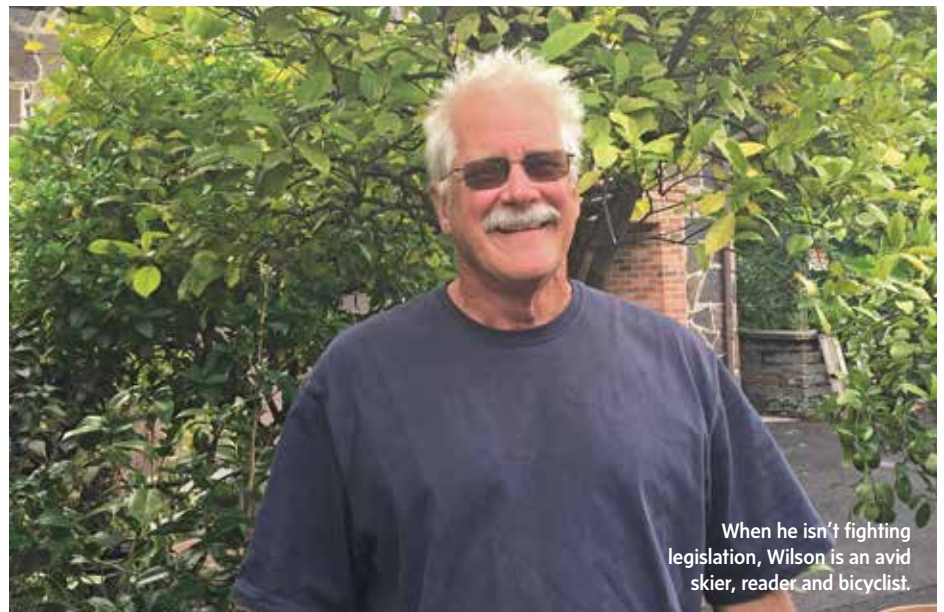
Wilson's favorite part of the year is when then legislature closes and he can take a look back at what he and his colleagues have been able to accomplish and spend more time on his own business.

He's is an avid skier, bicyclist and reader, making sure

he sneaks at least a half hour or 45 minutes of reading in before bed. And when he can, he loves to spend time with his wife, JoAnne, his daughter, Christina, and his son, James.

But the closing of the New York legislature isn't the end of Wilson's duties. Besides running his own business, he also serves as vice chair of the Westchester Parks Recreational Conservation Board and president of the Hyatt Community Association, and he continues to be active with GREENPAC, the New York state green industry political action committee he helped establish in 2006.

"I think the fact that he's been able to stay in this and continue on and people trust him and follow him is a huge compliment to his abilities," Seme says. "He holds everything all together and it's not an easy industry. It's a tough game, it really is, and yet he's withstood the test of time."



When he isn't fighting legislation, Wilson is an avid skier, reader and bicyclist.



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MW 1LGG6072-Lawn-AGP1 03/16

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