



PLANET News

Professional Landcare Network

July 2007

COVER STORY

In full bloom

Landscape lends color and excitement to federal building

ALSO INSIDE
Pricing competitively
Getting ready for immigration reform
Positive attitudes on the job

Entrepreneur takes long, rewarding road to ownership

For seven years, Rich Wilbert, CLP, has co-owned Robert Howard Associates with partner Mike Ransom. The Boulder, Colorado-based design/build firm caters to high-end residential customers, employs upwards of 30 people during the busy season, and completes between 30 to 50 projects a year.

“We have a well-defined niche,” says Wilbert. “Ninety-two percent of our business comes from our residential design/build customers, while the other 8 percent comes from maintaining English gardens that we have

Featured Member

**Robert Howard Associates
Boulder, Colorado
Rich Wilbert, CLP, owner**



installed. We keep the same values and many of the same philosophies that the original owner, Robert Howard, instilled in the company and, like he did, we strive always to be fair and honest with customers.”

This landscape contractor, though, readily admits that his career niche was a bit slow in developing. Born and raised in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, he started working for the Milwaukee County Park District right out of high school in what is commonly referred to today as “The Domes.” Wilbert worked in each of the three domes — the cactus, tropical, and show gardens — and enjoyed his job so much that he attended Milwaukee Area Technical College to get a degree in horticulture.

After receiving his degree in 1970, Wilbert worked for the Milwaukee County Nursery for eight years, before hiring on with nearby KEI. From that point on, his career reads like a “Who’s Who” in the green industry. He mentored with KEI President Ron Kujawa, CCLP, for five years, left to work for Lied’s owner Tom Lied, CCLP, for three years, and then returned to KEI and headed up the operations department until 1993. In the meantime, realizing there was a niche for someone who had business training and knowledge of horticulture and landscaping, he worked evenings getting a bachelor’s and master’s degree in business.

“The experience I gained from working with Ron and Tom was invaluable,” Wilbert relates. “At KEI, I learned the maintenance business, especially how to work with municipalities and commercial accounts. Lied’s, on the other hand, was in the design/build market and catered to high-end residential customers. That business was all about providing exemplary service to customers who could be very demanding at times. From there, I moved to Colorado. Richard Ott, CCLP, gave me an opportunity to run an Orkin interior plantscaping branch. The time was right. I was ready to try something different and operating a branch gave me a sense of ownership.”

The Colorado transplant stayed with Orkin until 1997 after which time he tried his hand in the bid/build market, working for All Phase Landscape. After three years there and a total of nearly 30 years in the industry, Wilbert knew what he wanted — to own a design/build company and work in the high-end residential market.

Timing is everything

Wilbert’s career search ended when he took a job with Robert Howard, with the understanding that within three years he and long-time Robert Howard employee Mike Ransom would buy out the owner. Within six months, the deal was consummated and Wilbert and Ransom became co-owners.

Looking back over the years, Wilbert identifies two critical elements to what has been an interesting and very

**BUYING OR SELLING
A BUSINESS?**

Professional Business Consultants
PBC
Merger & Acquisition Specialists

**FREE
APPRAISALS**

NO BROKER FEES

Professional Business Consultants can obtain purchase offers from qualified buyers without disclosing sellers' identity. Consultant's fees are paid by the buyer.

Contact Us:

708-744-6715

FAX: 508-252-4447
E-MAIL: PBCMELLO1@AOL.COM

successful career. “We say it all the time, but networking and relationships are so important,” he emphasizes. “I learned from Ron Kujawa what sacrifices owners have to go through to

1800s, and there’s an initiative to maintain these properties. In fact, we’ve developed a relationship with a local historical group, giving us an entrée into the preservation market. Among

Coincidentally, Robert Howard still does all of its design work the old fashioned way, by hand, without the use of computers. When asked why, Wilbert says simply that many of their cus-

“To be successful requires being strong and competitive, not to mention having an overall passion for the industry.”

operate a successful business and how to balance business and family. Tom taught me most everything I know about providing service to high-end customers, and Richard gave me a chance to be out on my own. They’ve all become friends, and I confide in them often, as I do with Eldon Dyk, CCLP, another industry veteran, close friend, and mentor. There’s no question, I wouldn’t be where I am today without their counsel and guidance.”

Having a competitive nature has also been instrumental to his success. Wilbert competed as a cyclist back in Wisconsin. He was state champ a couple of years, and even had a shot at making the Olympic team. The former bicyclist long ago traded in his pedal-power, but not his competitive spirit, for a Harley.

“This is a great industry,” says Wilbert. “It is enjoyable work and you get a chance to help associates grow their careers. But there are struggles, too. You have to fight Mother Nature, and finding a qualified workforce is an ongoing challenge. Owners also have to stay sharp to stay ahead of the competition. To be successful requires being strong and competitive, not to mention having an overall passion for the industry.”

He has all that, along with a career niche that keeps him excited. “We’re doing some interesting projects in Boulder,” Wilbert relates. “Many of the homes in the city were built in the

other areas where this has led, we have renovated landscapes where houses have been raised off their foundation to make room for a new foundation, and then set back in place. Preservation is not a huge market for us, but it’s becoming an important one.”

tomers prefer to see hand-drawn renderings of their future landscapes. What the customer wants, the customer gets — that’s the name of the game in any market, in any business, and that’s just one of many lessons this entrepreneur learned on his long road to owning his own business. ♣

Oly-Ola
Introduces

STONE-edg™

SIZE MATTERS...
...especially when you are restraining architectural hardscape stones

When **QUALITY MATTERS,**
Oly-Ola
EDGINGS, INC.

1-800-EDGINGS • www.olyola.com

With its 1 inch height, Stone-edg is ideal for shallow hardscaping