

Joe Gonzalez

CEO, ArtisTree Landscape Maintenance & Design

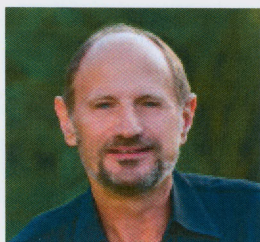
There's a first time for everything – the first sale, the first expansion, the first mistake and maybe even the first award. To help gain insight into the successes and lessons learned by successful business owners, every month *Lawn & Landscape* will talk to companies who have surpassed those milestones and have become some of the newest members of the Top 100 List.

COMPANY: ArtisTree Landscape Maintenance & Design

LOCATION: Venice, Fla.

TOP 100 RANKING: 96

2010 REVENUES: \$13 million



What about your company has remained consistent?

We've always had a single-minded objective, which is to be a representative in this industry of the highest quality company of our position. I'm not a horticultural person; I don't have a horticultural background.

My background is in business and the businesses that I've worked for are high-end, high-quality oriented companies.

That's what I thought that this industry needed – someone to be the quality leader in the area.

You just don't start out at the top; you hopefully wind up at the top. There's always more you can do, there's new ideas all the time. You're never done.

Did you plan to grow your company this big?

I moved down here with two babies in diapers, and I

knew I needed to make some money. I was just hoping I could get it off the ground and make it into a few-million-dollar business. A \$15 million business was not in my sights at that time.

There was really nothing in my sights except making an immediate living and doing it as quickly as possible.

I think at the point where we passed \$2.5 million and \$3 million is when I thought of the distinct possibility of us getting bigger, still \$15 million wasn't a reality for me.

When I got to \$10 million, right before the turn of the economy, is when my business got really excited on growth. That's when I was looking at a \$25-50 million dollar business.

So, when the economy rolls around, it might be a slower plan, but I plan to grow this business at 10 to 15 percent growth rate. We

still have those people and those objectives and we're probably better than we were five years ago.

To what do you attribute your success?

I think we have been unflinching in our objective to be the quality company.

During the hard times we have never cut back on anything. If we make a mistake, or we don't meet a customer's expectation, we'll rectify it at a loss.

I think the fact that we have stood by that standard for the last 20 years is what has kept us growing and moving forward.

How do you avoid getting complacent?

I think I keep myself moving in multiple directions. I have a group of people working for me that have a very good skill level of the day-to-day operations of the company, and I don't have those skills.

What I do have is a focus on growth and new opportunities, marketing, the things that are changing day to day.

I hire marketing and sales department employees who are giving me challenges every day, and they are hard-working, motivated people.

I think we inspire each other.

How has your role changed as your company has grown?

My role has been diminished over time because as we've grown we've added a marketing department and other departments to take over some of the duties I had.

I made our first brochure, for example. But now I'm basically on a part-time status here, overseeing what other people are doing for the most part, and I don't put more into it than I need to.

What advice would you give to leaders on growing?

I would say you have to find your niche. It has to fit your personality.

You need to have financial backing. It's very hard to make it in this business – it's highly competitive so the margins are very slim unless you establish yourself, and that has been the objective.

You have to have the ability to offer more services at a higher price for more profitability, but also to live with that profit you're promising.

I think business leaders should adopt a philosophy and stick with it. Do they want to be the cheapest guy or the highest priced guy? Do you want to be the best or do you want to be in the middle? You have to pick your market and stick with it. **L&L**