

A Growing Family Affair



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The Cordrey family offers property owners one of the broadest range of services and products in Delaware

RSC Landscaping, Ltd.

Founder and Owners: Brothers Rick and Stephen Cordrey; Chris, Ryan and Valery Cordrey

Founded: 1990

Headquarters: Millsboro, Del.

Market-Territory: Suffolk and Kent counties in southern Delaware

Services: Landscaping; lawn and garden care; pavers and walkers; lighting; irrigation; container and water gardening; and outdoor living spaces

Employees: 75 peak season, 40 to 50 year-round

Website: www.rsclandscaping.com

While Chris Cordrey was raised in his family's RSC Landscaping business, he was in the shadows of the company's founders, his father, Rick, and his uncle, Stephen Cordrey. Cordrey wasn't always sure it was the right industry for him, so he studied business and marketing, experience he knew he could apply to any industry. But he eventually realized that the family operation could provide him with the flexibility and support to do his thing. Today, at RSC Landscaping and its joint East Coast Garden Center in Millsboro, Del., his thing is what he refers to as "new school" marketing.

"Originally, I thought it would be an issue to work with my dad," Cordrey says. "I knew he'd always been supportive, and would continue to be, but I was also about to twist a lot of things and make changes."

Not that the company wasn't already flourishing and expanding in its first two decades under Rick and Stephen. But now with Rick's wife Valerie, who runs the garden center, and each of the founder's sons, Chris and Ryan

(cousins), all as part-owners, there are now four divisions of the company: landscaping, garden center, greenhouse operation and event-facility services. Both the garden center and the greenhouses are open to the public and also to the wholesale trade. The family grows 500 varieties of annuals, 250 types of perennials, 125 kinds of shrubs, and around 50 ornamental grasses.



RSC installed this paver patio, which is used for an outdoor living space.

Cordrey heads the event-facility division, which was added to the family business in the past two years. The family's Cordrey Center can hold up to 150 people for a seated dinner, and its Enrichment Center is a popular place for business meetings, training seminars and celebrations, such as birthday parties. Other special events, including wedding receptions and cocktail parties take place at the facility's Secret Garden.

Even with all of this, the family's RSC Landscaping serves more than 300 commercial or residential lawn care clients, mows more than 100 properties, and maintains another 125 properties, both commercial and residential. In all, RSC covers 4 million square feet of turf a year. There's also a busy container gardening business that caters to hotels and restaurants. Its Two Seasons of Color program sees the company plant and distribute over 30,000 summer annuals in 1-gallon pots and over 20,000 fall annuals. The company also installs 25 irrigation systems a year, and maintains charitable and social-cause interests, as well. With the fresh faces and ideas, it's allowed RSC (named for Rick and Stephen Cordrey) to expand comfortably.

"It wasn't feasible to have one or two people continuing to run it," Cordrey says. "At the same time, I don't think they imagined that we'd expand to this level, and in a relatively short amount of time." Even so, RSC is not the state's biggest green industry company.



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PHOTOS COURTESY OF CHRIS CORDREY.

"We don't want to be the biggest," says Rick, who started the company in 1990 by providing landscape maintenance. "We don't want to have 100 trucks – we have 15. You can get too big, and then you might have more money, but are you really happier? Probably not."

RSC is covering all the niche markets, and Rick says no one else in a 300-mile radius offers all the services under one roof. "Maybe they have this service or another, but not all in one," he says. "We get bored easily, so we're always coming up with ideas."

No secrets

The key to success has been an unyielding work ethic, even demonstrated by their father, Richard S. Cordrey, who donated a 16-acre cornfield to his sons to give wings to the business. He's still on the grounds every day, even if it's just for a cup of coffee and chat. When the two brothers began, they

worked a ridiculous amount of hours. They had to – there was no money. Cordrey says they couldn't even afford to pay each other \$8 an hour. "But they were learning that if you want to be successful, you had to be hands-on," Cordrey says. "You couldn't sit at a desk. You had to be with the crews to be productive."

It used to be that old-school marketing was primitive. Word-of-mouth from satisfied customers enabled Rick and Stephen "to keep moving down the street" to other neighbors. Once there was a customer base, that work ethic led to building incredible relationships with their clientele. Today, those relationships help weather economic factors that could work against a luxury like turf care.

"In a bad economy, if you don't have a relationship, customers are going to go with a low bidder," Cordrey says. "We've always tried to be in the middle of the pack [price-wise] and let services and our relationship win out. It's also one of the reasons we've been able to expand."

And, without a single argument or roadblock.

"They could have easily said, 'What do you mean? We've been doing it this way for 20 years and it's worked,'" Cordrey says. "They could have easily said, 'We've built this from the ground up. What are you talking about?' But, instead, they've been so nice and supportive. They've been willing to make changes."

Before his decision to move in full time, Cordrey had multiple discussions with his father, in particular, about the path he wanted to take, and whether he'd be given flexibility and freedom.

"We still have meetings on a regular basis," Cordrey says. "We go out to lunch a lot, and talk about what we want to do. For anything I've wanted, they've all been supportive as long as I keep them in the loop. It's been great having each other to bounce ideas off of."

Considerations for the future played a role, too. Rick is 56; Stephen is 53. And for as physically demanding a profession as the turf and landscaping business is, they both knew they couldn't continue to do it all for the rest of their lives. It was clear that the stress was beginning to take a toll.

"My dad would be out on a job, but he also had to run the business," Cordrey says. "He says I've dramatically decreased his stress level."

Measuring your marketing

If you can measure expansion, when the garden center opened in 2000, it was for in-house and wholesale distribution only. Now, its retail success is astounding. In fact, in mid-January, the family headed to Atlanta to receive accolades for its top 100 listing among garden centers in America as nominated by Today's Garden Center magazine. Locally, it and the new event centers are often saluted by Delaware Today Magazine in its "Best Of" issue.

And the garden center has definitely helped to spark growth in its turf and

landscaping business. It's a result of cross-marketing, which leads to cross-customers. If a customer comes into the garden center looking for advice on plants, they then decide that RSC should also design and install those plants.

"The garden center is really the reason why the event centers started," Cordrey explains. "We would often have guest speakers and classes, so we needed a place for the speakers, but our spaces ended up nicer than anyone thought they would be. Others began asking if we would rent them out, so we did, though there's been a learning curve: we've gone from landscapers to wedding planners."



This large residential water feature gently tumbles 85 feet along the edge of this property that RSC Landscaping beautified and maintains.

Perhaps it's all part of "new school" thinking. Cordrey, 24, beefed up and greatly improved the company's web presence. Prior to his efforts the company sported a small website for the garden center that required the expensive of an outside vendor to change. Cordrey updates the firm's site now, which he can easily do.

And, he's introduced RSC to social media. It has a presence on Facebook, Twitter and the newest social media site, Four Squares. "It's one thing to have a Facebook page, but it's another to keep it constantly updated," Chris says. "We want to constantly put up the information we want, and clients want. We want followers. We want daily interest."

He's also proud of a web-based newsletter he's developed that now reaches 1,000 clients monthly. Before, RSC's email list was stuck at a couple hundred addresses and a text-only email blast would go out a couple times a year. Now, through a company called Pink Monkey, the monthly eight-page newsletter is specifically tailored to customer's interests: gardening tips and recommendations based on a given month and season as connected with RSC's services.

There's also a favorite landscape of the month category, and plenty of other teasers to connect to the company's website. The newsletters also promote upcoming classes at the event centers, and include personal stories of RSC employees, which helps put a face on the family-oriented company. All electronic, it's cost-free (other than time), and Cordrey says the "open" rate is high. He can also check how long a viewer spent on the newsletter, what they clicked on, and where that viewer is located.

In March each year, RSC has also been hosting a customer appreciation event. Last year, even in the pouring rain, 300 people attended. "Sometimes, [the company elders] don't always understand everything I'm doing," Cordrey admits. "But they never question me. They've been super supportive."

Rick says, "Chris is from the new generation. He's added all the new stuff I didn't, or wouldn't, understand. We get a huge number of comments, especially about the newsletter. What he's doing is working."

There's room for further expansion, too. Richard still owns 200 acres of farmland across from company headquarters. Thus far, the Cordreys have established community gardens that are donated as space for families in need who either don't have the space or money to garden on their own, and the excess is donated to food pantries.



Who wouldn't be tempted to stop for a Big Mac at this McDonald's in Delaware thanks to the incredible floral landscape installed by RSC Landscaping?

The family has also begun the Cordrey Charities, a nonprofit foundation funded through fundraising and personal family contributions to engage local schools – typically second-graders – in the advantages of plant education. “It's our newest adventure,” Rick says. “It's cool to give back, and now we can and have.” For more information, visit www.rsclandscaping.com, www.eastcoastgardencenter.com or www.thecordreycenter.com.

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