

# Focusing on Landscape Health



Source: [www.TurfMagazine.com](http://www.TurfMagazine.com)

Growing Concerns succeeds with dedicated, multi-skilled techs



[Click image to enlarge.](#)

Randy and Robyn James founded Growing Concerns in 1992 to offer tree care. They've since expanded and provide plant health services for turf, ornamentals and trees.

Photos courtesy of Growing Concerns.

When Randy James started Growing Concerns, he only did tree work. Then he added turf and ornamentals. That's not the typical route in landscape industry growth, but this is not the typical company.

James and his wife and business partner, Robyn, are both Kansas State University (KSU) graduates. With a consumer economics major, she's the numbers person. James has an undergraduate degree in horticulture, specializing in plant protection, a customized program incorporating insect and disease pathology.

After 12 years of working for others, the couple launched their company in Kansas City, Kan. Three years later, they moved to Manhattan, Kan., with a three-part goal: help support a campus ministry program; establish a branch of the company; and enable James to earn his master's degree from KSU in plant pathology. They achieved all three.

The Kansas City location continues and is operated by Kevin Kremer. James describes Kremer as "a great employee and very smart guy." Initially, James spent one day a week working with Kremer. Over time, the Manhattan operation expanded to include additional services. Kremer continued the focus on tree care, and James spent less time at the Kansas City branch.

## **Growing Concerns Landscape Management**

**Owners and Partners:** Randy and Robyn James

**Founded:** 1997

**Headquarters:** Manhattan, Kan.

**Markets:** Manhattan, Kan., and surrounding communities

**Services:** Turf management, tree & shrub management, irrigation management, and night light management

**Programs:** HealthTree, HealthTurf, HealthScape

**Employees:** 11

**Website:** <http://www.growingconcerns.com>

"The markets were different; the services were different. The time was right for a split," says James. The sale became official in February of 2013, with Kremer licensed to use the company name for two years.

With his focus exclusively in Manhattan, James updated the website. "Our mission and purpose as stated now are better aligned with what we do and want to do. Landscape management, not landscape maintenance – small word, big difference. We're more concerned with the science of plant health, overall property beauty and order, and client relationships than performing a task on a to-do list."

That puts health first, as in HealthTree, James' term for the company's tree service offerings. When he added lawn care, Healthturf was born. Then came Healthscape. It encompasses the bundle of landscape management services, everything but mowing and snow removal. He'd rather have fewer clients and do more for each one, than a multitude of the smaller, one-service clients.

"It's operating landscape management like concierge medicine, with skilled technicians handling the broad scope of services. That's what we're working toward," says James.

"But we do welcome that initial opportunity to provide a single service. We do one thing, do it well, and consider it the lure on the line.' HealthScape is a win-win. They want it. They just don't know they do," he adds.

Manhattan, with a population just under 55,000, is a conservative college town where even the affluent mow their own lawns.



"That's our niche. If all you want to do is mow your own lawn, we're the company for you," says James. "With a \$10,000 riding mower, cutting the grass is fun – weeding flower beds, not so much."

James does work with subcontractors for those that don't want to mow, selecting companies with standards and service quality that match his. "Those companies bill us and we bill the client. It's a seamless package for them."

He defines his market as residential, but expands that to commercial buildings that operate like a residential account, with one contact person and similar expectations for quality service. He puts sororities and fraternities, many of them clients, in the same category.

## **Everyone an owner**

Too many companies give employees the responsibility, but not the capability. At Growing Concerns everyone is treated as an owner with rights as well as responsibilities.

James says, "Early in my career, I sat in the spit zone of a Charles Vander Kooi presentation. He drilled in the systems of organization, bidding, estimating, what good entrepreneurs should do, and it made sense for me. So we have an open-book policy. Our staff knows the overhead for the year, month, week, day and hour; knows when we break even; the profit figure we're shooting for; my salary.

"Their performance impacts those numbers. It's all tied to the profit sharing, retirement plan, driving a company truck."

Growing Concerns has a fleet of nine trucks, including James', and a bucket truck. Of those, only two are dedicated to a full-time service. "In an effort to have trucks our staff can use as personal vehicles to meet our technician compensation package goal, we opted for a three-quarter-ton truck plus trailer approach. We have four cargo trailers (sprinkler service, injection, seeding, tree spray) and four open trailers (landscape enhancement, brush, mulching, etc.). That allows any technician to do any service on any given day and stay in their own truck. At night, they drop off the trailer and drive their truck home."

To successfully operate that way takes the right people: educated, dedicated and skilled. "That's our team and we post their bios on our website," says James. "Each has an area of focus that best matches their strengths to the services we provide. While we use that to our best advantage, we also make sure everyone is involved in all aspects of what we do. It helps them better understand the big picture and how each segment augments the others."

James concentrates on in-house sales and pathology diagnosis, spending one to two days a week in the field. As a certified arborist, he handles the majority of the big tree work, including sprays and injections.

Ron Moretti is operations manager, spending about half his time on estimates and production management and the remainder as a sprinkler service technician.

Two staff members are designated applicators, with the application breakdown about 80 percent turf and 20 percent ornamentals. One technician concentrates

on landscape enhancement, always working with a helper. These are typically small projects for those on the HealthScape program, ranging from planting a tree to installing a new bed or working with night lighting. The final full-time technician does sprinkler service and detailing, as well as some enhancement work.

Susan Schnieders is the client care specialist. Robyn handles the payables, receivables, payroll, taxes, insurance, licenses and anything else on the numbers side, James says. "She's also my counsel; playing the devil's advocate when we consider new ideas. That's another vital role in growing the business."

The entire staff participates in the weekly training session, with 30 minutes on biology and 30 minutes on the business. "We set a timer for 30 minutes so I don't get carried away on the biology part," says James. "This year overall income will take a hit, with the sale of the Kansas City branch. We'll have some overhead drop, but not much. Our staff knows what we did and why, so it's not a shock and everyone's onboard on board to make up the difference."



[Click image to enlarge.](#)

Growing Concerns Landscape Management relies upon experienced applicators to manage the health of its clients' trees, turf and ornamentals.

## **New services a fit?**

Adding new services is one way to close the gap and still deliver the controlled growth and designated profit margin.

James says, "We're very disciplined in our analysis of new services. We've developed spreadsheets, tracking every service that we currently provide on a daily and hourly basis across the 12 months of the year. In that format, it's easy to see where we're heavy on work and where we're light. Strategically, we're trying to minimize the peaks and valleys."

Another factor is scheduled downtime. The entire staff takes a month off, from December 15 to January 15. "Depending on how long an employee has worked with us, one, two or three of those weeks are paid vacation," says James. "It's time away from the business, allowing everyone to decompress and come back energized. That's too valuable to jeopardize and why we don't do snow removal."

Analysis takes place in brainstorming sessions, with the staff engaged in roundtable discussions of multiple factors. Is it a service the company can deliver at a quality level equal to existing services? Is it a service that current clients need or want? Is it a service that would appeal to new clients, potentially expanding the client base? Is this an ongoing service that would be repeated each year? How does the timing of delivering this service plot out across the calendar year compared to the services currently provided?

## **Growing Concerns' 10 Points for Evaluation:**

- 1. Financial Health:** "Are we meeting our quarterly goals; our billings per tech?"
- 2. Client retention:** "We'd like this to be 100 percent."
- 3. Staff retention:** "We hire great people. We need to keep them."
- 4. Staff professionalism:** "Along with formal education and certifications, we consider attitude and actions."
- 5. Referral survey:** "The number one, and only needed question, is: Would you refer me? We plan to ask that this year."
- 6. Property/performance audits:** "Currently my own analysis, though I plan to arrange for candid feedback from an unbiased person on every facet of our firm: production – work quality, equipment, staff, etc.; sales; client care; and even billing."
- 7. Service calls/service complaints:** "A service call is an issue, such as a shovel left behind, where the client noticed, but is not mad. If the client is upset about something not being done, or not done to their satisfaction, that's a complaint."
- 8. Safety issues:** "Was there an accident? Is equipment in proper operating condition?"
- 9. Equipment appearance:** "We have nine trucks and eight trailers. I do the walk-through once a week, checking everything from the DOT sticker to how much dust is on the dash."
- 10. Facilities appearance:** "It's another weekly check. Are the trucks parked straight? Are the offices and shop clean and tidy? Among the core failures of service businesses are dirty trucks, people or dirty mouths."

"If it hits at a time we're already heavily scheduled, it's not a good fit," says James. "That was our verdict on Christmas lighting. The bulk of the installations would take place in October or early November, overlapping the last turf applications and tree fertilization, fall cleanup and sprinkler system winterization. Any problems with the bulbs or lighting system, or requests for additional lighting would most likely occur between December 15 and January 1. Few clients would be willing to wait for mid-January to have their lights taken down."

However, regular outdoor lighting system services were deemed a good fit. The company had the expertise to handle everything from full installation to troubleshooting. And they had already proven their competency with controllers and operating system efficiencies on the irrigation side. Clients saw the value of the service in both safety and landscape enhancement. Spring inspection and repair could start as early as February when the workload was lighter.



[Click image to enlarge.](#)

With the Midwest's frequent thunderstorms, lightning protection is a much appreciated service. It's part of the firm's trademarked HealthTree services.

Dormant pruning was already a good fit, and savvy marketing made it better. Typically, pruning service is requested when autumn leaf fall reveals the plant's branching structure. James says, "When those calls come in, we suggest delaying the pruning until February and offer them a price break to do so. Nearly all take that option. So, by the end of fall we will have booked enough labor hours to cover February."

## **Being the best**

Growing Concerns markets strategically. All trucks display the company name, but it's intentionally low-key, and the phone number is not listed. "We don't want them to look like billboards. To us, that approach doesn't reflect the professional level of our service," he says.

Most new business comes from referrals. "If six degrees of separation is the norm, then it's two here," says James. "That holds you accountable. If you do great work, it pays dividends. If you don't, everyone knows that, too."

James' core vision is for Growing Concerns to be the best residential landscape management firm in Manhattan. "But that's too easy to say and not define," he says. Acknowledging the "great work from great competing firms," he's developed a metric of the 10 attributes the company should have that they can evaluate and compare. Of course, it's shared with the staff.

"Hypothetically comparing our evaluation of those points to our top competitors, do we score equal to or better than them. We want to be better," he says.

The bottom line for James is a quote from a professor he read in a Kansas City Star article. He has it framed on his office wall: "It takes about 10 years to do anything well."

James says, "I hope that's an average. It took us about 12 years to define what we wanted to do and determine how to do it effectively. The landscape industry is challenging and rewarding, the best of professions. We need to remember that we are professionals, and act, carry ourselves and charge that way. I'm proud of our image and reputation. That's the encouragement for us in this industry, to have a vision and keep it."

Suz Trusty is a partner with her husband, Steve, in Trusty & Associates, Council Bluffs, Iowa. She has been involved in the green industry for over 40 years. Contact her at [suz@trusty.bz](mailto:suz@trusty.bz).