

# 'We just can't stop growing'

**Y**our customer list includes 60 Homeowner Associations (HOAs) and 120 residential clients, and all told, you mow between 400 and 500 acres of grass a week. Not bad for being in business only 10 years. Isn't it about time you slow down?

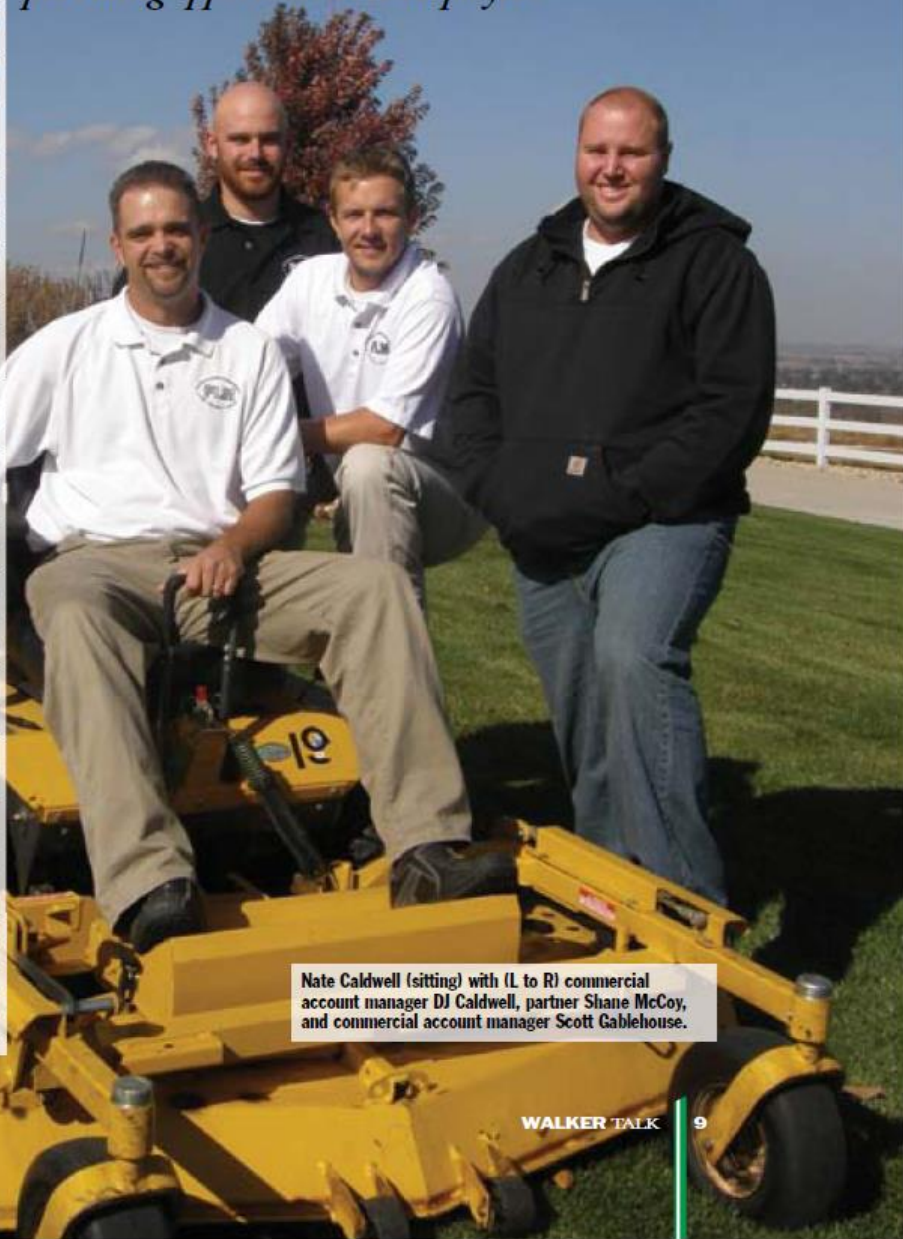
The answer to that question is an unequivocal "NO" from Nate Caldwell and Shane McCoy, co-owners of Foothills Landscape Maintenance (FLM) in Windsor, Colorado. The long-time friends-turned-partners are all about growing, doing quality work, and giving opportunities to employees.

"Once you start growing, you can't stop," says Caldwell. "You have to be able to offer employees a chance for advancement if you expect to keep them."

The young, energetic company has plenty of room for growth and opportunity. It fields seven mow crews, three "roamer" crews for mulch and enhancement jobs, two spray crews, three sprinkler crews and two "native" mowing crews. Of the 40 employees, there are six certified landscape technicians on board and two licensed chemical applicators. The company gladly pays for educating employees through continuing education classes and seminars.

"We want to be a full-service company and take the responsibility off the shoulders of our property manager customers," Caldwell says. "You can't do this unless you have trained and educated employees. Shane and I continually remind our employees that they will be the only landscaper to visit

*But for this Colorado company, success is just as much about performing quality work and providing opportunities to employees.*



Nate Caldwell (sitting) with (L to R) commercial account manager DJ Caldwell, partner Shane McCoy, and commercial account manager Scott Gablehouse.



**RIGHT:** Included in FLM's Walker Mower lineup are five Super B's with 60-inch side-discharge decks for wide-area mowing.

**BOTTOM:** Shane (left) and Nate admit that inefficiencies became more pronounced as their business grew.



their properties all day. The way the properties look when they leave is their responsibility, totally.”

#### **WHATEVER IT TAKES**

The owners' story is a bit unusual. Both have degrees in fish and wildlife biology, and were working for a fish hatchery when they learned their jobs could be in jeopardy. Caldwell relates, “Shane and I were repairing a roof at the hatchery when we decided it was time to do something else. On a hunch, we rented an aerator. In one weekend we made \$1,000 aerating lawns.”

That was all the incentive the two friends needed. They made up some fliers and purchased a used trailer, along with what Caldwell describes as some

“cheap mowers.” Before spring 1999 came to a close, they had said goodbye to one career and hello to another by registering their company.

For the first three years, Caldwell and McCoy worked alone doing, as they explain, “anything it took to get the job done.” During that time, they had two important breaks. They met Walker Mower dealer, Dan's Small Engine in nearby Fort Collins, and were later introduced to a big client who gave them their first big account.

“Dan Dettman encouraged us to upgrade to commercial-quality equipment, so we bought a couple of Toro mid-size walk mowers before actually getting our first Walker, a used 1986 model with a 42-inch GHS deck for

\$3,000,” explains Caldwell. “We called her Betsy, and still use the mower to this day. In fact, we may have the mower bronzed when it finally quits running.”

Betsy set a good example. One Walker Mower led to another, and today FLM crews operate 13 Walker Mowers, including five Super B's with 60-inch side-discharge decks. Most of the mowers can be equipped with snowblades for the unpredictable and often harsh Colorado winters. The company also owns two Walker snowthrowers and three dethatcher attachments. In addition to the Walker Mowers, Caldwell says they use five Wright Standers, primarily for hilly terrain, and two John Deere tractors for rough mowing.





Sisters Amanda McCoy (left) and Kristina Stoner keep the office running smoothly.

The company's other big break came when they met a property developer who awarded them their first HOA. "It was a big learning curve for us, but a great learning experience," recalls McCoy. "When we didn't know how to do something, we hired it out, and learned by observing and paying close attention."

Caldwell and McCoy were excellent students. In addition to the initial service mainstays of aeration and mowing, FLM offers turf care, irrigation repair, tree care, landscape

renovation, bed care, annual flowers and mulching. The company has even rented sweepers to clean parking lots.

Natural-born communicators, the co-owners quickly discovered what it would take to be a success in the HOA market, getting themselves in front of the right people at the right time.

They started to regularly attend HOA board meetings, educating board members about what their company was doing to keep their properties in top shape. They would perform monthly property inspections and send

reports, with photos, back to the board.

With more HOA clients came a monthly newsletter to keep customers up to date. Now FLM has a Facebook page ([www.facebook.com/foothills.landscape](http://www.facebook.com/foothills.landscape)) to expedite communication between the company and its clients.

#### GROWING PAINS

Caldwell and McCoy admit that aggressive growth can be challenging. "The bigger we get, the more pronounced our inefficiencies become," says McCoy. "Right now, we're focusing on being more efficient with our labor, which is our biggest expense. We've strived to reduce downtime at the shop and more accurately budget hours on projects, giving crew members goals to reach."

"We've also discovered that smaller crews are more efficient, taking ours down from four to three," adds Caldwell. "To minimize overtime, we mow five days a week, but rotate crews through four-day workweeks. Ideally, individual employees work only four days a week while our mowers work five days. Poor Betsy!"

The program is working. The company is growing organically by word of mouth, and the bottom line is healthy enough to afford the partners the ability to purchase a large parcel of land just outside of town. They've also just opened a branch location in Cheyenne, Wyoming.

The highly motivated team includes commercial account manager Scott Gablehouse (one of the company's CLTs), account manager DJ Caldwell, operations manager Aaron Towne, McCoy's wife Amanda (director of internal operations), and Amanda's sister, office manager Kristina Stoner.

"You can't assemble a talented staff unless you can provide growth opportunity," says Caldwell. "We've been fortunate. Despite the economy, we've been able to create career opportunities for our employees. For that reason alone, we just can't stop growing." 