

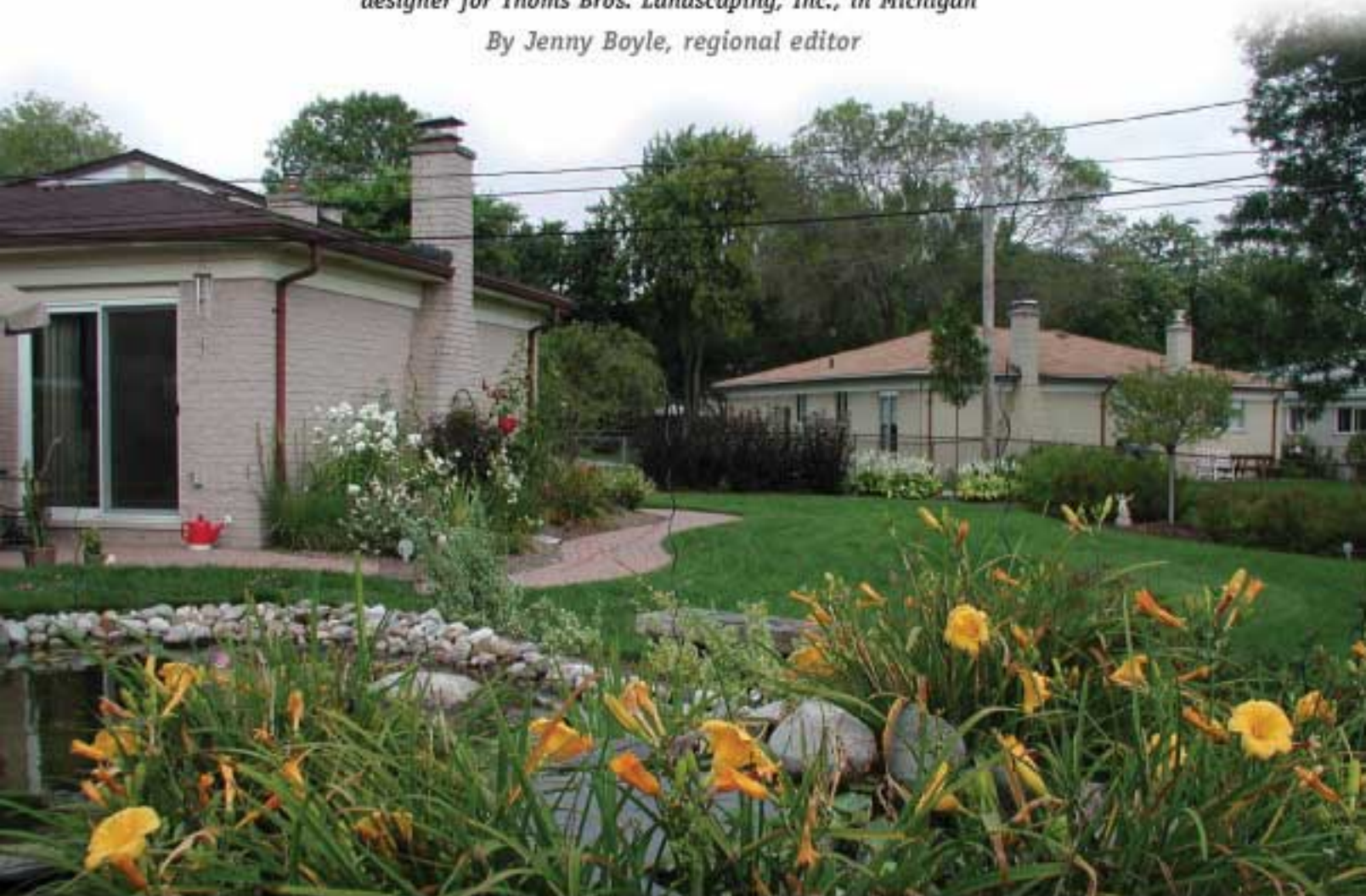
TWO BROTHERS

— one goal —

SUCCESS

An exclusive interview with Steve Thoms, vice president and landscape designer for Thoms Bros. Landscaping, Inc., in Michigan

By Jenny Boyle, regional editor



What was once a way for two Michigan high school kids to earn a little extra cash, became an incredibly successful, award-winning business.

Scot and Steve Thoms are co-founders of Thoms Bros. Landscaping Inc., and they have

made a name for themselves over the past 17 years with their full-service capabilities for residential, multi-residential, and commercial clients. We interviewed Steve Thoms, vice president and the man behind design and construction, to find out how they maintain a business that grows with each passing year.

Left: In December 2004, Thoms Bros. received a Gold Award from the Michigan Green Industry Association for their work on this residence. The home was previously in very poor shape. The homeowner had been living there since the house was built in the mid-70s. She was looking to revive the property by adding color—as seen in the Stella D’Oro Daylilies—privacy from neighbors, the brick paver patio and walkway features, and the serenity of the waterfall and pond. The project was phased into three years and the client was so happy with the service and the results that she has since referred Thoms Bros. to many others.

Thoms says it didn’t take his brother and him long to figure out how lucrative a career in landscaping could be.

“Plus,” he says, “it was a natural for me since I loved being outdoors, creating, drawing, being with people, and being my own boss.”

He received his bachelor’s degree in business administration from Davenport University and got an associate degree in landscape design from Oakland Community College. Then in 1988, he and Scot—who has an associate degree in business management and serves as the company’s president—started their first company, S&S Lawn Maintenance. By 1991, they became Thoms Bros. Landscaping, Inc., a complete landscape design, build, and management service. The move to incorporate was a natural one because many of their clients at the time expressed a need for an all-in-one company. The Thoms brothers had already built up a large network of people who specialized in areas they did not, so the change to a full-service company seemed a natural progression. Over the years, they have made lasting relationships with their clients while experiencing growths from five percent to 50 percent in gross sales.

Maintaining Clients

The Thoms brothers have made a business out of knowing people. Thoms says most of their customers want a full-service landscape contractor and because they understand this need they have built strong relationships with their sub-contractors.

“The majority of our maintenance customers are high-end residential who expect the best,” says Thoms. “With our sub-contractors we are able to offer our customers anything they need for their yards. If one of our customers asks for an unusual request, be it statue reconditioning or party tents, we are able to use our vast networking resources to locate a qualified contractor or supplier.”

Thoms believes this factor often gives them an edge up on the competition, especially for their clients that don’t care to dabble in the details of organizing several different people to get various jobs done on the property. In one phone call, their clients can get everything they need.

This is a 12-foot by 18-foot pond with a two-foot-high waterfall. The pond uses the Aquascapes system, minimizing maintenance for the homeowner. Since the pond was to be located in the rear yard of an existing landscape, all materials were transported with wheelbarrows. Michigan fieldstone boulders and cobblestone are used here for the pond feature. Several types of water plants, including hardy water lilies, are used inside the pond



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Many colors, textures, and shapes were brought in to enhance this large home located on several acres of prime real estate. When choosing new plants, shade had to be taken into consideration due to the Northern exposure and the density of the mature oak and maple trees that already existed on the property. The customer desired a wide pallet so the crew added varieties including annuals like impatiens, begonias, and coleus; and shrubs like Duetzia, Yew, and Globe Colorado Spruce.

"And," he says, "they can have full faith that we will get the job done."

Currently, Thoms Bros subs-out its irrigation installation and maintenance work to two highly qualified contractors.

"We use two for geographic purposes only," says Thoms. "One contractor services our west side customers, and the other, the eastside."

They also contract out all of their lawn, tree, and shrub fertilizer/pesticide care services. Thoms says they do have two certified pesticide applicators on staff, but they are utilized for ornamental bed weed control.

Being a design/build firm allows the Thoms brothers to constantly offer suggestions to customers on how they can improve their outside surroundings. Thoms gives an example of the devastating Emerald Ash Borer in Michigan. This borer was brought over from Asia and has wreaked havoc on the large population of ash trees in the area, some of which exist on the properties of the clients Thoms Bros. services. Smaller trees are already being removed due to the cost of defense, but Thoms says they are making efforts to save the larger, more established specimen and to also plant a wide range of alternative trees.

"We try to let our customers know that if they have a large tree in their landscape that is really worth saving, there are preventative measures if they are willing to pay," he says. "Nothing's been proven, but our efforts have shown effectiveness in the past couple years that we've been treating the ash trees."

Thoms says that extra care and concern is a necessity when servicing customers like theirs. Many of their customers are located in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, which is located in Oakland County, the second richest county in the country. Most of the homes they service sit on several acres and are worth in the millions.

"Being such affluent and successful individuals, they need show-stopping landscapes," says Thoms.

The Thoms brothers insist on making regular visits to job sites to ensure things are running on schedule and that their customers remain happy. "Through these visits, and with phone calls," Thoms says, "we keep in contact with customers and find out how we can improve our services and their landscape. Many of our customers have been with us for over 10 years, so we have built strong relationships."

Along with high-end residential accounts, they also service many condominium complexes.

"Going from one boss to over 100 can sometimes be difficult," says Thoms. "But with constant communication between foreman, board members, and the property manager, we are able to offer the same quality that we give our residential customers."

Thoms says many of their condo and homeowner associations also utilize their snowplowing services in the winter.

"We have found this to be a valuable way to offer customers year round services," he says.

With over 100 driveways located in these communities, they specialize by using equipment such as skid loaders with snow blowers and trucks with back-dragging snowplows. Thoms says the high level of service helps them retain many customers in their highly competitive market.

He says they have never advertised their maintenance services because their reputation precedes them.

"Relying on referrals brings us the customers we want and being referred by a long time customer gives us confidence in the relationship that we will have with our new accounts," he says.

Maintaining Excellence

At Thoms Bros, they strongly believe in the importance of certification and education in their industry. The company offers paid educational courses to its employees and encourages its staff members to take seminars that will further benefit the company and themselves.

"Our industry is often thought of in a negative aspect," says Thoms. "We are thought of as not very professional or educated when compared to, say, an electrician who has to go to school."

He says this has a lot to do with the fact that landscaping is such an entry-level industry.

"Really, anybody with a pick-up truck can start a landscape business," he says. This is one instance when certifications become of value. Thoms uses the fact that his company is certified as a selling point when dealing with new clients.

"Educating customers on the process of certifications will increase their confidence and respect for you, your company, and the industry," he says. "For example, when selling a paver installation job, I inform the

customer on the ICPI certification process. I believe this gives me the upper hand in landing the job—and at a better price.”

Currently there are only two other employees with Interlocking Concrete Pavement Institute, or ICPI, certifications. But the company has strong commitments to rapidly increasing this. Just in the last few years, the Michigan Green Industry Association has brought the Certified Landscape Technician program to their area. Along with plans of the ICPI and CLT, Thoms Bros. will promote the Michigan Certified Nurseryman (MNLA) and Certified Landscape Designer (APLD) with current and future employees.

“In the future,” includes Thoms, “we will offer a plan for employees to attend one of the two landscape/horticultural colleges in the area.”

Thoms is referring to Michigan State University, which has a fully accredited horticulture department offering certification, undergraduate and graduate programs; and Oakland Community College, which offers students the choice of certification or an associate degree in applied science for horticulture.

There is a method to their madness. The employees are a reflection of the company as a whole, so the more qualified they are, the more qualified the company becomes in the eye of the customer.

“We rely on quality through the hard working, highly trained, and passionate individuals that we hire,” says Thoms. “We have a great core of employees and they refer us to other good employees. We very seldom have to do a wide market advertisement for [new hires]”

Thoms also attributes their current successful crew to the fact that 80 percent of the workforce is Latino.

“Their work ethic and family-type personalities have only helped us improve our business,” he says.

Whatever they’re doing to promote excellence, it seems to be working. Recently, in December 2004, Thoms Bros. was honored with a Gold Award for residential landscape construction from the Michigan Green Industry Association. The award was given for work they had done to overhaul a property that had not been refurbished since the mid-70s.

Maintaining The Business

The Thoms brothers have learned much about running a business efficiently and effectively.

“You definitely have to be organized and set systems in place,” says Thoms. “There’s nothing worse that can tear a business down than not having bills paid accurately and on time. We also have to make sure that jobs are completed in a systematic fashion.”

Right: These steps are a limestone-type ledgerock that has become a popular feature in Michigan. The steps lead from the lower backyard patio area to the driveway above. The project was completed with three people, two manually setting the steps while the other operated a skid loader to set the 1000 to 3000 pound pieces of stone. This type of step work is perfect for the natural setting.



Left: Workers build a Michigan Fieldstone (granite based) boulder wall in this terraced yard. A previous timber wall had rotted away, leaving the ground to erode into the lawn area. The New Holland LX885 is being used to haul the boulders from the front yard to the construction area where the employees manually position the two- to three-foot sized boulders in place. This project took approximately two days, using 40 tons of boulders.





These Oak Romanesque pavers are surrounded by *Taxus x media* *Densiflora* shrubs. The grass in the yard is a Kentucky Blue Grass blend originating from dirt back sod. The design was by request of the homeowner for a flowing, curvilinear design, which included this elevated paver patio. The patio was elevated over three feet with the use of a limestone ledgerrock. On the far side of the patio limestone steps lead to a lower patio from the walkout basement.

Every business has its frustrations, and Thoms Bros. is no exception.

Thoms says his biggest irritations have been dealing with ineffectual staff members in the past, and also what he calls "low-bidders," or, in other words, people that try to get into somebody's door with the lowest price.

"I have learned to accept low-bidders because I started out that way," he says. "I don't have to be that way now because Thoms Bros. has a great reputation and if a customer wants the lowest price, then that isn't the customer for us."

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As for unsatisfactory employees, Thoms says experience has helped him deal with times when he hasn't had the best crew and he insists this has not been a problem of late.

As for the bookkeeping procedures, Thoms says customers are billed monthly for their services using QuickBooks. Working with high end residential and management firms, he says, means they seldom have problems with late payments. QuickBooks is also utilized for all of their accounting needs, including payroll.

"We have a good book keeper that helps us with billing and accounts payables," says Thoms. "We do not use a routing program as of now, due to the amount of accounts that we have, but we look to implement a program like CLIP as we continue to grow."

Thoms says knowing your numbers is essential to staying alive in this industry. "There are new companies starting up constantly, and if you don't know what to charge, cut, add, or improve, you won't be in business long," he explains. "We constantly strive to improve our accounting and job costing practices by improving our knowledge through seminars and reading."

This devotion to top-notch service shows in the delighted faces of Thoms Bros. clients.

"We charge a good price, and we want them to feel like their money is worth it," says Thoms. "It is such a great feeling when they hand you that last check and you can just see in their eyes how happy they are with the project."

NEW

Below: This Ford F-750 dump truck was custom built for the company. Both sides are fold down for easier access to tools, plant material, boulders, and block. The rear tailgate is three-way for easier dumping of different types of material. The traditional opening is for topsoil and small stones and the barn door-type opening is for large boulders, bark and brush. The tractor is a New Holland 2120 and is being used here for loading shredded bark at the yard. Thoms Bros. stocks its own shredded bark for

consistency and cost. They used over seven semi-loads of bark last year.

Left: Thoms Bros. employs between 12 and 30 individuals depending on the season and the workload. This picture of the snow equipment operator staff was taken in 2001. Currently, they have three more operators and a John Deere skid loader

with a snow blower, a Ford F-350 pickup with a plow, and a Ford F-750 with a plow. On average, Thoms Bros. employs 20 to 30 hand crew personnel to clear sidewalks and next to garage doors. The equipment shown includes a New Holland skid loader with snow blower, a Ford F-450 dump with tailgate salt spreader, a Ford F-250 pickup, a Chevy 3500HD stake truck with "V" bottom salt spreader, a Chevy 2500 pickup, a Dodge 2500 pickup, a Chevy 3500 dump, an enclosed trailer, and a New Holland 2120 tractor.

