

Presents —

Understanding and Preparing for the CLT Field Exam

CLT Field Test Problem: 1.08 Irrigation Program Controller

By Becke Davis

This is the second article in a series that will address problems on the CLT test — how to prepare for the task, how to prepare for taking the test, and how to avoid common problems that occur during testing.

This month, we focus on Problem 1.08 – Program Controller in the core portion of the test. This is a timed problem in which the applicant has 15 minutes to change

the watering program on an irrigation control to water assigned stations (also called zones) at specific days and times for a set period of time. The applicants must also demonstrate how to program the control box manually.

The study reference guide for this test question can be found in Irrigation System Components and Maintenance in the Landscape Training Manual for Installation or Maintenance (Chapter 10) or Irrigation (Chapter 5) Technicians. Study guides may be ordered through the ILCA website or by contacting the association office.

Landscape designer Amy Miller is vice president of Five Points Landscaping in Clare, IL, a company specializing in landscape maintenance. Prior to her work with Five Points, Miller worked for the City of Lake Forest. She earned her CLT in Exterior Maintenance in 1999 and has been involved with judging the test ever since. Four years ago she became a judge's assistant, then a captain, and now she is a judge's coordinator.



When test applicants prepare for the Program Controller problem, Miller says, they need to be aware of the big picture.

“Applicants tend to only look at the problems – they should think about what they would do at a client’s house,” she stresses. “The biggest problem applicants have is that when they read the problem about entering programming information, they go to set up the

program based on the problem as given. They often don’t go back and clear the previous programs or double check that all the other days and times are turned off. There will be lots of other information programmed already, just as it would be at a client’s house. They will set the days to water and the watering times, but they don’t go back to check if something else was already programmed. The applicants are so worried about getting the problem right that they forget to clear it.” Test applicants often forget basic details, too, Miller observes. “One of the biggest problems is that they forget to set the current date and time, and it won’t work without that.”

Peter Gordon has been city forester for the City of Lake Forest for 17 years. He earned his CLT three years ago and is currently a common core captain. “The key is that you have to read and understand the test questions. The number one thing is to clear the controller so that you are starting fresh – start at zero,” he explains. “What happens is that applicants focus on

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one or two program sets and forget there are others in there. They need to understand the directions on the control box because each is a little different — and they may have other buttons to press.

“Also, the test is timed, so budgeting time is very important. There is enough time, but starting from scratch is the key. Follow the instructions and do what is asked so you don’t have to go back and make changes. Applicants are worried about time — there is some pressure, so it’s easy to get confused and make mistakes.”

Some test applicants have little or no experience using irrigation control boxes, and that can pose a serious problem. “You definitely have to have some experience,” says Gordon. “The boxes are all different and a lot are donated [for the test], so we don’t know which ones we’ll have. It’s like a Chevy and a Ford — both will get you down the road, but they have different amenities. If the applicant has only used one kind of control box and they see something new, they get flustered.” The instructions are right there, but applicants don’t always take the time to read them, he notes. “You need to read the directions carefully if you haven’t used it before.” The applicants may not have the opportunity to choose between different brands or models, Gordon says. On test day, they usually try to provide applicants with the same control boxes.

Ken Payne, maintenance supervisor for Thornapple Landscapes, Inc. in Geneva, has been with the company for about seven years. He earned his CLT in 2002 and has been involved in the judging process ever since. “We see a tremendous amount of failures,” he says about the Program Controller test question. “A lot of people have trouble setting the alarm on a digital alarm clock right. If you do that wrong, you get a ‘wake up call’ when you don’t wake up. If the alarm doesn’t come on, you did it

wrong. If that happens, you go back and see what you did wrong and read-just it. It’s the same with the control boxes — you need hands-on experience, you have to physically play with it.” Payne notes that the judges try not to confuse the test applicants.

“On retake, we want to get these people through, but some people have no clue at all. We could set it up correctly and they still wouldn’t pass,” he says. “We aren’t trying to trick them, we are just trying to make it more like the real world. We try not to put a lot of programs on the control boxes when they are retaking the test, but the applicants may still confuse start time and zone time. Some old clocks had a function to ‘clear all programs,’ but the newer ones don’t have this.” Payne says he thinks that the Irritrol, Hunter ICC and Hunter ProC are the easiest to use, if the applicants have a choice.

Test applicants who have not had experience using the control boxes have more difficulty, and even those with experience can get confused while taking the test. “Some applicants have no clue what they are doing,” says Payne. “They forget to clear the programs or they forget to set the current date and time. Some have problems with the questions.”

One part of the test requires applicants to manually activate a particular zone, and while this is only a part of the test, many are thrown by it. “Some applicants have no idea how to do it manually,” says Payne. “They can get three-quarters of the test right and then they get to this zone question. The different brands of control boxes work differently. On some, you just turn the dial to ‘run’ — very simple. The instructions are in the box on the lid, but applicants are under pressure, there’s someone behind them, so they don’t read the instructions. No sprinkler comes up, so they don’t know if it’s working, either — in the field you would know. In real life, you’d know if it’s working or not

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– if it comes on, it’s right.”

When training or preparing for the test, applicants should watch for things like setting the wrong date or time, or a.m. instead of p.m. “The symbols are very small and in a dim situation. Unless you have really good eyesight, you can’t see them. You have to remember to check or it will throw you off by twelve hours,” Payne explains. “Many applicants get confused with zone (station) time and start time – you can have up to eight start times on some clocks. Some think Start 1 is Zone 1, Start 2 is Zone 2 – they get confused with the numbers even though the numbers are in different places on the clock. They have to be careful which zone they are programming. Programs A, B and C, for example, could each have up to eight start times. It depends which zones are on which programs. There could be three start times for Zone A, one for Zone B and two for Zone C.”

It is strongly suggested that applicants try to get hands-on experience with different brands of control boxes before they take the test. “They need real world experience,” Payne stresses. “Learn how to manually operate the box, set up a basic program. Set it for five minutes from now and see if it comes on.” 🌿



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CLT Field Test Problem: 1.10 Lateral Repair and Head Adjustment

By Becke Davis

This is the third article in a series that will address problems on the CLT test — how to prepare for the task, how to prepare for taking the test, and how to avoid common problems that occur during testing.

This month, we focus on Test Problem 1.10: Lateral Repair and Head Adjustment. For this problem, CLT candidates are presented with a situation where they arrive at a job site and learn that there is a problem with an underground sprinkler pipe. The candidate must locate the problem, flush the system, and adjust three different sprinkler heads to ensure proper coverage.

The study reference guide for this test question can be found in Irrigation System Components and Maintenance in the Landscape Training Manual for Installation or Maintenance (Chapter 10) or Irrigation (Chapter 5) Technicians. Study guides can be ordered through the ILCA website or by contacting the association office.

The test is divided into five parts. In the first part, the test candidate is asked to turn on the water to locate the broken water line. In part two, the candidate will review the irrigation process to assess the broken lateral and sprinkler heads. Part three requires the candidate to properly repair the sprinkler head, test the repair, flush the lines, adjust and clear the sprinklers, then backfill the trench. Part four requires the candidate



to replace all parts and materials that were used in the problem and restore them to their original condition. Finally, in part five, the candidate must properly adjust three sprinkler heads, as directed by the judge, for proper spray of a given area.

Terry Holum, regional account manager for Landscape Concepts Management, Inc. in Grayslake, has been a judge for

this portion of the CLT test for about three years. Landscape Concepts is a full-service landscape company with its own in-house irrigation staff. As a company, they have been actively involved in irrigation testing overall, but Holum specializes in the Lateral Repair test question.

As with the other CLT test questions previously featured, there are common mistakes made on this part of the test, too — mistakes of omission as well as commission. The first thing for a test candidate to remember, Holum stresses, is “safety first.” “Starting with that is what I might call a rookie mistake,” he says. “Whenever you are using sharp tools and instruments, remember to protect yourself. Number one is wearing gloves, but many applicants are skipping this.” Holum speculates that “it might feel more comfortable to work with bare hands.”

The judges aren’t trying to sneak this point past the applicants, he says. “All the safety equipment is there on the table in

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full view. They grab the safety glasses and the gloves, but they don't put them on. They need to slow down and think – there is adequate time for them to settle down and think rationally. This is a half-hour test module, but they can really do all these items in 15 minutes. Safety comes first – protect your body.

“Once they get past that, most candidates can fix the leak, it's not problematic. The next step after doing the repairs is to clear debris by flushing the line. It's very commonly overlooked to flush out debris that may have fallen into the pipe during the repairs – dirt or rubber shavings – from working underground. This is the second biggest problem, candidates overlooking this whole step. The people who forget just skip over this whole step completely – my impression is they don't even know they should be doing it.”

The third most common problem relates to adjusting sprinkler heads, he says. “The thing that messes up many candidates is the adjustment of different heads – there are three heads that each adjust in a different method. The thing most applicants say is that they have no experience with irrigation, so they convince themselves that they may not pass. They just haven't been exposed to these systems, and it's hard to get this information out of a book. They need to go out in the field and physically adjust a head themselves to see how it works – just go out and do it.”

There are two kinds of candidates for this test problem, says Holum. “There are those with no experience who are very humble, and those who

are confident. The candidates who do the best are confident. The people with field experience tend to pass, although they may forget to use the safety equipment. The way the test is weighted, some of the safety things could bring you close to failing. If you don't make sure the points are facing down on rakes, if you don't use gloves or

safety glasses, the deduction could put you on the verge of failure.”

For test questions previously discussed, the importance of the study guide

was stressed. For this question, hands-on experience is the key.

“I would recommend if candidates have an irrigation technician in their company, maybe spend a half hour with them to see which adjustment tool is appropriate for each type of sprinkler head. A lot of people do not do any kind of preparation. They think, ‘I'm going to wing it.’ But just a half hour could make the difference between passing and failing.”

Holum enjoys judging this test question, even though it has a few drawbacks, he says. “You get wet! You get soaked by the end of the day, but I find it very enjoyable. The landscape contracting industry is not generally comfortable with the irrigation portion of the test. It's a great test to judge because you get to move around, you're not just sitting in a chair – you have to actively watch the candidates.” Holum also enjoys judging because it is a way of showing his support for ILCA. “It's important to raise the bar, to professionalize the green industry,” he says. 🌿



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Understanding and Preparing for the CLT Field Exam

CLT Field Test Problem: 1.12 Tree Planting, Staking and Guying

By Becke Davis

This is the fourth article in a series that will address problems on the CLT test — how to prepare for the task, how to prepare for taking the test, and how to avoid common problems that occur during testing.

This month, we are focusing on Problem 1.12 – Tree Planting, Staking and Guying in the core portion of the test. This is a timed problem in which the applicant has 30 minutes to plant a

tree, stake it, or use guy wires. The study reference guide for this test question can be found in Plans and Planting in the Landscape Training Manual for Installation or Maintenance (Chapter 6) or Irrigation (Chapter 11) Technicians. Training manuals can be ordered through the ILCA website or by contacting the association office.

Dan Klindera, vice president of Autumn Tree Care Experts, Inc. in Glenview, has been a CLT judge for eight or nine years. He has judged many test problems, including Tree Planting, Staking and Guying in 2004 and 2007. He says that safety is the number one area where test applicants make critical mistakes. “Safety is such a big part of the scoring, you can lose a lot of points there. This is true for all of the test questions.

Failure to use proper protective equipment is the first major way to lose points. If you forget to put on eye protection and gloves – right off the bat, you lose points.”

Care and handling of equipment is another category test



applicants need to watch. “If you throw down your equipment, it can bounce around,” says Klindera. “You need to handle it properly, making sure to put the tines facing downward.” Personal safety is important in more areas than just equipment use, Klindera observes, noting that you can lose points for improper lifting. “You need to bend your knees, lift with your knees, and put force on your knees

rather than your back.”

Safety is such a big concern, some test applicants will even bring their own equipment, says Klindera. “That doesn’t get you extra points, but it’s easier because you won’t forget to put on something like safety glasses, gloves or a hard hat. You don’t need ear protection for this test question, but you do for some problems, such as the chain saw question.”

It’s hard for test applicants to go wrong if they prepare using the study guide, Klindera stresses. In addition, specific directions are on the instruction sheet at the testing station, he points out. “If you read the directions and look at the study guide, there shouldn’t be any surprises,” he says.

While the test question and instructions focus on tree planting, staking and guying, logistics make the actual test a little different from the description, Klindera explains. “We may test 30 people on tree planting in a single day. If they were all

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planting trees and demonstrating this from beginning to end, we wouldn't be able to reuse the tree. You can't necessarily plant 30 trees in one day, so we probably plant and replant three trees. The test applicants have to tell us what they would be doing if they were really planting a tree from start to finish."

As long as they explain it correctly, they'll do fine, he says. But the problem is that applicants often forget things when they try to tell the judge what has to be done. When they actually perform the task, Klindera says, the repetitive motion may lead them to do things automatically — things that they might forget to mention when talking to the judge. "Everything is in the study guide, and detailed instructions are there on test day, available to the applicants."

In general, test applicants are fine with the staking and guying sections of the test, Klindera says, as long as they follow the detail. "Unless they have no idea what they are doing, the detail is clearly right there. They just have to remember to read the test question thoroughly — and they can even ask to see the question again. The test was designed as if they were to get a set of instructions from a foreman or supervisor on the job. This way, it's not 100

percent memory. They can check the specifications."

Peter Gordon, city forester for the City of Lake Forest, is a CLT common core captain who has spent four to five years judging this test question and others. Like Klindera, Gordon says that it's common for test applicants to go

wrong on safety issues. "They assume it's just tree planting, and they forget safety glasses and gloves, or they may just grab one or the other. Because it doesn't involve a piece of machinery, they may think safety is secondary."

Lifting is another area of concern, says Gordon. "Some applicants will just grab the tree without thinking of the proper techniques of bending and lifting. They are ner-

vous, focusing on how to plant the tree and not on the safety issues. It's a pretty safe bet that if the safety equipment is on the testing table, the judges are going to want you to use it. When applicants think of chain saws, they automatically think of safety — they may not think about it when they are planting a tree."

Gordon says another common mistake relates to proper watering of the tree. "There is no hose at the test site so applicants have to make a verbal response. They have to tell the judge



the tree should be watered infrequently with deep soakings, which is better than shallow and frequent watering. Some may say something like, 'Well, add a gallon of water,' which may not be sufficient on a hot summer day as opposed to a cool fall day."

The manner in which equipment is used is another important issue, Gordon says. "There's a proper way to put down a shovel or a spade so it can't flip up. With a rake, the tines should be face down." Test applicants are required to create a tree ring and stake the tree, and he notes, "They usually get that right."

Gordon stresses the importance of completely reading the question while the test applicants are still at the table. "If they forget something, they can go back, but they should thoroughly read it first. It's a timed test and they get nervous. Safety issues can automatically disqualify you from the test question, especially if you create a hazard or an immediate threat. We would stop the test before someone could injure themselves, we wouldn't let it go that far. Safety is an important part of the test, and it can lead to point deduction."

Gordon says that, while knowledge is the key to the CLT testing, safety is actually more important. "It's not a hard test," he says. "It's a lot of talking yourself through it – explain why you want to plant the tree higher than low, explain what you're doing because, due to the time restrictions, you might not be doing what you are explaining."

If the three most important words in real estate are "location, location, location," then the three most important words in CLT testing are "safety, safety, safety." Keep that in mind, use the study guide to prepare for the test, and be sure to read the instructions thoroughly on test day. Following these simple guidelines can help you pass this test with ease. 🌿

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CLT Field Test Problem: 1.14 Chain Saw

By Becke Davis

This is the fifth article in a series that will address problems on the CLT test — how to prepare for the task, how to prepare for taking the test, and how to avoid common problems that occur during testing. This month, we are focusing on Test Problem 1.14: Chain Saw.

In this 15-minute test, the applicant assumes he is not the last person to use

the chain saw and must check everything to ensure that the chain saw can safely be used. This includes explaining the procedures for mixing oil and gasoline and ratios for two-cycle engines. Once the applicant is ready, they will be asked to start the chainsaw and cut a section off of a log.

Not surprisingly, safety is of the utmost importance when using a chain saw. All necessary safety equipment is laid out on a table and should be used. Many applicants bring their own safety equipment because it fits better, but they should check to make sure that they have every piece of equipment that is on the table. If not, they must add the missing equipment to whatever they have brought.

The study reference guide for this test question can be found in General Landscape Equipment Safety and Maintenance in the Landscape Training Manual for Installation, or Maintenance or Irrigation (Chapter 9) Technicians. Study guides can be ordered through the ILCA website or by contacting the association office.

Peter Gordon, city forester for the city of Lake Forest, is a CLT common core captain who has spent not than four years



judging this test question and others. Preparation is critical, he stresses. “People who take the time to read this article and to study for the test will pass,” he says. “With this particular tool, safety is of the utmost importance. Applicants who do not use the safety equipment correctly will end up failing. We tell people to bring their own equipment, as long

as it’s OSHA approved, because it fits better. But they still need to use everything that’s on the table. There are five pieces of safety equipment: a helmet with a safety visor, a set of chaps, safety glasses, ear plugs and gloves. Some applicants bring safety glasses but they don’t bring the face shield, which is required by PLANET for the purposes of the test.”

The judges take no chances with safety, and will not let an applicant put himself at risk. “If there are any safety infractions or if the applicant misses anything, the judge will stop him and will stop the test. No gloves, no ear plugs, no chaps — if they miss any of the safety equipment, they would automatically fail the test,” says Gordon.

In addition to wearing all of the safety equipment, it is important for applicants to know the proper way to mix gas and oil, Gordon explains. Mistakes are often made in the presafety check, he notes. He singles out three common mistakes: “They don’t rotate the chain, they don’t explain about the air filter and all the saw’s characteristics, and they don’t make sure the nuts are tight. The key is to take the judges through the whole process, talk about whatever you can think of. The more

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you tell the judges – if it's accurate — the better it is.

“The applicants have time to explain it in detail and to show it all. Show the throttle and the choke. Early in the day, they should pull out the choke. That may not be necessary later in the day. Make sure the safety brake is on, get in front of the log, assume the position of cutting, then disengage the safety. Your arms are locked and held straight out, the muscles tight to push down on the saw in case it kicks back.

You will then be asked to cut a piece of the log. When you are finished, apply the chain brake, then take off the safety equipment and put it back on the table.”

In addition to all the items already noted, Gordon stresses the importance of checking the chain saw carefully before attempting to use it.

“Check the chain brake, check for slack on the chain. Rotate the chain and lift it up to make sure it snaps back at the bar – that it's snug, not loose. Go over the saw on the ground. Make sure the bar is free of debris and rotates freely. Check that it's sharp, rotate the chain and put on the safety brake.”

Kickback is a serious concern, as

described in a report by the Consumer Product Safety Council. “Chain saw kickback can result in serious injury or death to the person operating the saw. Kickback most often occurs when the saw chain moving around the nose of the guide bar accidentally touches another object such as a log, branch or twig. Contact like this can throw the

chain saw violently back toward the operator. In 1982, kickback was involved in an estimated 24,000 medically-attended injuries to chain saw users.”¹ There were 32,000 chain saw-related

injuries reported in 2004.

Dan Klindera, vice president of Autumn Tree Care Experts, Inc. in Glenview, has been a CLT judge for

nine years, and has judged many test problems. Two years ago, he judged the chain saw portion of the test. “This question is a bit simpler in the scope of what you have to do, but you could easily fail if you don't use proper safety

precautions,” he explains. “With this question, it's as if you walked into your shop and someone says, ‘Use this saw today.’ You have to make sure it's safe enough to use, then start it up, make a cut and you're done – it's very straightforward. You just have to know your saw and know how to use it. To prepare for the test, just learn the



parts of the saw and get some practice with it.”

It sounds simple, but many people fail because they don't make any attempt to prepare for the test. Klindera notes, “When I judged this question, some people just had no clue. They weren't familiar with a chain saw at all. Maybe they didn't have time to study or look at this one. It's pretty much safety related. The judges want to know if the applicant knows how to use it – some people were never taught the right way to use a chain saw in the first place. Some people think, ‘Well, I know how to use a saw,’ but they have to know how to properly use it. The applicant has to check the machine – look for cracks in the housing, loose parts, make sure the air filter is clean and that the chain is in proper order. The important thing is to assess the equipment overall, to determine if it's safe enough to use. We're not going to give them an unsafe machine – that's the communication factor. It's all laid out in the test question.”

What if the test applicant is used to using a particular brand of chain saw, and is unfamiliar with the brand they will be using at the test site? “They have to let the judges know if that is the problem,” says Klindera. “In general, the saws will be mostly the same. But if the applicant is unfamiliar with that particular make or model, he needs to tell the judge. Just say, ‘I'm used to using (whichever brand), I'm looking for the air filter and I'm not finding it.’ The judge will show them where to find it and that will be okay.”

Three things are key to passing this test question: Use all the safety equipment put out on the table at the testing site, learn about the components of the saw and how they are supposed to work, and practice using a chain saw. Doing these things on test day, and accurately explaining to the judge what you are doing, should get you a passing score. 🌿

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CLT Field Test Problem: 2.01 — Plant Layout



This is the sixth article in a series addressing problems on the CLT test — how to prepare for the task itself, how to prepare for taking the test, and how to avoid common problems that occur during testing. This month we focus on Problem 2.01 — Plant Layout. This is a timed problem in which the applicant has 30 minutes to perform the test procedures.

In this portion of the CLT test, applicants are provided with an architect's scale, a measuring tape and a copy of the plan, which is drawn to scale. Working in a planting area 20 feet by 20 feet (6m x 6m), test applicants are instructed to take note of the side from which the plants will be viewed, and then lay out the plants according to the plan. Applicants are allowed to make all their measurements first and write them on the plan supplied by the test judge. Flags can be used to mark the plant locations first. The edge of the bed is marked off with rope or poly line.

In addition to setting out the plants as indicated on the plan, applicants must be aware of how to lift and handle the plants

correctly. Finally, applicants must allow time to dismantle the planting area at the end.

Tim Caldwell of The Savanna Group, Inc. in North Aurora, took the CLT test when it was first offered 12 years ago. He passed all parts of the test on his first try except the instrument portion, which he took and passed in Wisconsin two weeks later. Caldwell has been involved in almost every aspect of the CLT testing program, serving in a number of positions, including judge, judge's coordinator, judge's technical assistant, captain, assistant state chair, and state chair. In addition, he works with the International Certification Committee (ICC) through PLANET.

Caldwell pinpoints four main issues that cause applicants to fail the Plant Layout portion of the test. "The biggest problem we see with Plant Layout is applicants not being able to read their tape measure correctly," says Caldwell. "Another problem

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is when they don't orient their plan according to the design. There is also a safety issue with the manner in which applicants lift plants. The only point deductions for safety are in relation to incorrect lifting. Some applicants don't realize they can ask the judge for assistance with lifting; they just can't ask for help with where the plant is to go.

"Others run out of time because they were not prepared. They are given half an hour to take the test, and it is possible to do it in that time. Some applicants can't read scale so they mismeasure – 1/4 when it should be 1/8 or whatever. They don't know how to convert scale or, in some cases, they have never even seen scale before. Some parts of the CLT test use an engineer's scale, which is in tenths. This portion uses architect's scale given simply — there are no tricks.

"The study guide is the real test – it contains the actual plan used in the test. Applicants can use the study guide to prepare for the test by marking up the plan. They can't take the cheat sheet with them when they take the test, but they can check it before the test begins.

"The Plant Layout test question is fairly easy – it has one of the higher pass rates. The truth is, some applicants may need to study other test questions more because they are harder. This is more of a physical test, moving plants around, measuring it out. It involves more time planning and physical constraints, and applicants can ask for help with that."

Since the test is available in the

study guide, it's hard to understand why anyone would *not* use it. As Caldwell points out, there aren't too



many schools where you're given all the answers before you take the test. Timing may be an issue for some people, he notes. "Sometimes the business owner will sign someone up. The applicant may not even know that he's been signed up until the day before the



test, so he has no time to prepare. Others know about it ahead of time, and may even have a copy of the study guide. They are just too busy to look at it until a day or so before the test."

Caldwell recalls that in his own case, he purchased the study guide and took five or ten minutes to study one page per night for about a month.

Taking time to do this makes sense, he says, because most applicants who fail do so because they didn't prepare. The study reference guide for this test question can be found in *Plants and Planting in the Landscape Training Manual for Installation Technicians* (Chapter 6). Study guides can be ordered through the ILCA website or by contacting the association office. 🌿

Presents —

Understanding and Preparing for the CLT Field Exam

CLT Field Test Problem: 2.02 — Grading and Drainage



By Becke Davis

This is the seventh article in a series addressing problems on the CLT test — how to prepare for the task itself, how to prepare for taking the test, and how to avoid common problems that occur during testing. This month, we focus on Problem 2.02 — Grading and Drainage. **Please note:** As of the June 1, 2008, PLANET will implement its CLT program revisions, and Problem 2.02: Grading and Drainage will be tested under the Hardscape Installation Certification. (In the past, this was a field test only.) Under the new program, Grading and Drainage has both a written test (6.02: Hardscape Principles and Calculations) and a hands-on test (6.06: Grading and Drainage).

The hands-on test is a timed problem in which the applicant has 35 minutes to perform the test procedures.

For this test problem, the applicant will work with a grading

area in a wooden frame that is partially filled with sand. The sand must be added or removed in order to create the contours as specified on a plan provided by the test judge. Applicants are allowed to make their measurements and keep a note of them on a working copy of the plan. Since the test focuses on both grading and drainage, applicants must ensure that all areas of the wooden box drain to the catch basin that they install as part of the test. The tools provided to complete these tasks are an architect scale, an engineer's scale, a long straightedge, a measuring tape and hand tools.

Test applicants are instructed to grade the sand into a mound based on the provided scale detail drawing, finishing the mound to a smooth uniform appearance at the specified elevations. Applicants must also place a catch basin at the proper location and at the specified elevation so that the finished

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project will drain all areas to the catch basin. The study reference for this test question can be found in Instrument, Grading and Drainage in the Landscape Training Manual for Installation Technicians (Chapter 3)

Greg Roos is construction division manager for Bertog Landscape Co. in Wheeling, managing eight to ten crews throughout the year. He has been in the landscape business for 27 years, 15 of those with Bertog. He passed the CLT test in October 2000 and has been involved with the testing ever since. He serves on the CLT test committee, and has served as a judge and/or a judge's technical assistant on numerous test problems, including Grading and Drainage, Instrument, Truck and Trailer, Plant Layout, Plant ID, Sod Installation and irrigation portions of the test.

"One of the problems is that some people don't know how to use the engineer's scale, which is like a wooden collapsible ruler. The triangular architect scale works completely differently," Roos explains. "Test applicants use the architect scale with the scale of the plan to check where the contour lines should stop and start, and to see where the drains should be positioned. They use the engineer's scale for reading the elevation of their contour lines, from the bottom of the board to the top of the contour, according to the plan they are provided."

The size and overall layout of the box used in the test can cause difficulties for test applicants also, Roos observes. "Applicants work in a small box – basically a sandbox. Most are used to working in a large backyard, maybe 100 by 100. They find it difficult to work in a small, tightly condensed area when they're used to working on a larger scale. It's not that they are failing badly – it's the minor little details that cause problems. We're asking test applicants to do this on such a small scale, they don't know how to resolve it.

When I took the test eight years ago, it was like working in a shoebox. In a backyard, you can make it flow much better."



Roos stresses the importance of being able to read both an architect scale and an engineer's scale. "You really need to know how to read an engineer's scale," he says. "The first time I bought one was in preparation for the CLT test – now I use it all the time. It's useful when you're looking at a grading map. If someone in the crew asks, 'How do you know you're supposed to be four inches lower here?' you can show it to them on the engineer's scale. It's not one of the tools people use every day, but it's important that they know how to use it when they take the test."

As always, safety is an issue test applicants need to remember. "Applicants sometimes will leave the tines of steel rakes facing the sky. If you're not wearing heavy shoes, the tines can poke right through them. If someone steps on a rake, it can hit them in the head. Also, the only tools test applicants should have in their pockets are the scales." Although applicants are issued rakes and a shovel, Roos recalls, "When I took the test I didn't use one tool – it was such a small area, I just used my hands. Some applicants spend ten to fifteen minutes trying to rake off the contain-

er, which is really difficult in such a small space."

The test involves both grading and drainage. "The drain we use is like a Tupperware top," Roos explains. "When applicants do their contour lines, it's like they are building a mound two to three feet away from the side board. They are building a horse-shoe-shaped berm – they're not thinking of it, but there's a pocket behind it that ends up holding water. The contours won't allow it to drain. It may seem nitpicky, but if they get the concept of the drainage down, there's no reason they can't pass it. Judges have certain general guidelines they have to look at, and applicants will lose points if they don't have drainage behind the berm. The judges do have some discretion. Applicants have a blank board to double-check the measurements of their grades. The judges have a 'cheat board' that shows the measurements the applicants should have."

In many portions of the CLT test, using the study guide is the best way to prepare. That is not the case with this test question. "With this one, hands-on experience and practice is the key," says Roos. "You can study in a book how to read the grades, but the best thing a test applicant can do is take the sample in the book, which is pretty similar to the actual test, and go out and practice that. They should get used to working in a confined space. Other than that, it's not a difficult test as long as you know how to read an architect scale and an engineer's scale."

Once again, the three things to remember for this test question:

- Make sure you know how to read an architect scale and an engineer's scale;
- Use your tools with safety in mind;
- Practice working in a confined space.

If you observe these three simple things, passing should not be a problem. 🌿

Presents —

Understanding and Preparing for the CLT Field Exam

CLT Field Test Problem: 6.62 — Instrument



By Becke Davis

This is the eighth article in a series addressing problems on the CLT test — how to prepare for the task itself, how to prepare for taking the test, and how to avoid common problems that occur during testing.

Please note: PLANET has changed the certification testing effective June 1, 2008. In the past, there were separate tests for maintenance and installation. Now there will be two different maintenance and two different installation certifications. Test components will include Softscape Installation, Hardscape Installation, Turf Maintenance and Ornamental Maintenance. Applicants may have points deducted for safety or technical aspects of the test in each of these components.

This month, we focus on Problem 6.62 (formerly Problem 2.03) — Instrument in the Hardscape Installation portion of the CLT test. While there are no safety deductions for this prob-

lem, up to 100 points may be deducted for technical errors. Retest candidates who have previously failed this problem will take 6.62 Instrument as the hands-on portion of the retest, as well as 6.06 Hardscape Principles and Calculations as a written test.

This is a timed problem. In the past, the applicant had 30 minutes to perform the test procedures. Under the revised test specifications, the applicant will have 35 minutes. This test problem has also changed slightly. Test applicants will be asked to demonstrate their ability to use a surveying instrument, working in an area that has been set out to represent the front stoop steps (A) and a point in the front yard (B). Applicants must demonstrate how to handle and set up the equipment. Next, they must accurately record the two elevations and the distance apart, calculating the elevation and indicating the lowest point.

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The new test requires applicants to: set up a tripod, including disassembly; identify the equipment used as a builder's level or transit; set up the instrument (and disassemble it); record the rod readings, and calculate and record the vertical and horizontal distances between points A and B. Finally, applicants will be required to identify the lowest point (A or B) and disassemble the equipment.

Although this test question does not weight applicants on safety issues, they are cautioned that when using a laser level, they should avoid looking at it or directing the beam at other people. The Study Reference for this newly-revised test question is Instrument, Grading and Drainage in the Landscape Training Manual for Installation Technicians (Chapter 3).

Greg Roos is construction division manager for Bertog Landscape Co. in Wheeling, managing eight to ten crews throughout the year. Roos has been in the landscape business for 27 years, 15 of those with Bertog. He passed the CLT test in October 2000 and has been involved with the testing ever since. He serves on the CLT test committee, has served as a judge and/or a judge's technical assistant on numerous test problems including Grading and Drainage, Instrument, Truck and Trailer, Plant Layout, Plant ID, Sod Installation as well as irrigation portions of the test. Since the new test question will not take effect until June, Roos is describing difficulties test candidates have experienced with the Instrument test problem in the past.

"In the past, the candidates were

struggling with the math and calculations – they are very nervous already, and that alone prevents them from passing," says Roos. "I've been in the



business going on 28 years, but I failed this problem the first time around. I didn't see the math in the study book so I didn't study it. The study guide shows the formulas now. Once you make a mistake at the beginning, it gets compounded as you go down the line. It's the formulations and calculations that the candidates need to do that cause many of them to fail — that and the math. In order to get more CLTs out there, the test has been revised to focus on the basics without all the math formulations."

Math has been the biggest issue for most candidates in the past, Roos observes. "Most candidates don't have a problem identifying the transit or builder's level, and the only safety

issue is the laser itself. I've never really focused on that as a problem, but it is a real laser and you could damage your eyes by looking at that beam. I don't think we've ever knocked off points for not wearing safety goggles in the past, but eye protection is important. You need safety glasses that are like sunglasses, not just clear ones.

"If you don't know how to read the instrument or what you're seeing when you're looking at it, you can fail this problem. Some candidates are unfamiliar with the tenths scale, and might think it's saying 10.6 when it's really saying 10.65. Doing the math is where most candidates run into trouble," Roos stresses. "You could come up with correct gradations, but without incorporating the right formulations, you won't pass. If your math is off – if you don't get the first part right – it will all fall apart on you later on."

The new test problem requires the candidate to disassemble the equipment, something that was done by judges in the past, as Roos recalls. "The new testing is more user-friendly since, basically, the difficulty is with the math and the formulas. When I took the test in 2000, the math wasn't in the study guide, but they now have that information. The candidates need to demonstrate that they know how to use the instrument and that they can read the gradations."

Starting with this month's CLT test problem, *The Landscape Contractor* will be relating information based on the new PLANET version of each problem, describing the differences between the old and new problems where applicable. 🌿

Presents —

Understanding and Preparing for the CLT Field Exam

CLT Field Test Problem: 6.08 — Paver Installation

Certified Landscape Technician



By Becke Davis

This is the ninth article in a series addressing problems on the CLT test — how to prepare for the task itself, how to prepare for taking the test, and how to avoid common problems that occur during testing.

PLANET has changed the certification testing effective June 1, 2008. In the past, there were separate tests for maintenance and installation. Now there are two different maintenance and two different installation certifications. Test components will include Softscape Installation, Hardscape Installation, Turf Maintenance and Ornamental Maintenance. Applicants may have points deducted for safety or technical aspects of the test in each of these components.

This month, we focus on Problem 6.08 (formerly Problem 2.04) – Paver Installation in the Hardscape Installation portion of the CLT test. This is a timed problem. In the past, the appli-

cant had 60 minutes to perform the test procedures. Under the revised test specifications, the applicant will have 80 minutes. This test problem has changed slightly. Test applicants will be asked to complete a small paving stone project. The excavation has already been completed and the aggregate base preparation is almost complete. Applicants must do the final base preparation and create a 2% slope. The header board at the end represents the correct finished height of the paver pad.

Applicants will continue with the edging, sand base, installation and compaction. Tools and safety equipment are provided. The saw and compactor have been checked for fluids and are ready for use. Be sure to allow time to disassemble the test materials at the end of the allotted time period.

Safety components of this test question make up nearly half of the maximum deductions in the score weighting, with the
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balance going to the five phases of the technical portion of the test. The first phase consists of the final aggregate base preparation. Phase two is the installation of paver restraints. Phase three involves the installation of bedding sand. Phase four is the setting and

installation of paver stones. Phase five is the compaction of the paving stones, disassembly of the test, return of materials, and regrading the area to its original condition.

The study reference for this newly revised test question is Hardscapes in the Landscape Training Manual for

Installation Technicians (Chapter 4). Please note that there is an error on page 45 regarding 2% slope. The chart on page 38 is correct. Further reading on this topic can be found under ICPI Concrete Paver Installer Certification – Student Manual, fifth edition.

Starting with last month's featured CLT test problem, *The Landscape Contractor* will present information based on the new PLANET version of each problem, describing the differences between the old and new problems where applicable. Because the revisions to the CLT test questions only took effect on June 1, 2008, the judges interviewed in this series of articles are basing their comments on past experience with the earlier version of the test questions.

Chris Malloy is co-owner and partner of the Savanna Group, Inc. in North Aurora. He earned a horticulture degree at the College of DuPage and has worked in the industry for nearly 18 years. "My specialty is snow removal," says Malloy, "but I have



worked in all different aspects of the green industry.” He first served as a CLT test judge about ten years ago, and he has served as either a judge technical advisor (JTA) or a captain ever since. “I have judged anything to do with installation,” he says, “including grading and drainage, instrument and paver installation.”

The most important part of this test question for most applicants is base preparation, Malloy stresses. “Anyone can lay bricks on top and make them look pretty,” he says. “But if the base is wrong, it will all fall apart – the base is like the foundation of a house.”

Another aspect of the test that some applicants overlook is time management, Malloy observes. “Some applicants don’t pass because they don’t manage their time – they forget to break it down. They do get points taken off if they run out of time. If their score is borderline pass or fail, the points lost for failure to disassemble can make the difference.”

Another common mistake relates to

paver edging (paver restraints), says Malloy. “Some applicants compact the gravel, add the sand, then nail or spike the plastic edging right into the sand,” he says. “The correct way is to sweep the sand away because it shifts, and nail or spike the edging directly into the gravel.”

Grading issues can also be a concern. “Applicants will fail right off the bat if they don’t have the right pitch – the pavers won’t drain properly if they don’t have the right grading. If applicants mess up on the grading, they will be either close to failing or they will fail
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Applicants should follow the instruction procedures recommended in the study guide, says Malloy, but he adds that “with pavers it’s one of those things where you either know it or you don’t know it.” This test question is more complicated than some of the others and it is important that applicants understand what is expected of them. “They need to have six inches of gravel and one inch of sand; they have to compact every two inches; they have to physically show the judges what they are doing, what pattern they’re going to lay. They have to understand what they’re doing in order to pass the test,” Malloy observes.

“Sometimes applicants don’t know what the pattern is or they’ll put down the wrong amount of sand,” he explains. “They have to have a 100% comfort level – it’s not enough just to have the knowledge. They have to understand the key points and tell the judges what they’re doing. They either get it 100% or they fail. An extremely small percentage just squeak by – those may be

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right off the bat. Common problems are getting the grading wrong, using too much sand, not enough gravel, or not having the right pitch.”

Safety issues make up a large part of the test score in this test question. “The safety equipment is laid out on the table but the judges aren’t allowed to tell applicants specifically what to use,” says Malloy. “They need to use gloves, ear protection and safety glasses when cutting pavers,” he cites as an example. “You’re going to lay pavers, so the test provides all the safety equipment you could possibly need – such as a hard helmet. You’re on the ground so you don’t really need that, but you do need eye protection and a mask or respirator when you’re cutting brick. I think they have now eliminated some of the things you don’t really need, like the hard hat. If the applicants want to bring their own safety gear, that’s fine. But the judges can’t say, ‘You should be using this and this.’”



applicants who know it, but don't have the experience. Usually they either know it or they don't."

Malloy recommends hands-on practice as the best way to prepare for this test question. "With things like grading and excavating, it's easy to read it, but it's not always easy to do it. The best way is to get on a crew and actually physically do it. If your company has a paving crew, try to get on that crew for a couple of weeks. You could also set up a practice box and have a foreman observe what you do. It's repetition, but it just takes time to understand it. Everyone has their own way of laying pavers, though, and you need to do it the way the study guide says to do it."

Although this test question



is more complex than some others discussed in this series, by practicing and using the study guide, applicants can successfully prepare for this portion of the test. 🌿

Presents –

Understanding and Preparing for the CLT Field Exam

CLT Field Test Problem: 6.09 – Skid-Steer Operation Certified Landscape Technician



By Becke Davis

This is the tenth article in a series addressing problems on the CLT test — how to prepare for the task itself, how to prepare for taking the test, and how to avoid common problems that occur during testing.

PLANET has changed the certification testing effective June 1, 2008. In the past, there were separate tests for maintenance and installation. Now there are two different maintenance and two different installation certifications. Test components include Softscape Installation, Hardscape Installation, Turf Maintenance and Ornamental Maintenance. Applicants may have points deducted for safety or technical aspects of the test in each of these components.

This month, our focus is on Problem 6.09 (formerly Problem 2.06 – Tractor/Skid-Steer Operation) – Skid-Steer Operation in the Hardscape Installation portion of the CLT test.

This is a timed problem. In the past, the applicant had 30 minutes to perform the test procedures. Under the revised test specifications, applicants will have 35 minutes. This test problem has changed slightly.

The test simulates an employer's test to evaluate the operating skills of the test applicant before allowing the applicant to fill an actual truck. First, the applicant should check that the machine is safe and ready to operate. The next step is to start the engine and run it at a fast idle so it will warm up. In the new test question, the applicant will then be required to attach the bucket. Traffic cones will be set up to outline the course, far enough apart that they should not be touched.

Once the bucket is attached, the applicant will move the first bucket of soil from the stockpile through the course to the loading area. Here the soil will be dumped over the bar (the

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high bar represents the side of the truck). The applicant will return through the course, repeating the process with two more buckets to be dumped over the side of the simulated truck. The applicant will then move the piled material back to the original stockpile (not through the course) and demonstrate the ability to grade smooth



and clean up the loading area.

In the new test, applicants must detach the bucket, then park the skid-steer safely in the area as directed by the judge. During the test, applicants must drive the skid-steer through the course five times, without hitting the cones. Four aspects will be judged: equipment check, working with the machine, driving the machine, and the safety components. The safety portion of this test makes up nearly half of the maximum deductions in the score weighting, with the balance divided between the other three categories.

The Study Reference for this newly revised test question is Equipment Safety and Maintenance in the Landscape Training Manual for

Installation Technicians (Chapter 9).

As of the June 2008 issue, the featured CLT test problem in *The Landscape Contractor* is reporting information based on the new PLAN-ET version of each problem, describing the differences between the old and new problems where applicable. Because the revisions to the CLT test questions only took effect on June 1,

2008, the judges interviewed in this series of articles are basing their comments on past experience with the earlier version of the test questions.

Greg Roos is construction division manager for Bertog Landscape Company in Wheeling, managing eight to ten crews throughout the year. He has been in the landscape business for 27 years, 15 of those with Bertog. He

passed the CLT test in October 2000 and has been involved with the testing ever since. He serves on the CLT test committee and has served as a judge and/or a judge's technical assistant on numerous test problems, including Grading and Drainage, Instrument, Truck and Trailer, Plant Layout, Plant ID, Skid-Steer Operation and Sod Installation, as well as irrigation portions of the test.

"Safety first" is a good thing to remember on all parts of the CLT test and Skid-Steer Operation is no exception. "The first thing an applicant should do is a walk-around, checking to make sure none of the tires are flat and that the hoses aren't leaking. They should also check the fluids in the machine," Roos stresses. "They should wear ear protection and I believe they're given eye protection, too. We offer hard hats, but I don't believe they are required for this question," he says.

"In my opinion, this is one of the easier test questions – if you are familiar with the machines," says Roos. "There are quite a few mistakes applicants make on this test question, but the



biggest one is being unfamiliar with the machine. If they don't know how to run it, they can't traverse the course, which is winding but not difficult. The majority of failures happen because applicants don't know how to run the machine correctly, so they can't control it. They should set up a winding practice course with a six-foot bar to demonstrate lifting and dumping."

Applicants who are unfamiliar with the machines can fail early on, Roos observes. "Once they start knocking down cones, they start losing points. There is a 2x6 board placed about six to eight feet in the air on two posts so they can demonstrate lifting the bucket up and dumping it. If they don't keep the bucket level, it will spill," he explains.

"The buckets aren't always self-leveling. The controls are different on the different brands. We used mostly New Holland skid-steers last year and that make has hand and foot controls and buckets that are not self-leveling. The CASE skid-steers have foot controls and the buckets are self-leveling."

Driving and dumping aren't the only important aspects of the test, Roos

points out. "Applicants have to demonstrate how to approach, load and dump, then put back the soil for the next applicant. They also need to level and clean up the loading area, using only the machine." Attaching and detaching the bucket is a new part of the test, but it makes sense to Roos. "Machines come

probably going to make a mistake. Take your time going through the course at half throttle if you're not real experienced with the machine. If you are familiar with it, the machine will be more manageable at full throttle."

While there is a study guide for this test question, applicants would be better



with various implements and you have to know how to safely attach and detach them. If it's done wrong or carelessly, it could be dangerous."

Running out of time is not usually an issue on this test question, Roos observes, so there is no need to rush through it.

"There's no need to put the machine on high throttle," he says. "If you aren't used to the machine and you do it quickly, you are

served by getting out and doing some practice runs, Roos says. "Applicants are going to have to prepare for this test question hands-on," he advises. "They can practice at their place of business by filling a bucket with soil or debris and then simulate dumping it into a truck. With this test question, practice, practice, practice will do you a world of good. Otherwise, especially if you aren't familiar with the machine, chances are you won't pass it." 🌿

Presents –

Understanding and Preparing for the CLT Field Exam

Certified Landscape Technician

- CLT Written Test Problem: 5.02 – Softscape Plan Reading
- CLT Written Test Problem: 5.03 – Softscape Horticultural Principles
- CLT Written Test Problem: 5.04 – Irrigation Components



By Becke Davis

This is the eleventh article in a series addressing problems on the CLT test – how to prepare for the task itself, how to prepare for taking the test, and how to avoid common problems that occur during testing. Previous issues of *The Landscape Contractor* have discussed problems in the Hardscape Installation portion of the test. This month we begin examining Softscape Installation.

PLANET has changed the certification testing effective June 1, 2008. In the past, there were separate tests for maintenance and installation. Now there are two different maintenance and two different installation certifications. Test components include Softscape Installation, Hardscape Installation, Turf Maintenance and Ornamental Maintenance. Applicants may have points deducted for safety or technical aspects of the test in each of these components.

This month, the focus is on three written tests in the Softscape Installation portion of the test. Problem 5.02: Softscape Plan Reading, a timed problem with 45 minutes allowed for the test; Problem 5.03: Softscape Horticultural Principles, with 30 minutes allowed; and problem 5.04: Irrigation Components. This problem confuses many applicants on test day when they aren't testing for a CLT in Irrigation. Even though ILCA does not offer a complete irrigation exam, there is an irrigation section to the Softscape Installation test. Fifteen minutes are allotted for applicants to complete the problem. There are no safety components to any of these tests and all problems are essentially unchanged from previous versions.

Kevin Vancina, president of Vancina Landscaping, Inc. in Joliet is the CLT Committee Chair, serving a two-year term. Vancina Landscaping has been a member of ILCA since 1968

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and both Kevin and his father, Bud, now retired, have been active with the CLT testing. Bud was the original Site Coordinator for the CLT field test. Kevin took the test in its second season and judged the sod portion the following year. Since then, he has judged many of the problems and, over the years has served as Site Coordinator for sod, Judge's Coordinator for the whole test, Assistant Chair and now Committee Chair.

Problem 5.02: Softscape Plan Reading (Written Test)

The Study Reference for this problem can be found in Landscape Plan Reading and Estimating in the Landscape Training Manual for Installation or Irrigation or Maintenance Technicians (Chapter 2).

The plan provided for this problem is in English. No notes, formulas or conversion charts are allowed at the test. Applicants for this test question are given a landscape plan that will show some details of a residential yard. The problem indicates that since it is inefficient to keep going back for additional materials, the applicant must calculate the materials needed for the job. Applicants should be familiar with the scale on the plan provided and know how to use an architect scale. They are cautioned that incorrect use of the architect scale will result in major errors. Reading the 'North' arrow is another important consideration.

Vancina notes that applicants are required to do simple counting of items in the plan. "It is important to study the plan carefully to make sure you have counted them all. You will need to calculate the area of lawn and planting beds and make sure that you add up all the areas. Plant spacing also involves area calculation and you will be

required to calculate volume of materials," he says.

Scoring of this problem is broken down into five categories, based on the applicant's calculations of square footage of an area, lineal footage of measure, cubic yardage of material to cover an area, ground cover plant spacing, and numbers of items.

Vancina stresses the importance of knowing how to measure properly, figure square footage and cubic yardage, to use scale and to read an architect scale. While many students bring their own architect scale, scales will also be available on test day.

Calculations may be tricky for some, but others fail because they

allow themselves to become complacent, says Vancina. "Some applicants try to whip through it fast and when they are asked how many shrubs are needed for the job, they make a simple mistake like counting the wrong number of shrubs. Scale is usually the biggest thing because some applicants aren't capable of identifying and reading the measurements on the plan."

Another common problem is miscalculating when measuring an area – to determine how much stone is needed, for example – and then converting the figure to square feet, Vancina notes. "After figuring the square feet, applicants must measure the depth to get cubic feet, and then they have to be able to convert it to cubic yards. Then they have to figure out how many tons they need to fill the space. Some applicants don't neces-

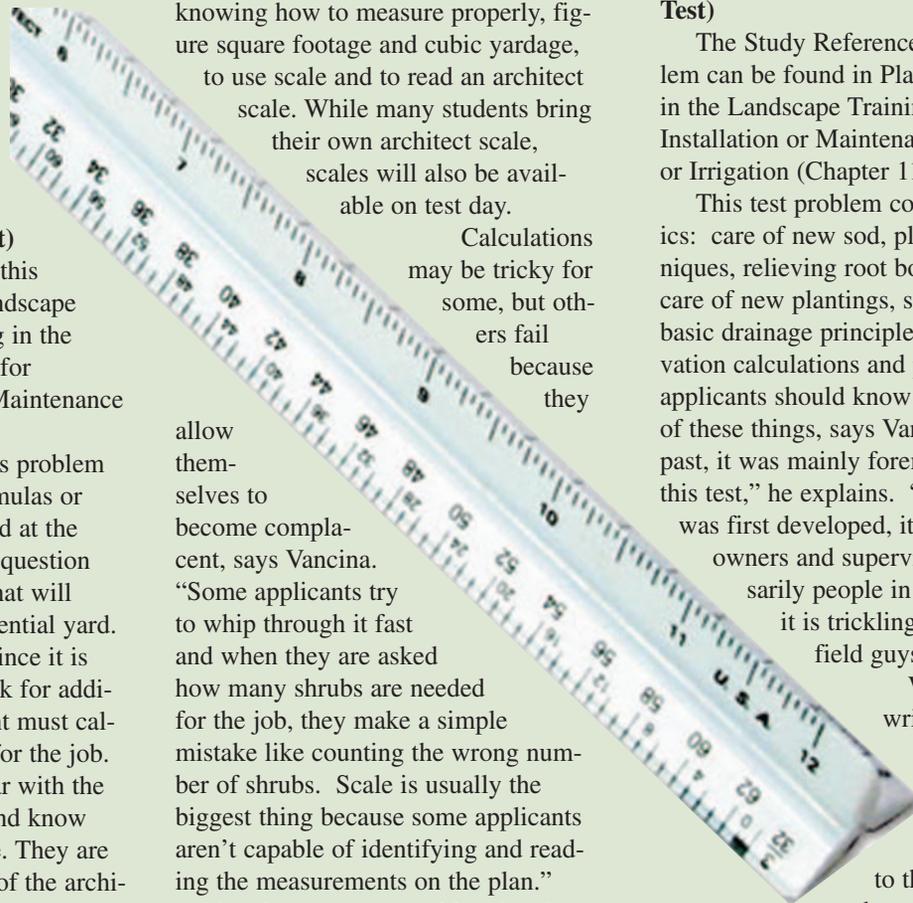
sarily do computations – I personally don't think it's hard because I've had a lot of experience with it. Applicants need to consult the study guide because there are examples in there. But they still need practice if they aren't familiar with the mental calculations," he says.

Problem 5.03: Softscape Horticultural Principles (Written Test)

The Study Reference for this problem can be found in Plants and Planting in the Landscape Training Manual for Installation or Maintenance (Chapter 6) or Irrigation (Chapter 11) Technicians.

This test problem covers nine topics: care of new sod, planting techniques, relieving root bound conditions, care of new plantings, soil compaction, basic drainage principles, grading, elevation calculations and pruning. Test applicants should know how to do all of these things, says Vancina. "In the past, it was mainly foremen who took this test," he explains. "When the test was first developed, it was taken by owners and supervisors, not necessarily people in the field. Now it is trickling down to the field guys."

With these two written problems, as with other hands-on test problems, referring to the study guide and practicing the required skills are the key to passing. "It's a matter of the applicant having well-rounded knowledge," explains Vancina. "These tests separate labor from foremen – the test separates those who just work in the field from those who really know what they are doing."



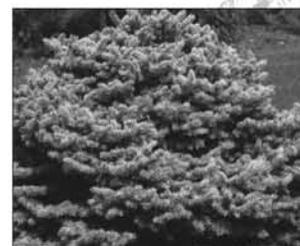


Problem 5.04: Irrigation Components (Written Test)

The Study Reference for this problem can be found in Irrigation System Components and Maintenance in the Landscape Training Manual for Installation or Maintenance (Chapter 10) or Irrigation (Chapter 5) Technicians.

Seven components are covered on the written test: types of irrigation heads, drip system components, mainlines, lateral lines, valve boxes, remote

control valves and quick couplers. As always, knowledge and preparation are the key to passing this test. The test requires technical knowledge that is described in the study reference, but Vancina says you can't beat personal knowledge of these components, whether it is from hands-on practice or on-the-job experience. Take advantage of the information provided in the study reference. But, if at all possible, he recommends getting to know these components and practice, practice, practice. 



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Presents —

Understanding and Preparing for the CLT Field Exam

Certified Landscape Technician

CLT Test Problem: 5.05 — Plant Identification



By Becke Davis

This is the twelfth article in a series addressing problems on the CLT test – how to prepare for the task itself, how to prepare for taking the test, and how to avoid common problems that occur during testing. In previous issues of *The Landscape Contractor*, we discussed problems in the Hardscape Installation portion of the test. In September we began examining the Softscape Installation portion of the test.

PLANET changed the certification testing effective June 1, 2008. In the past, there were separate tests for maintenance and installation; now there are two different maintenance and two different installation certifications. Test components include Softscape Installation, Hardscape Installation, Turf Maintenance and Ornamental Maintenance. Applicants may have points deducted for safety or technical aspects of the test in each of these components.

This month, we focus on Plant Identification in the Softscape Installation portion of the CLT test. The Study Reference for this problem can be found in Plants and Planting in the Landscape Training Manual for Installation or Maintenance (Chapter 6) or Irrigation (Chapter 11) Technicians.

This is a timed test, with 35 minutes allowed to complete it. Unlike many other test questions, Plant Identification is unchanged. Since this test question only involves plant identification, there are no safety aspects to the test.

In this question, test applicants are asked to assume that they have arrived at a job site where they are assigned to locate 30 plants that have lost their tags. The plants have only numbers on them and applicants have no plant ID text. They must match the plant numbers to the plants on a list they are given, using only their knowledge of the plants to identify them.

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The use of reference materials is not allowed. The list of plants will contain both botanical Latin and common names.

Dr. James Ethridge, department chair of horticultural sciences at Joliet Junior College (JJC), is an ILCA member and chairman of the education portion of the CLT Committee. Dr. Ethridge has been at JJC since 1983. Prior to that, he taught at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, where he also received his Bachelor's and Master's degrees and Ph.D.

Each state that offers CLT testing selects the 150 most commonly used landscape plants in their state and, from those 150 plants, 30 are selected for the Plant Identification test question. A different 30 plants are selected each time the test is given. In Illinois, ILCA members are surveyed to compile the list of 150 plants that form the pool used in this test and Dr. Ethridge is charged with selecting the 30 plants that will be used on any given test day.

"There are six or seven categories of

plants, including trees, shrubs, broadleaf evergreens, vines, grasses and annuals and perennials," Dr. Ethridge explains. "I have to make sure to include a representative sample of plants from each group." The most



common reason test applicants fail this test question is that they aren't familiar with all the categories of plants, he says. "If they work with a tree crew, they may know trees but not annuals and perennials," he observes. "If they are in a crew that installs bedding plants, they may know annuals but not woody plants. Some people fail half the test for this reason."

Another problem might be that the

test applicants are able to distinguish between a maple and an oak or a pine, but they aren't able to tell one species of maple from another. "If there are two maples on the test and they get one of those wrong, that means the other is going to be wrong, too," says Dr.

Ethridge. If someone is retaking the test, he may ask to see which questions the applicant missed on the original test so he can include the plants that were wrongly identified the first time around. On the other hand, he says, he might put completely different plants on the retest. There are 150 possibilities, and every time he gives the test he's likely to pick a different 30 plants.

"These are real plants," he stresses. "No slides, no pictures, just real

plants either in the ground or landscape-size plants in a container. They're in random order, not alphabetical. Students in college have to spell the Latin names right, but this test is multiple choice with the Latin name and common name spelled out."

In other words, the test is pretty easy for applicants who know their plants—but if they don't know the plant material, it's another story.

“Someone who works on a lawn crew may not need to know plant material,” says Dr. Ethridge. “But a foreman ought to know — and there is a higher standard for CLTs.”

The woody plants used in the Plant Identification test are all in the ground at Joliet Junior College. The herbaceous plants are in JJC’s greenhouse. Dr. Ethridge notes that test applicants can visit the greenhouse to study the plants Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., and the grounds can be visited anytime. While test applicants can study the plants, they will have no way of knowing which 30 plants will be included on the day they take the CLT test.

Annuals and perennials may not be in bloom at the time of the test, but Dr. Ethridge says he will sometimes seek out plants that are going to be out-of-season and keep them in the greenhouse until test day. He doesn’t always select plants in pristine condition, so applicants may find it necessary to identify a plant by its twigs or buds. Dr. Ethridge says that one year there was a bad infestation of Japanese beetles, and he select-

ed some plants with severely damaged foliage. He says test applicants “should know what the plant looks like even if the foliage is damaged.”

All of the 150 plants that form the core of this test are plants commonly

found in Illinois landscapes — the test doesn’t have trick questions or rare, exotic plants designed to fool the test applicant. Applicants whose knowledge is limited to one or two plant categories would be well served to stop by Joliet Junior College and see how many plants they can



identify on the grounds and the greenhouse. Familiarity with the plants and knowledge of their identifying characteristics is the only way to go into this test with confidence. 🌿

Every article in this series is also available on the ILCA website at www.ilca.net/certification.aspx

Presents —

Understanding and Preparing for the CLT Field Exam

Certified Landscape Technician

CLT Test Problem: 5.06 – Sod Installation



By Becke Davis

This is the thirteenth article in a series addressing problems on the CLT test – how to prepare for the task itself, how to prepare for taking the test, and how to avoid common problems that occur during testing. In previous issues of *The Landscape Contractor*, problems in the Hardscape Installation portion of the test were discussed. In the September issue, we began to examine the Softscape Installation portion of the test.

PLANET changed the certification testing effective June 1, 2008. Previously, there were separate tests for maintenance and installation. Now there are two different maintenance and two different installation certifications. Test components include Softscape Installation, Hardscape Installation, Turf Maintenance and Ornamental Maintenance. Applicants may have points deducted for safety or technical aspects of the test in each of these components.

This month, we focus on Sod Installation in the Softscape Installation portion of the CLT test. This test is weighted so that 30% of the score is related to procedure, 50% installation and 20% safety component. In November 2007, *The Landscape Contractor* discussed Sod Installation as it was in the previous version of the test. This article describes the revised test question.

The Study Reference for this problem can be found in Turf Installation in the Landscape Training Manual for Installation (Chapter 8) or Maintenance (Chapter 3) or Irrigation (Chapter 10) Technicians.

This is a timed test, with 35 minutes allowed to complete it. For the test, it is assumed that the customer has only a small rectangular box that needs sod. The applicant must establish the correct grade first and prepare the base properly, allowing

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for the thickness of the sod. The next step is to spread the fertilizer. Then, the applicant is required to follow the instructions and install the sod accordingly, being careful to use the proper lifting techniques.

The preparation portion of the test requires the test applicant to establish the finished grade so that the top of the sod is level with the top of the frame (or existing sod). The judge will determine the amount of soil to be removed or added. Next, the applicant must rake the area to level irregularities and roll it with a water-filled roller. After these steps are completed, the applicant will measure out fertilizer into a

container as indicated by the judge, and broadcast the fertilizer evenly in the area to be sodded.

For the installation section of the test, the applicant is required to lay the first row of sod parallel to the long side of the frame, and continue to lay the remaining rows parallel to the long side. All seams must be butted properly and trimmed as necessary – head, valve box and edges. The applicant will then

roll the sod with a water-filled roller. Finally, upon the judge's direction, the applicant will roll up the sod and return it to the pallet.

The safety component of the test primarily relates to lifting techniques

and also some Fertilizer aspects of the test. Huckstadt has worked for The Brickman Group, Ltd., which is based in Gaithersburg, MD and has offices in 29 states, for 33 years. Although he has judged Sod Installation many times in the past, he has not judged this test

question since it was revised in June 2008.

Additional information about the revised test question was provided by Tim Caldwell, co-owner of The Savanna Group, Inc. in North Aurora.

Caldwell has served on the CLT Committee for 12 years and is currently Co-Chair. He is also a member of the ILCA Board of Directors. Over the years, Tim has worked with all aspects of the CLT testing program.

According to Huckstadt, one common mistake test applicants make is in

the placement of the sod. "They are supposed to put a full width-wide roll of sod next to the edge of the enclosure," he explains. "They have to make some cuts, but the cut needs to be in the middle, not next to the street edge or sidewalk edge. They should lay down a full piece of sod lengthwise at the edge. It would usually take three pieces wide to cover the area, but it's a little less. They will need two full



and wearing safety masks while spreading fertilizer. Safety gear is generally provided at the test site, although some applicants prefer to bring their own gloves and safety glasses.

Stan Huckstadt, operations manager for The Brickman Group in Wheeling, has judged the Sod Installation portion of the CLT test since he earned his CLT about 10 years ago. He has also judged Plan Layout, some Irrigation,

pieces with the cut piece in the middle – not on the outside edge. Also, the sod should be laid in staggered rows — the way you would stagger brick — but some people don’t do that. On test day, the judges usually put in some obstacles, like a sprinkler head or a pipe, to simulate a light pole, which applicants will have to cut around.”

Grading is part of the test, as well as laying sod. “You can’t have the edge of the sod above the enclosure,” explains Huckstadt. “You don’t want the sides of the sod to show. This is not usually a problem – the judges usually remind applicants that the sod will be graded as if it’s at the edge of a sidewalk to accommodate that edge.”

In the past, test applicants were required to explain sod watering techniques at the end of the test, and if they forgot to do this, they could fail the test. This is no longer part of the test question. When the test is completed, applicants are expected to return the sod to the pallet, but if they neglect to do this, they will not lose points. Caldwell notes that points will be deducted if applicants do not complete the entire task as outlined in the instructions.

Two things that caused test appli-

cants some problems in the past are no longer a part of this test question: filling out mock work orders is now in the written portion of the test, as is calculating how much fertilizer to use. Huckstadt recalls that these issues caused a number of test applicants to



fail in the past — so the test should be that much easier to pass, if applicants come prepared.

While safety is only 20 percent of the test score, it is still important for test applicants to lift the sod carefully, using their knees rather than their back, or points will be deducted. Points could also be deducted for careless use of tools or failure to wear safety gear when spreading fertilizer.

“This test is pretty straightforward,” says Huckstadt. “Some people will do a great job, know exactly what they’re doing. Others don’t come prepared, or maybe they don’t have much experience in laying sod. Some applicants can do

the test in 15 minutes; others who are nervous or without experience will eat up the whole 35 minutes and still not finish. If they are unable to complete the test, they won’t pass. Some years, most applicants will pass; other years, many will fail. I can’t pin down why this happens.”

The study guide is an obvious recommendation to help test applicants prepare, but hands-on practice may be even more useful. Observe the precautions

described above, and this test question should not be difficult to pass. 🌿

Presents —

Understanding and Preparing for the CLT Field Exam

Certified Landscape Technician

CLT Test Problem: 9.01 — Pruning



By Becke Davis

This is the fourteenth article in a series addressing problems on the CLT test – how to prepare for the task itself, how to prepare for taking the test, and how to avoid common problems that occur during testing.

PLANET changed the certification testing effective June 1, 2008. In the past, there were separate tests for maintenance and installation. Now there are two different maintenance and two different installation certifications. Test components include Softscape Installation, Hardscape Installation, Turf Maintenance and Ornamental Maintenance. Applicants may have points deducted for safety or technical aspects of the test in each of these components.

This month, we focus on the Pruning test question in the Ornamental Maintenance portion of the CLT test. This test is weighted so that 10% of the score is related to procedure, 20% on pruning tools and methods, 20% on tree pruning, 20% on

shrub pruning and 30% on safety component.

The Study Reference for this problem can be found in Tree and Shrub Maintenance in the Landscape Training Manual for Maintenance Technicians (Chapter 7).

This is a timed test, with 35 minutes allowed to complete it. The test applicant will be required to demonstrate knowledge and abilities about basic tree structure, types of pruning and use of pruning tools. The applicant will use a hand pruner for small cuts and loppers for larger cuts, and show which tools should be used to cut specific branches on the tree (which will be marked with clothespins and/or flagging tape). Next, the applicant will be asked to point out branches that should be removed from a shrub that is in need of pruning. The power shears at the test site will have been checked and will be ready for the applicant to turn on and then off. When the applicant

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demonstrates shearing techniques, the power shears will be turned off.

In the tree structure portion of the test, the applicant must point out the trunk, leader, scaffold branches and lateral branches.

In the pruning tools and methods portion, the applicant will first be required to show the judge how to properly use a pole pruner on the tree provided, without actually making the cuts. Next, he/she must demonstrate how to properly handle and use a hand pruner using the sample branches provided, making at least five cuts. After that, the applicant must demonstrate how to properly handle and use loppers using the sample branches provided, making at least two cuts.

Finally, the applicant will be asked to show the judge where to make saw cuts for removing a large limb on the sample provided, without actually making the cuts. (IMPORTANT NOTE: The photograph on page 96 of the Training Manual is incorrect as to the location of the cut. Refer to the text in the manual only.)

The tree pruning portion of the test has four parts. In the first part, the applicant must point out at least three types of problems that require pruning on the tree provided, designating where the pruning cuts should be made by



attaching colored clothespins and survey tape to the branches. The clothespin and tape color should coordinate with the proper tool that the applicant would use. Once the judge has approved the markings, the applicant will remove the clothespins.

The shrub pruning component of the test requires the applicant to point out at least three types of problems that require pruning on the shrub provided.

It is assumed that the provided shrub is a stand-alone shrub. The applicant will start the gas-powered hedge shears provided, then turn the hedge shears off. With the hedge shears still turned off, the applicant will demonstrate how to properly handle the shears as if they

were to prune the provided shrub.

Charlie Kepple is a professional, certified arborist who has worked for The Care of Trees for 30 years. He is the company's vice president of Midwest sales, working out of the Barrington office. He has judged portions of the CLT test for 10 years, including Pruning, Tree Trimming, Chain Saw and Plant Health Care.

Kepple explains that test applicants can have points deducted for a mistake as simple

as forgetting to put on safety gloves or a hard hat. Whenever an applicant is pruning anything above the head, a hard hat is required. Others may fail because they don't know how to correctly operate a hand saw.

"The applicant needs to understand why the tree needs to be pruned," he observes. "We use clips to identify structural branches, determinate branches and the applicant has to indi-

cate which branches to keep and which to take out. The biggest problem is that some applicants don't understand how to identify the parts of the tree or what to take out. When they are pruning a shrub, they may not know how to use a hand pruner, that the blade should be facing the plant so you don't leave a stub. The applicants also have to know what tools to use on what plant."

Some applicants may know these things, but still make mistakes because they are just nervous, Kepple says. "The purpose of this test question is to take a tree, three to five years old, and make sure the test applicant knows how to prune it for proper form, not just to remove dead wood. If they don't know the parts of the tree, they won't know how to make the correct cuts for the form of the tree."

Educating landscape contractors about the correct way to trim trees is an important concern of Kepple's. In addition to judging tree-related CLT test questions, he also teaches an ILCA class on tree trimming. "We really need to work on educating the people in the field, who are doing the work, so they have a better knowledge of what they are doing. One of the biggest emphases is on safety and use of protective equipment, such as hearing protection."

As always, practicing before test day is helpful. But by following the tips Kepple has provided, this test question should be easy to pass for anyone with knowledge about tree structure and the use of the appropriate tools. 🌿



Presents –

Understanding and Preparing for the CLT Field Exam

Certified Landscape Technician

CLT Test Problem: 9.11 – Power Blower



By Becke Davis

This is the fifteenth article in a series addressing problems on the CLT test – how to prepare for the task itself, how to prepare for taking the test, and how to avoid common problems that occur during testing.

PLANET changed the certification testing effective June 1, 2008. In the past, there were separate tests for maintenance and installation. Now there are two different maintenance and two different installation certifications. Test components include Softscape Installation, Hardscape Installation, Turf Maintenance and Ornamental Maintenance. Applicants may

have points deducted for safety or technical aspects of the test in each of these components.

This month, we focus on the Power Blower question from the Ornamental Maintenance portion of the test. The sections of the test are weighted, with equipment check and preparation counting as 20% of the score, site preparation 10%, equipment operation 40%, and the safety component making up 30% of the test score.

The Study Reference for this problem can be found in Turf
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Equipment Operation and Safety in the Landscape Training Manual for Maintenance Technicians (Chapter 8).

This is a timed test, with 15 minutes allowed to complete it. The test applicant is sent to a

work site where the turf area is bordered by an office, driveway and walkway, assuming that it is a warm, summer day. The office windows are open and vehicles are present in the driveway. Upon arriving at the site, the applicant will check and prepare the equipment for operation, identifying and removing any existing hazards prior to operating the blower. S/he will then start the machine and proceed to clean the driveway and walkway areas, as well as the turf area adjacent to the “office,” removing the debris from each of these areas. When this is completed, the applicant will clean the blower and prepare it for storage. The judge is to be considered a pedestrian, and the test applicant is asked to be careful to treat the judge as such.

Armando Actis is the demo and product training manager for Pace, Inc. Although the company is based in

Plymouth, MI, Actis works out of Joliet. He has been a CLT judge since moving to Illinois from New Jersey in 2002. In that time, he has judged a number of small equipment categories, including power blower, string trim-

of them.

“When the applicants arrive at the test site, they approach the desk, go over the checklist, read the problem and then they’re okay to start. They pick up the safety equipment when they sign in – it’s not hidden, it’s right there

by the sign-in, only inches away. When they collect their safety stuff, many just push the masks aside and put the rest of it on.”

Actis stresses that the use of disposable face masks is nothing new in the landscape industry. “For use with concrete saws, where dust can get in the lungs, it’s been mandatory for 10 or 12 years. For power blowers, it’s more recent, but still about five years. The masks aren’t just required for the CLT tests – OSHA and everyone else



mer, edger, chain saw, tiller, aerator and concrete saw.

“The biggest mistake for about 75 percent of the applicants is forgetting to put on a disposable paper face mask,” he says. “This has been mandatory for about five years now. They might do everything else okay – they’ll put on the earplugs, the safety glasses, the gloves – but they forget the masks, and they’re right there in front

requires that masks be worn when blowing leaves or where dust, dirt or other particles can be inhaled.”

With this test question, Actis explains, most of the mistakes are related to the safety component. “People will pick up the safety gloves and put them in their pocket – they won’t actually use them,” he says. “They’re not supposed to be in your pockets – they’re supposed to be on your hands.



It's the same with safety glasses; they'll take them and put them on top of their heads. You're supposed to put them over your eyes, not on your head!" It obviously frustrates Actis to see people make such obvious mistakes but, as he observes, "We're not allowed to say anything until after the test."

According to Actis, the equipment check portion of the test doesn't cause many problems. "Mostly, they know

what to do. Normally, they pass the operations part of the test, although some will blow towards the judge instead of away. If the judge comes up, they should turn the blower on low or turn it off, and ask the judge to move away," he explains.

There are several common mistakes people make with site preparation, though. "Applicants are supposed to pick up any debris and put it in a pile

with the rest of the junk. Some won't bother to pick up debris, things like rocks that you could cut yourself on. Instead of picking up things like a soda can, a piece of glass or a clump of grass, they'll just push it aside. The judge is acting as a passer-by, and the test applicants are supposed to be trained to ask the person to move to one side, and then talk to them. It's supposed to be like a time-out."

That about covers the mistakes, Actis says, emphasizing that close to 30 percent of those who fail do so because they forgot to wear the disposable mask. "If they forget the mask and screw up something small – boom! – they just failed the test," he explains. "If they remember the mask, they can make a couple of small mistakes and still pass."

While reviewing the study guide and doing hands-on preparation is always recommended, for this test in particular, safety is key. Take all of the safety equipment provided and actually wear it. And whatever you do, don't forget to put on the disposable paper mask. 🌿



Presents –

Understanding and Preparing for the CLT Field Exam

Certified Landscape Technician

CLT Test Problem: 8.07 – 21-Inch Mower



By Becke Davis

This is the 16th article in a series addressing problems on the CLT test – how to prepare for the task itself, how to prepare for taking the test, and how to avoid common problems that occur during testing.

PLANET changed the certification testing effective June 1, 2008. In the past, there were separate tests for maintenance and installation. Now there are two different maintenance and two different installation certifications. Test components include Softscape Installation, Hardscape Installation, Turf Maintenance and Ornamental Maintenance. Applicants may have

points deducted for safety or technical aspects of the test in each of these components.

This month, we focus on the 21-Inch Mower question from the Turf Maintenance portion of the test. The sections of the test are weighted, with 30 percent of the score from the safety component, and 70 percent from the procedure portion of the test (20% for blade change, 10% for equipment check, 10% for mowing height adjustments and 30% for equipment operation).

The Study Reference for this problem can be found in Turf
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Equipment Operation and Safety in the Landscape Training Manual for Maintenance Technicians (Chapter 8).

This is a timed test, with 15 minutes allowed to complete it.

The test question assumes that the applicant has been sent to mow a small lawn, but finds that the mower blade is dull. In the first step of the test, the applicant will go to an area that is marked off and change the blade on a 21-inch mower. (Applicants are urged to be cautious, because the new blades are very sharp.) After changing the blade, the applicant should do a complete check to make sure the mower is ready to go. The “customer” is curious, and will ask for a demonstration on how to change the mower height. The applicant will then set the mowing height to three inches (7.5 cm).

The lawn area to be mowed will be marked off with spray paint. The applicant should remove any debris and make sure the area is ready to mow. It should be assumed that there is a walkway on all four sides of the area to be mowed, so it’s important to watch where the clippings are directed. Sections of tree trunks will represent trees. After the debris has been removed, the applicant should begin mowing, safely and efficiently, with caution to be aware of the overlap.

Armando Actis is the demo and product training manager for Pace, Inc.

Although the company is based in Plymouth, MI, Actis works out of Joliet. He has been a CLT judge since moving to Illinois from New Jersey in 2002. In that time, he has judged a number of small equipment categories,



including power blower, string trimmer, edger, chain saw, tiller, aerator and concrete saw, in addition to several mower categories.

This test question is straightforward, according to Actis, because most applicants are familiar with the smaller mowers. More problems occur with the test questions focusing on the bigger mowers, which will be featured in upcoming issues of *The Landscape Contractor*.

“As with the other tests, when the applicants arrive they will see a table with all of the safety equipment laid out,” Actis observes. “All the usual safety equipment will be there – eye and ear protection, gloves and so on.

The applicants must be dressed appropriately, or they must have a change of clothes with them. If an applicant shows up in shorts or in sneakers, s/he can’t take the test. They must change into jeans and boots, or be sent home.”

Once the applicant has checked in, picked up the safety equipment and put it on, he/she will head over to the area to be cut. “The area to be mowed is about 10 feet wide by 20 feet long,” Actis says. “It’s marked off with flags and fluorescent paint, and there will be sprinkler heads, maybe some debris, and there might be a two-by-four stake to represent a tree.”

Most of the mistakes made with this test problem relate to the safety component, Actis stresses. The

applicant should put on all of the safety equipment before getting to the mower, he cautions. “They can have the equipment with them — maybe have the eye protection on their head — but before they start the mower, they better have it in the appropriate places. No gloves in the back pocket!”

If an applicant isn’t familiar with the particular brand of mower at the test site, the judge can help. “The judge will ask if they are familiar with the brand of machine. He may ask if the applicant knows the location of the gas cap or choke, for instance. We can’t expect them to know all the brands.”

Although the blade-changing portion of the test is dangerous because of

the extremely sharp blades, that is not where most problems occur. “Knock on wood, we’ve had no problems with blades,” says Actis. “Normally, we make sure the unit is off; we take the spark plug cable off the unit. If it uses a key, we turn it off with the key then remove the key. The judge will double-check — there’s no room for mistakes. We haven’t had any issues with the oil, machine or blade safety.”

Prior to mowing the lawn area, the applicant will need to mark any sprinkler heads and clear away any debris, then check out the basic things on the mower, which Actis describes as “a typical home-type mower.” “They’ll need to check the fuel, oil, the pulling mechanism, make sure the air filter and blade are both secure. If the mower is cold – if they’re one of the first few applicants to take the test – they’ll need to put the choke on. It’s a pull-start mower, not electric, so they’ll need to yank the cord to start. The OPC (Operator Presence Control) device is connected to a switch on the handle, so the handle must be pulled together to let the mower know someone is there,” he explains. “Then they need to let go of the OPC and start it again, then go through the routine of mowing.”

The OPC has been required on larger mowers for awhile, he adds, but the



safety feature hasn’t always been on smaller mowers. “Maybe ten years ago, small mowers didn’t have it,” he says. “So many people kept getting hurt, now it’s mandated on all sizes of mowers.”

After starting the mower, the applicant will mow the designated area, being careful where they direct the clippings. There is a final step: “After they come back, they are required to shut off the mower and clear off the dirty grass

and debris,” Actis says.

Remember that the safety issues count for 30 percent of the test score. Don’t forget to use the safety equipment, or you may lose points that you may need to pass this problem, Actis reminds. 🌿

Presents —

Understanding and Preparing for the CLT Field Exam

Certified Landscape Technician

CLT Test Problem: 8.08 — Intermediate Walk-Behind Mower



By Becke Davis

This is the seventeenth article in a series addressing problems on the CLT test – how to prepare for the task itself, how to prepare for taking the test, and how to avoid common problems that occur during testing.

PLANET changed the certification testing effective June 1, 2008. In the past, there were separate tests for maintenance and installation. Now there are two different maintenance and two different installation certifications. Test components include Softscape Installation, Hardscape Installation, Turf Maintenance and Ornamental Maintenance. Applicants may

have points deducted for safety or technical aspects of the test in each of these components.

This month, we focus on the Intermediate Walk-Behind Mower question from the Turf Maintenance portion of the test. The sections of the test are weighted, with 15 percent of the score based on equipment check, 15 percent mowing height adjustments, 40% equipment operation and 30% safety components.

The Study Reference for this problem can be found in Turf
(continued on page 34)

CLT Field Exam Prep

(continued from page 33)

Equipment Operation and Safety in the Landscape Training Manual for Maintenance Technicians (Chapter 8).

This is a timed test, with 15 minutes allowed to complete it. The test question assumes the test applicant has been sent to mow a lawn. The applicant must do a complete check to make sure the mower is ready for operation. The customer (played by a judge) is curious and wants to know how to lubricate the mower and how to change the mowing height. The lawn area is marked off with spray paint. The applicant is to assume there is a walkway on all four sides of the marked-off area, and should be careful where the clippings are directed. Sections of tree trunk will be used to represent trees. Remove any debris and make sure the area is ready to mow. Begin mowing safely and efficiently, and be aware of the overlap.

In the equipment check portion of the test, the applicant should check the mower to prepare it for operation, and point out all mower grease fittings to the judge (“customer”). Next, show the judge the mower height adjustment points. The next step is to mow the designated area as directed by the judge, being careful to put on all safety gear first and to operate the mower safely.

Armando Actis is the demo and product training manager for Pace, Inc. Although the company is based in Plymouth, MI, Actis works out of Joliet. He has been a CLT judge since moving to Illinois from New Jersey in 2002. In that time, he has judged a number of small equipment categories, including power blower, string trimmer, 21-inch mower, edger, chain saw, tiller, aerator and concrete saw in addition to several mower categories.

“The basic set-up for this test question is the same as for 21-Inch Mower,” says Actis. “The judges will set up the area to be mowed, marking with a flag

or something where a sprinkler head is supposed to be, or there may be debris like a branch or a soda can. The biggest difference is the machine.

“There are two types of units that might be used for this test question. The first is a gear-driven walk-behind – it has a pulley and belt system, a gear system up to five speeds, and a pistol grip. The other type of unit is a hydrostatic walk-behind with hydraulic gears. These units have the same type of pistol grip but no pulley – it’s much faster and much, much more powerful. They have bigger horsepower engines, so they are more dangerous. They still have the pistol grip – when you take it out of neutral, you let go of the grip and let it go, similar to the gear-driven but much more efficient.”

As with 21-Inch Mower, the safety component makes up a large part of the test score. “Again, it’s the same scenario,” Actis explains. “You go up to the table, read the problem and go over it, check out the oil and gas, the oil filter, and sometimes the judge might ask you to make sure the blade is secure. They’ll make sure the engine is off and they’ll take the key out if that happens. The applicants will be asked to check the mowing height – on gear-driven units, there’s a floating deck and washers – we call them donuts – in the both of the front caster wheels. You need to make sure you have adequate washers so you get your desired height. You put a pin at the desired height. We usually cut at three inches, but the judges may have it set at one and a half inches or four inches to see if the applicants will catch it. If they don’t – if they assume it’s set at three inches – they’ll lose points.”

The process is different with a hydrostatic walk-behind, Actis observes. “The gear-driven machines are very static,” he says. “The hydro machines are very sophisticated, more powerful, so the danger potential

increases. All the units have the OPC on the handle, a flat piece of metal that lets the machine know you’re there. You slap that down before you move the machine, so if you fall, it all shuts down.

“Some test applicants might never have used a hydro machine before. What we use for the test depends on equipment availability. Sometimes we have both types, but there’s no way to know ahead of time which type of machine they’ll be tested on. If they aren’t familiar with it, the judge will go over it with them. Basically, it’s the same thing – when adjusting the mower height, it has to be done by half-inch intervals. The chutes on the side have to be down; some have an optional up position.”

Actis notes that when most applicants have problems with this question, it’s a safety issue, not a set-up problem. “They need to use all the safety equipment,” he stresses. “Gloves, ear and eye protection – those are all mandatory. Shirts have to be tucked in, and jean-style pants must be worn, not shorts or anything with loose material. Hard hats aren’t required in Illinois, but applicants should wear a cap of some kind, mainly to keep their hair out of the way. They do have to wear boots – and while steel toes aren’t mandatory, they are recommended.”

Even though the applicant is wearing all the proper safety gear, if it doesn’t appear that he or she can operate the equipment safely, the judge will stop the test, says Actis. “If the machine is just jerking around, the applicant may just stop. If the judge sees that the applicant can’t control the machine, he’ll stop him and tell him to come back next time.” 



A series of
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Presents —

Understanding and Preparing for the CLT Field Exam

Certified Landscape Technician

CLT Test Problem: 8.83 — Riding Mower



By Becke Davis

This is the eighteenth article in a series addressing problems on the CLT test — how to prepare for the task itself, how to prepare for taking the test, and how to avoid common problems that occur during testing.

PLANET changed the certification testing effective June 1, 2008. Previously there were separate tests for maintenance and installation. Now there are two different maintenance and two different installation certifications. Test components include softscape installation, hardscape installation, turf maintenance and ornamental maintenance. Applicants may have points

deducted for safety or technical aspects of the test in each of these components.

This month, we focus on the riding mower question from the turf maintenance portion of the test. The sections of the test are weighted, with 15 percent of the score based on equipment check, 10 percent mowing height adjustments, 10 percent fueling, 35 percent equipment operation and 30 percent safety components.

The Study Reference for this problem can be found in

(continued on page 34)

CLT Field Exam Prep

(continued from page 33)

Turf Equipment Operation and Safety in the Landscape Training Manual for Maintenance Technicians (Chapter 8).

This is a timed test, with 15 minutes allowed to complete it. The test question assumes the test applicant has been sent to mow a lawn. The applicant must do a complete check to make sure the mower is ready for operation. The lawn area is marked off with spray paint. It should be assumed there is a walkway on all four sides of the marked-off area, and care should be taken about where the clippings are directed. Sections of tree trunk will be used to represent trees, and will be marked by flags or stakes. Remove any debris and make sure the area is ready to mow. Begin mowing safely and efficiently, and be aware of the overlap. Park the mower safely when finished.

In the equipment check portion of the test, the applicant will be asked to check the mower to prepare it for safe operation, and point out all grease fittings on the mower to the judge. Next, show the judge the mower height adjustment points, and demonstrate to the judge how to fill the mower with fuel. Once these steps have been completed, mow the designated area as directed by the judge, being careful to put on all safety gear first and to operate the mower safely.

Brian Huffhines is a CLT judge and an ISA-certified arborist in the forestry

department of the City of Lake Forest. There are a few changes to this test question since PLANET revised the test, he says. “You used to be disqualified if you didn’t engage the mower; now that’s just a point deduction,” he explains. “The only major change is that if you don’t lower the deck, you’ll be disqualified.”

Safety is a large percentage of the



test score, so applicants should always be conscious of operating equipment safely and wearing *all* of the appropriate safety gear (which is provided by the sign-in table). Huffhines notes that applicants are required to wear “rugged footwear” such as work boots; failure to do so could result in the applicant being sent home. “They need to wear ear and eye protection, and gloves while they are doing maintenance on the mower,” he says. “Some appli-

cants will have the eye protection in their pocket or on top of their head, but they’ll forget to put it on.”

Forgetting to do one simple thing can knock points off an applicant’s test score, Huffhines observes. “When they look at the area to be mowed, they’ll remove the debris but forget to look for sprinkler heads. The sidewalks are marked with paint, there are stakes for the trees and there might be a Coke can thrown onto the grass. Even if a sprinkler head isn’t marked, the applicant should check for it or explain that they would check for any sprinkler heads. Just because they can’t see it, doesn’t mean it’s not there.”

According to Huffhines, most applicants are prepared for the equipment preparation of the test. “They’re pretty well prepared for checking the air filter, hydraulics level and things like the oil dipstick. There are usually two kinds of machines — Scag and Ferris — and

they can choose which one they’re most familiar with. The judge can’t prompt them, but the applicants can say they’re looking for something on the machine and the judge will point it out, since there are differences on the different mowers. Applicants sometimes forget to mention how to adjust the mower deck. All they have to do is say, ‘I would adjust it here’ where they would pull out the pin and adjust it. For the test, they don’t have to physically

adjust it – they’d be there all day.”

For the fuel filling part of the test, Huffhines says applicants don’t have to actually fill the tank, just explain how they would do it. He points out things to mention in the explanation: making sure that the machine has cooled down before fueling, that the motor isn’t running, and that it should be done in the fueling area, not on the lawn.

“A lot of things on the mower might not be familiar to the applicant,” says Huffhines. “Most people are pretty well prepared, though, and they just have to explain what to do. The deflector – sometimes it’s metal but usually it’s rubber – has to be down, and sometimes

they forget to do that during the mower height adjustment, before they engage it. It’s all part of the mower deck, and it’s another thing they should notice.”

On the surface, this is a straight-forward test, but a lot of people fail it. “Almost half the people who don’t pass, fail because they forget to lower the deck,” stresses Huffhines. “Some mow the whole area without lowering the deck. Most are so well prepared that I’m surprised they do fail. Applicants should practice before they take the test, because they might be intimidated. These are zero-turn mowers that you drive by pushing and pulling two levers; there is no steering wheel. Most have

practiced, but you can’t just jump on and start driving – not with any success.”

If you’re planning to take this test, don’t fail because of a simple mistake. Put the eye protection on your eyes, not on your head, be sure to lower the deck and, as always, go over the study guide if at all possible, and practice, practice, practice. 🌿





Presents –

Understanding and Preparing for the CLT Field Exam

Certified Landscape Technician

CLT Test Problem: 8.84 –Edger and Trimmer



By Becke Davis

This is the nineteenth article in a series addressing problems on the CLT test – how to prepare for the task itself, how to prepare for taking the test, and how to avoid common problems that occur during testing.

PLANET changed the certification testing effective June 1, 2008. Previously, there were separate tests for maintenance and installation; now there are two different maintenance and two different installation certifications. Test components include softscape installation, hardscape installation, turf maintenance and ornamental maintenance. Applicants may have

points deducted for safety or technical aspects of the test in each of these components.

This month, we focus on the Edger and Trimmer problem from the turf maintenance portion of the test. The sections of the test are weighted, with 20 percent of the score based on equipment check, 20 percent based on equipment operation – edger, 20 percent equipment operation – line trimmer and 40 percent safety components.

The Study Reference for this problem can be found in turf
(continued on page 34)

CLT Field Exam Prep

(continued from page 31)

equipment operation and safety in the Landscape Training Manual for Maintenance Technicians (Chapter 8).

This is a timed test, with 15 minutes allowed to complete it. The test question assumes the test applicant has just arrived at a site that needs some edging and trimming along a walkway. A wooden header, sidewalk or curb may represent this walkway. The applicant should watch out for any pedestrians on the walkway (the judge should be considered a pedestrian). The grass around the signposts at this site requires trimming. The signposts are represented by 6x6 timbers, or something similar. The applicant will need to check and prepare the edger. The line trimmer is ready to use.

Armando Actis is the demo and product training manager for Pace, Inc. Although the company is based in Plymouth, MI, Actis works out of Joliet. He has been a CLT judge since moving to Illinois from New Jersey in 2002. In that time, he has judged a number of small equipment categories, including power blower, string trimmer, 21-inch mower, edger and trimmer, chain saw, tiller, aerator and concrete saw, in addition to several mower categories.

As always, safety gear will be on one of the front tables, in the same area where applicants read over the test question. Collecting and actually using

the safety gear should be automatic, since failure to do so can disqualify applicants from almost any test. For this test, ear and eye protection are required, as are a hat and gloves, long pants and boots.

For the edger portion of the test, two types of edgers may be available at the test site. “The stick edger looks like a string trimmer, but its blade is

“After putting on all the safety gear, the applicant will start the edger. It’s important to start it on the ground, not in the air. Holding it the air, or ‘drop-starting’ it, causes the blade to spin, so it’s a safety issue. If the judge, acting as a pedestrian, walks down the sidewalk, the operator should take the machine out of the rut and let it idle, then politely ask the pedestrian to move

out of the way. If the pedestrian doesn’t move away, the machine should be turned off.

“Sometimes, the judge may use fluorescent spray paint to designate the location of a sprinkler head, or he may use an actual sprinkler head. The applicant should stop edging – don’t shut off the machine, just put it in idle – go around the sprinkler head and continue edging on the other side.”

On occasion, the applicant will be given the choice of using a stick edger or a heavy duty edger, says Actis. “The other type of edger that might be

available for the test is an industrial edger with a four-cycle engine and a choke, almost like a small lawn mower. It has one wheel in the front and two wheels at the back. Checking out this type of edger is a little more involved than with a stick edger, but the operation is the same.”

For the string trimmer part of the test, the set up is much the same as with a stick edger with its straight shaft, says Actis. “It’s a two-cycle



like a propeller,” explains Actis. “Test applicants should check the equipment, make sure it has the oil/fuel mixture, and that the blade is tight. Next, the applicant should check out the area he will be cutting, which is usually an area where sidewalks criss-cross. The judges usually put something in the area to represent debris – a stake or a rock or a soda can. The applicant should do a walk-through to pick up any debris and move it to the sidewalk.

engine, oil with gas. The applicant should check the string trimmer head and make sure the shield is tight, and that the throttle is working. The judge will designate an area to trim, usually with a make-believe tree in the middle of the area. The applicant has to trim around it without touching the 'tree.' In addition, there could be actual flower pots to trim around.

"Again, in the same area the judge says to trim, there may be branches, rocks, cans or other debris. The applicant should pick up any debris and put it on the sidewalk, then start trimming the designated area. In addition to wearing safety gear, the applicant must consider pedestrian safety. If the judge is on the sidewalk, the trimmer should be on idle while the 'pedestrian' is asked to move aside. If the pedestrian fails to move, turn off the machine.

"There's more leeway with string trimmers, except for cutting around the tree, bush or flower pot. The first hit

will get them a warning; the second time they hit something, they'll be immediately disqualified. It's the same with picking up debris: observe it, pick it up and put it on the sidewalk. First time, warning; second time, disqualification. Also, if the string breaks, the applicant has to be able to shut off the machine and take more line."

Some of the most common mistakes are made with edgers, Actis notes. "The edger has a six- to seven-inch blade that edges two-and-a-half to three-feet deep. If a person doesn't know how to handle an edger, they will lose control of the machine. The blade will hit concrete and cause pieces of gravel to fly, or a rock could go flying out. They should start out nice and gentle, then make the cut between the sidewalk and sod. If they make a mistake the first time, the judge will give the applicant a warning, but if they do it twice, they're going to fail."

There's a good reason for this, Actis

says. "If you hit a rock at 50 to 60 mph, you can easily break a window. If you cut it one direction, it doesn't shoot out. There is a technique to using a string trimmer; it's about safety and control. Before taking the test, you should practice until you become proficient. You're not only going to be tested on how to start the machines, but how to use them. Some test applicants may only use lawn mowers. They aren't used to trimmers, but part of the test includes this.

"Sometimes you will be able to choose between a stick trimmer and a heavy duty trimmer. It doesn't matter which it is, since they both work the same way. You have to leave a nice, clean cut between the sidewalk and sod. If only one type is available, it will be the stick trimmer. If you aren't familiar with it, you will probably fail. The judges will be able to tell if you don't know how to use it." 🌿





Presents –

Understanding and Preparing for the CLT Field Exam

Certified Landscape Technician

CLT Test Problem: 8.85 –Aerator



By Becke Davis

This is the 20th article in a series addressing problems on the CLT test – how to prepare for the task itself, how to prepare for taking the test, and how to avoid common problems that occur during testing.

PLANET changed the certification testing effective June 1, 2008. In the past, there were separate tests for maintenance and installation. Now there are two different maintenance and two different installation certifications. Test components include Softscape Installation, Hardscape Installation, Turf

Maintenance and Ornamental Maintenance. Applicants may have points deducted for safety or technical aspects of the test in each of these components.

This month, we focus on the Aerator question from the Turf Maintenance portion of the test. The sections of the test are weighted, with 20 percent of the score based on equipment check, 10 percent on site preparation, 40 percent on equipment preparation and 30 percent on the safety components.

The Study Reference for this problem can be found in Turf
(continued on page 34)

CLT Field Exam Prep

(continued from page 33)

Equipment Operation and Safety in the Landscape Training Manual for Maintenance Technicians (Chapter 8).

This is a timed test, with 15 minutes allowed to complete it.

The test assumes you have been sent to aerate a lawn. The customer shows an interest in the machine, so the test applicant should take time to explain how to check and prepare the machine for operation. Prepare the site, making sure to remove debris, and start aerating the area. Remember to use caution when crossing the sidewalk.

Professor Armando Actis is a product trainer and safety instructor. He has been a CLT judge since moving to Illinois from New Jersey in 2002. In that time, he has judged a number of small equipment categories, including Power Blower, String Trimmer, 21-inch Mower, Edger and Line Trimmer, Chain Saw, Tiller, Aerator and Concrete Saw in addition to several mower categories.

As always, safety gear will be on one of the front tables, in the same area where applicants read over the test question. Collecting and actually using the safety gear should be automatic, since failure to do so can disqualify applicants from almost any test. For this test, ear and eye protection are required, as are a hat and gloves, long

pants and boots – the usual safety gear for hand-held power tools. The hat or cap is not a safety requirement for using the aerator, but it is necessary to protect from the sun and heat stroke.

Actis walks us through the test: “The test applicants should check the aerator like any internal combustion



equipment, check the oil, and check the tines. The tines stick out in the back, and the applicants must check that they’ve been properly installed, with nothing loose. The lever on the machine should be up, in transport mode – with the tines up. When the lever is down, the tines should make contact with the ground, so make sure that the lever is working.

“Prior to this, the judge (posing as an interested customer) will ask about a t-handled tool. The test applicants should take this tool from the table when they get their safety equipment. They should use that to take a soil sample by pushing it into the earth about ten inches. Show the judge the soil

sample, and point out how compacted it is, how much dirt is in it and how much dead grass – a little or a lot. Explain why aeration would work, how the air would get at the roots, how the lawn would benefit from aeration. They don’t have to make a scientific or super-technical explanation, just say if the soil would benefit from it — and then explain the benefits of aeration.

“The land where you will be aerating will be painted off in a rectangular U-shape, where you take a right-hand turn and then go back down. Before you turn on the machine, walk the area and remove any debris such as pop cans or branches. The judge may put a sprinkler head in the test area. It will be visible, and you if see one, you should flag it, because where there are sprinkler heads, there are pipes under the ground. The tines of an aerator go down three to four inches, so you should stay clear of this area.

“Once this is done, turn the machine on full throttle and put the tines down.

It's a heavy machine, and when the test applicant accelerates, the judge will be able to see if he's familiar with the machine. If you're not used to it, it's like a big St. Bernard pulling you down the street. Sometimes it's funny, and they'll take off like a cartoon character.

"A judge can tell right away if you're using it incorrectly and will stop you before you can hurt yourself or somebody else. The judge may give you one or two chances, but after that, you fail. (Some may take the test when they're normally responsible for planting trees or flowers. If they pass, fine, and if not, they can retake that part of the test in October.)

"To aerate, pull up the lever and aer-

ate up and down the test area. The judge will be able to tell quickly if you're doing it right. Aerate up and down. When you get to the turn in the 'U', pick up the tines and turn the machine. One side of the tines will dig deeper than the other while turning, so put the tines in transport mode, then make the turn. Get in position, then put the tines down and aerate. Do that at each turn, and pull up the tines at each turn. The area is about nine feet wide and the aerator is 18 to 32 inches wide, so you will have to go up and down two or three times to get a good coverage pattern.

"When you've finished aerating, pull up on the tines and transport the

machine back by the table where the machines are kept. It's easier if you transport it while it's running — just put it in transport mode.

"As far as safety, the judge can usually tell in the critical first five minutes if the applicant has put the safety gear on and is able to use the machine."

Actis suggests anyone who plans to take this test practice before taking it, so they are familiar with the machine. 🌿





A series of clip-and-save articles

Presents –

Understanding and Preparing for the CLT Field Exam

Certified Landscape Technician

CLT Test Problem: 8.86 – Turf Fertilizer



By Becke Davis

This is the 21st article in a series addressing problems on the CLT test – how to prepare for the task itself, how to prepare for taking the test, and how to avoid common problems that occur during testing.

PLANET changed the certification testing effective June 1, 2008. In the past, there were separate tests for maintenance and installation. Now there are two different maintenance and two different installation certifications. Test components include softscape installation, hardscape installation, turf main-

tenance and ornamental maintenance. Applicants may have points deducted for safety or technical aspects of the test in each of these components.

This month, we focus on the turf fertilizer question from the turf maintenance portion of the test. The sections of the test are weighted, with 20 percent based on fertilizer handling, 50 percent on spreading fertilizer and 30 percent on the safety components.

(continued on page 34)

CLT Field Exam Prep



(continued from page 31)

The study reference for this problem can be found in turf chemicals in the landscape training manual for maintenance technicians (chapter 5). This is a timed test, with 15 minutes allowed to complete it.

The test assumes you have been sent to a site requiring fertilizer. There will be a painted area or a large tarp representing the turf area. Kitty litter will be used as a substitute for fertilizer during the test. Weigh out the correct amount of fertilizer, in this case five pounds (or 2.5 kg). Put the weighed-out fertilizer in the spreader, using either a belly grinder or a wheeled broadcast-type spreader. Properly fertilize the designated turf area.

Charlie Keppel is a certified arborist with The Care of Trees in Barrington. He has been involved with CLT testing since the beginning – about 12 years. He has judged tree trimming, chain saw,

edger and he is still judging the fertilizer portion of the test. Prior to judging, he served as a judge's technical assistant.

Keppel says there are three issues that cause applicants to fail this test question. The first is math, or conversion.

"They get confused about how to convert square feet to acres, teaspoons to ounces, ounces to gallons," he explains.



"They have to know how to read the label and how to read the equation sheets."

Reading the label is the second issue. "If they don't read the label, they won't know where to find the information they need – they don't comprehend it. It's important for a company to review how to read a label before they send someone to take the test."

The third issue is calibrating

the spreaders, whether it's a broadcast spreader or a grinder-type spreader. "The label shows how to calibrate each one. A lot of people don't know how and where to set the calibration. It's not just opening and shutting the spreader, but also adjusting it on the handle. The label tells you what number to use for the calibration. I've been doing this for over 40 years, but some applicants have never used a spreader. Anyone spreading granular fertilizer should do a dry run – either with their company, or CLT offers some classes. Otherwise, they could kill somebody's lawn, or somebody could get hurt.

"When it comes to the safety component of the test, Keppel says, "Most people are pretty good. Most aren't unsafe, as compared to chain saw, where I've had to stop people who were about to start the machine without their safety gear on. With fertilizer, they need to wear a dust mask for mixing, and gloves and safety goggles the whole time. Boots are always required."



Those are the primary mistakes people make, but Keppel points out a few others. “It’s worth a reminder that you should open the gate while the spreader is moving inside the lawn area to be fertilized and close the gate when outside the lawn area, watching the overlap for distribution. The gate opens and shuts with a valve on the spreader and opens at the bottom.

“If you spill the fertilizer, you need to pick it up with a rake and a shovel. Read the label to see how to dispose of it. In some cases, you can respread it into the same area. If this happened on a real lawn, you wouldn’t want to hose it down, because the fertilizer could end up in a storm sewer.”

Keppel says to be careful about spreading outside the designated area. “Some applicants don’t stop (the application) when they turn. They should stop, then reopen the spreader after they turn. Otherwise, they end up burning the grass and they will run out of material.”

Finally, Keppel cautions applicants to use proper lifting techniques when filling the spreaders. “Lift with your knees, not your back. Make sure you have the proper safety gear on.”

As with other test questions, the judge will ask the applicant to describe what he is about to do or what he would do if he was at a real jobsite, walking through the whole procedure. If the applicant doesn’t mention putting on safety gear, the judge may remind him/her to do so.

The main thing when preparing to take this test is to do a dry run, and familiarize yourself with both reading the label and calibrating the machine. As always, be sure to use the proper safety gear. 🌿



CLT Field Exam: August 22, 2009



Presents –

Understanding and Preparing for the CLT Field Exam

Certified Landscape Technician

CLT Test Problem: 5.53 – Rototiller



By Becke Davis

This is the 22nd and final article in a series addressing problems on the CLT test – how to prepare for the task itself, how to prepare for taking the test, and how to avoid common problems that occur during testing.

PLANET changed the certification testing effective June 1, 2008. Previously, there were separate tests for maintenance and installation. Now there are two different maintenance and two different installation certifications. Test components include softscape installation, hardscape installation, turf

maintenance and ornamental maintenance. Applicants may have points deducted for safety or technical aspects of the test in each of these components.

This month, we focus on the rototiller question from the softscape installation portion of the test. The sections of the test are weighted, with 50 percent on technical aspects of the test and 50 percent on the safety components.

The study reference for this problem can be found in equipment safety and maintenance in the landscape training manual

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CLT Field Exam Prep

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for installation technicians (chapter 9).

This is a timed test, with 15 minutes allowed to complete it. In this test, the applicant is assumed to have picked up a rototiller, but doesn't know who used it last. Each applicant must be sure he/she is familiar with the operation of the specific rototiller used in the test before attempting to operate it. Check the rototiller to see if it is mechanically safe to start, explaining each step to the judge.

The judge, acting as a site foreman, will explain which area needs to be tilled and how deeply. The applicant should check the area for debris, removing any obstructions and setting them outside of the area to be tilled. Make sure the rototiller is ready, explaining each step to the judge, then proceed to till the area as instructed.

Matt Toftoy, production manager for Garden of Eden Landscape Co. in Naperville, became a CLT in October 2002. He started judging in 2003, and since then has judged tree planting and staking, skid steer and rototiller. He is currently the Illinois CLT judge's coordinator, in charge of recruiting judges and assigning them to test problems.

Even though this is a fairly straightforward test question, Toftoy observes that quite a few people fail this test. "I think most of those who fail haven't used a rototiller before. Even if they haven't used that specific model, most rototillers have the same functions and parts," he says.

There are several common reasons

that applicants fail, Toftoy explains, including forgetting to tell the judge or to physically demonstrate basics like checking the oil, the air filter and vital mechanical pieces. "Technically, all they have to do is to show the judge where everything is located. They don't have to physically take out the

he has to do is tell the judge he's not sure where the piece is on this one."

A little preparation can make all the difference, according to Toftoy. "Before taking the test, applicants should check out a rototiller and be familiar with the parts and where the components are. If they know that and the basic operation – how to adjust the tines to the correct depth and how to till the area and return – they will do fine."

Before operating the equipment, the test applicant has to perform a few simple tasks. "The applicant has to inspect the rototiller to make sure the tines and the safety shields are in place," says Toftoy, "Then check that the machine is mechanically safe to start. The depth gauge should be adjusted, setting it so the tines will go in to the ground to a depth of four inches. The depth gauge is on the back of the rototiller, and can be raised and lowered to raise or lower the depth.

"Applicants can explain these steps verbally – it's not necessary to demonstrate each step. Next, they should check for any debris. The judges may put small objects or potential hazards in the area to be tilled, to replicate sprinkler heads that could be damaged by the rototiller. The applicant should collect any debris and move it out of the area to be tilled."

When these tasks have been completed, the applicant should till the designated area in two passes, down to the end and then returning. "When you get to the end, raise up the tines and disengage the rototiller," says Toftoy, "then make the turn." He stresses that not dis-



dipstick or show the air filter; they just have to explain what they would do. It's a matter of familiarity with the equipment, because they're all manufactured the same, with the same critical parts. If the test applicant isn't familiar with that particular brand, all



engaging is considered a safety problem, and could make the difference between passing and failing. “On most job sites, the operator will keep the rototiller running, but for the test – and for safety purposes – it has to be disengaged whenever you are not tilling the ground.”

As with all the CLT test questions, part of the safety component is based on wearing the appropriate safety gear, which is provided at the check-in table. “For rototiller, gloves are essential and

safety glasses or safety goggles are required,” says Toftoy. “Glasses or goggles is a matter of personal preference. Ear plugs or ear muffs, are again a personal preference, and a hard hat and steel-toe work boots. We have had to send applicants home who showed up in tennis shoes – and the boot requirement is right on the test packet.”

It should also be stressed that it’s not good enough to have this equipment with you — the test applicant must actually wear and/or use each piece of safety

gear. Safety goggles worn on the head instead of over your eyes will count against you.

As far as the operation itself, Toftoy says, “It’s something judges can tell right away – either they know it or they don’t. It’s going to be very obvious if they don’t know how to use it. We’ll stop them before they can damage the machine or hurt themselves or an observer.”

CLT Field Exam: August 22, 2009
Written Exam: October 16, 2009



A series of clip-and-save articles

Presents –

Understanding and Preparing for the CLT Field Exam

Certified Landscape Technician

CLT Test Summary



It takes an army of people to conduct the CLT Field Test. This photo is typical of one of the many test days.

By Becke Davis

For nearly two years – 22 issues – *The Landscape Contractor* has interviewed a variety of CLT judges to help prepare prospective test applicants for test day. Judges have explained, step by step, all the parts of each test question and highlighted the common reasons for failure. When PLANET changed the certification testing effective June 1, 2008, the updated questions were reviewed in detail. Test components, including softscape installation, hardscape installation, turf maintenance and ornamental maintenance were detailed, pay-

ing special attention to critical safety requirements.

“The articles covered most – if not all – of the issues each problem has,” says Tim Caldwell, RLA, CLT, of The Savanna Group, Inc., North Aurora. He is past Chair of the Certification Committee, serves on the ILCA Board of Directors and is the Board liaison for certification. “I serve on the committee and attend every test day and retake day. I’ve been there for every test we have given. As the national observer for PLANET, I travel all over the country to make sure PLANET

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CLT Field Exam Prep

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guidelines are followed consistently on a national basis. I review the matrix, the tests, lists and layout, and observe and evaluate the judges at each test station.”

Caldwell, like all who work on CLT testing, is a volunteer. He completes an evaluation, several pages long, as a follow-up to each test he observes. Simply put, Caldwell knows the CLT test, inside out.

Caldwell says his concern is that, even with all the information available in the series of articles in *The Landscape Contractor*, applicants are not prepared when they show up to take the test. “The applicant is ultimately responsible,” he stresses. “Sometimes they haven’t devoted time because they’re working. But before they take the test, they should take at least 15 to 20 minutes to review the material.

“They also need to practice in advance of the test. The day of the test is not a training session – the judges can’t show them how to use the equipment. The basic operation is pretty standard, but the test applicants have to practice, especially if they’re not familiar with the equipment,” he says.

It’s also essential for test applicants to take and use all the safety gear provided at the registration table, even if they don’t always use every item of that safety gear on the job. “There’s a very good safety record in Illinois, for the most part, but most companies are not requiring all the safety equipment,” observes Caldwell. “You see guys running chain saws without chaps – companies will follow some safety guidelines, but not all.

“The CLT test site is also an OSHA safety site, following their guidelines. We’ve never even had a close call, which is why the rules are there – so we *don’t* even come close to anyone hurting themselves. One of the greatest advantages of the test is that when applicants leave the site, they have a greater appreciation of what to do on



Tree planting



Paver installation



Chain saw

the job,” he notes.

Caldwell stresses that no one is trying to trick the test applicants. All the safety gear is provided, they simply have to put it on. “Sometimes safety is an automatic failure,” he says. “With chain saw, it’s enough to send you home. Basic safety gear like safety glasses, ear plugs, helmet – for eyes, face, ears, and limbs, of course – is required for every single test problem.

“Every year, someone will show up in tennis shoes and/or shorts. No one is allowed on site that is improperly dressed. I once saw a judge show up in shorts and steel-toed sandals. In 25 years, I’ve never seen steel-toed sandals. The judge was asked to change into pants and boots.”

“My advice is not to expect to pass every test the first time. You’ll pass what you know very well, but you should try it for the experience. You’ll learn what you need to work on, so you can study those parts of the test. On retakes, the percent of applicants who pass probably jumps up to about fifty percent. It’s a higher pass rate, because they are better prepared.”

As difficult as the CLT testing is, Caldwell is convinced of the advantages. “Personally, I took the test because I wanted to take myself to a more professional level. People who pass the CLT have the self-gratification of knowing they’re more of a professional, and it might help them get more pay. The first time I took the test, I passed all parts except one. When I went back to take that one, I passed with a 98 out of 100. At that time, the test consisted of 16 or 17 exams in one day,” he says.

Caldwell is proud of industry support for the CLT program and its volunteers. “It’s unique within our industry – it’s impressive that people will do all this work without pay.”

Kevin Vancina, president of Vancina Landscaping, Inc. in Joliet, is CLT Committee Chair. “The Certification Committee is an awesome

group of people – it’s a group effort to keep it going; they make it happen. I took the CLT test in its second year, and I’ve been involved ever since. My father was part of the original committee – he was the site chair – and when he stepped down, I took his place.”

Vancina notes that the CLT test is evolving over time. “The whole test process is metamorphosing. It used to be company owners and supervisory staff; now it’s boiling down to the people who are actually doing the work. That’s who it’s really designed for. A lot of the Hispanic work force is taking the test – this is a chance for them to educate themselves, and it gives them a degree of authority in the field. It shows they have expertise.”

Vancina says that PLANET is talking about doing a CLT promotion to educate consumers about the certification program, to put it in the public eye. “We’re now starting to get CLT written into municipal specs as a bid qualification. It helps homeowners, so they know someone knowledgeable is working in their yard.”

When it comes to preparation for the test, Vancina says it’s not unusual to hear a test applicant say, “My boss told me to take the test today.” This can make passing problematic. “They just found out, so they have no clue what they are getting into,” he explains. “An applicant has to have the ‘want to’ in order to pass it. When employers send guys in with no knowledge of the test, they have no desire to pass.”

There are good reasons to work for that CLT designation, Vancina believes. “Some companies will pay more for a CLT, and it makes a job applicant more marketable when jobs are tight. When you’re looking for work, someone with a CLT has a much better chance of getting a landscaping job.”

Both Caldwell and Vancina agree – it’s important to continue educating the landscape work force about the CLT program, keeping it visible to prospective applicants, and marketing the pro-



Skid steer operation



Lateral repair



Plant layout

gram to the public and to municipalities. The CLT program has come a long way, thanks to the vision of the people involved and the support of the industry. 🌿

Editor’s note: next month we will examine the future of the CLT test and program.

Future CLT Test Dates —

- **Written Exam**
October 16, 2009 - ILCA HQ
June 18, 2010 - ILCA HQ
- **Field Exam**
February 27, 2010 - Joliet Junior College’s Weitendorf Agricultural Education Center



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CLT Test Indoor Test Site



By Becke Davis

It's official – the exciting new John H. Weitendorf, Sr. Agricultural Education Center, a 30,500-square-foot complex owned by Joliet Junior College (JJC), has been tried and tested as the site of recent and future CLT testing. The verdict: it's a win/win for ILCA's certification program.

Kevin Vancina, CLT and president of Vancina Landscaping, Inc., in Joliet, is the state chairman for CLT Certification and chair of ILCA's Certification Committee. He explains the impetus behind the move. "We're really excited about this. We had talked about doing the tests indoors, since it takes away the

weather factor for set up and testing. It also provides flexibility, which is to our advantage.

"Others have done it – Canada *only* does indoor testing. Our test site was going to have to be moved, anyway, because of reconstruction on the main campus at JJC. We won't be going back to the main campus anymore – everything is on site (at the Weitendorf Center), which allows us to go, rain or shine. It also allows us to do a winter test in February/March, before the season really gets going."

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CLT Indoor Test Site



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The new site was serendipitous. “The school received a huge donation for a new agricultural center – it provided for land and a building,” Vancina explains. “We opted to use the Ag Center for the whole test, because it didn’t make sense to use that plus keep the other site.”

The Weitendorf Center includes a 10,800-square-foot arena and a 6,900-square-foot exhibit hall. Despite the size of the Center, some portions of the CLT test will continue to take place outdoors, making the testing an indoor/outdoor hybrid. “There’s a warehouse, classroom space, and paved exterior space we can use,” says Vancina. “The August test was the first full test at the new facility, a hybrid indoor/outdoor.”

“In August, the site wasn’t finished, but the entire site is now graded and seeded. There’s not enough space to do all the tests indoors, so

mowers are outdoors, and skid steer will always be outside on the parking lot. If there’s snow for the test in February/March, we can clear the snow and still use the space.

“The tree planting is going to be one of the challenging tests. Canada builds a platform and fills it with soil, and some test sites have dirt floors. We’ll probably have to do the tree planting outdoors, since we have a concrete floor. We built paver boxes for grading and drainage (there are drainage holes in the floor), and we can do plant I.D. indoors. Rototiller and aerator will probably be outside, too – we did aerator indoors last time. Forty yards of mulch were donated, and we filled the floor with eight inches of mulch. I don’t think we’ll do that again.”

There is an indefinite contract with the college to use it as a testing site, Vancina explains, calling it “outstanding.” “It doesn’t cost us a dime to use the site and keep our



trailers there. We are scheduled and locked down for the next five years. JJC has been more than generous, right from the get-go, when that contract was put in place.”

Vancina notes that Dr. James Ethridge has been instrumental in the success of the CLT test program in Illinois. Dr. Ethridge is department chair of horticultural sciences at the college, an ILCA member and chairman of the education portion of the CLT Committee. He has been on the faculty at JJC since 1983.

“Set up will be much easier now,” says Vancina. “We can set up the day prior and leave the test equipment in place, so the whole site is ready to roll in the morning.”

The indoor site will be safer, too. “We’ve never had anything vandalized, but we did have some equipment disappear a couple of years ago. Now everything is under roof, under lock and key, and ready to go,” Vancina notes.

With the move to the new

hybrid site, the October retake test has been eliminated.

“Retakes will be worked into the matrix of the full test, in August and in February/ March,” says Vancina. Written tests will continue to be given bimonthly at the ILCA office.

CLT testing is expected to grow in importance as more municipalities write CLT requirements into their specifications. The test has been revamped by PLANET to include four modules: hard-scape installation, softscape installation, turf maintenance and ornamental maintenance. Illinois hasn’t implemented the irrigation module at this stage, other than irrigation and drainage aspects of other test questions. Eventually, PLANET anticipates adding other modules, such as carpentry, for example.

The new test site, with its capacity for a hybrid of indoor and outdoor testing, should give ILCA and CLT candidates the best of both worlds. 🌿





A series of
clip-and-save
articles

What it means to be a Certified Landscape Technician

by Becke Davis

Tom Lupfer, CLT and president of Sustainable Landscaping, Inc. and Lupfer Landscapes in Lyons, says that if he was going to ask his employees to take the Certified Landscape Technician (CLT) test, he should take it himself. "I got my CLT in 2007. I graduated from Northwestern and was impressed by the educational rigors of the test. In fact, I failed three components and had to go back and retake it. It increases my professionalism and makes me stand out from others," he explains.

"I'm trying to get municipalities to put CLTs in specs because it will level the playing field. Every time a customer asks why I'm more expensive than another company, I can point to the CLT as proof that we're more professional. I plan to send more employees to take the CLT test – it's a plum for them, and a resumé builder. It gives them something extra to bring to the table."

Lupfer notes that some companies seem to send employees for CLT testing from the top down rather than from the bottom up. "I was inspired by two older women who worked as office staff and were taking the irrigation control part of the test.

"Certification is a long, hard process that greatly enhances professionalism. By the time I finished it, I had learned a lot about safety training



Tom Lupfer



Hector Melendez

in day-to-day operations. I've increased safety training and I strive to maintain a high level of professionalism. Certification heightens your awareness of safety procedures – it made me look at things in a different way," he notes.

Hector Melendez of Hoy Landscaping in Melrose Park is a CLT who paid for the test out of his own pocket.

"It is very difficult to get into a management position. When I asked about taking the test, I was told there was no money to pay for it, so I paid for it myself.

"Every month I meet with the guys and use the information I have learned, putting it into binders for each truck. Some of the guys are taking English classes and wanting to educate themselves – I recommend they become CLTs. You can put CLT on your business cards, and now some commercial properties specify CLTs must be on site. It raises the reputation of the company – it works for me, and it works for the company," Melendez says.

"You have to make yourself valuable to the company. If your company offers to pay for CLT testing – great, go for it. But if not, invest in yourself," he says. "If you want to make a difference in yourself and in your company, ask yourself, what are you going to bring in value? Take horticulture classes,

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agriculture classes, English as a Second Language classes and CLT testing. CLT is very valuable – use it to improve yourself. I think everybody should take it, not just foremen. It proves you are knowledgeable.”

Matthew Dingeldein is owner of Matthew Dingeldein & Co, Inc., doing business as The Oak Grove Gardeners in Naperville. He is also a CLT. When asked how he would respond if a fellow landscape contractor asked if he thought taking the CLT test was useful, he said, “I would encourage him to go ahead and take it — for the intrinsic value that comes from passing, for the new way it makes you look at familiar tasks, and the way it helps you prepare for unfamiliar ones.

“Initially, I wanted to prove to myself that I could pass the test,” says Dingeldein. “I’ve been working in the landscape for more than half of my life, and I just wanted to make sure I knew what I was doing. Additionally, I wanted to do something to set myself

apart from my contemporaries. Having been certified in all four modules lets my current and potential clients know that I am a contractor worthy of their trust and more than capable of performing my duties,” he says.

“You wouldn’t trust an accountant without their CPA, a broker who hasn’t passed the Series 7 exam, or a lawyer who hasn’t passed the bar. Why would you expect any less from your land-



Matt Dingeldein

scape contractor? I’m going to be on your property at least once a week caring for your landscape, something that projects your image to your neighbors and/or clients. There are a lot of things that can go wrong with any landscape project, and it’s important to invest in a contractor who takes those unknowns seriously enough to be versed in all aspects of his trade.

“Aside from the sense of satisfaction that I received after taking and subsequently passing the test, it hasn’t ‘paid off’ in the traditional monetary sense of the phrase,” Dingeldein says. “When an individual works for a larger firm, they might see a raise or a future promotion to foreman or superintendent. In my experience, clients’ eyes tend to glaze over when I start breaking

it down for them. The certification seems to be appreciated more within the industry than by the general public.

“I’m busy educating my client base and developing marketing that shows my potential clients the importance of contractor certification. The Oak Grove Gardeners have existed in

one form or another since 1979, making 2009 our 30th year in business. Inspired by that success, we hope to add 30 more landscape maintenance clients for 2010 – and I hope to achieve it by using my CLT designation as a vehicle,” Dingeldein notes.

“Was the CLT test harder than I expected? Yes, only because I had to take the time to re-evaluate some of the things I do on a daily basis. When production is a factor, we often power



Christy Webber

through our tasks. When taking the exam, it’s important to learn the ins and outs of each section; the judges will be looking at each aspect of the task at hand. There are no reasons to be unfamiliar with them since they’re itemized in the test materials, and have been the subject of discussion in past issues of *The Landscape Contractor*,” he says.

“There are a surprising number of people who show up to the exam with little or no preparation. Since I paid my own way, I made sure to know as much as I could. Not everyone who takes the exams is going to feel that sense of accountability. But knowing that your employer is willing to make the investment in you should be reason enough to succeed. Whether you’re a two-man show like Oak Grove or a firm with yards all over the city and suburbs, those three letters – CLT – come at a pretty hefty price tag. There’s a lot more riding on those mowers than just us, like the reputations of our businesses and our clients,” he concludes.

Christina Poggi, horticulturist, CLT and CLP at James Martin Associates, Inc. in Vernon Hills has this to say: “When the first JMA employees became CLTs, I gained an advantage in preparing for the testing. Our certi-

fied employees were able to prepare a training module that closely resembled the test. JMA strongly believes in the CLT designation and invested time for CLT employees to train me. The study guide, along with the hands-on training at JMA, was invaluable in preparing for the test.”

Thomas C. Bolas, ASLA, CLP and general manager of James Martin Associates, says there are benefits from having certified employees. “Training leads to more efficient and productive employees, a higher level of professionalism, safety awareness and individual employee growth and development.”

Christy Webber, president of Christy Webber Landscapes in Chicago, is herself a Certified Landscape Technician and so are many of her staff. “We’ve been sending a lot of people to take the CLT test – about ten people in the last year and a half – although they’re not all certified yet.”

Webber explains that this is done for internal, not external reasons. “Certification is not something our customers recognize yet. We really get excited when someone passes the CLT – we give them lots of attention, and put it on the website. It’s an in-house badge of distinction, of honor.”

For details about the CLT program and testing, visit ILCA’s web site: ilca.net. 

Future CLT Test Dates —

- Written Exam
February 5, 2010 - ILCA HQ
- Field Exam
February 27, 2010 - Weitendorf Agricultural Education Center
Joliet, IL



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