Mid Atlantic Enterprise in Williamsburg, VA, is working hard to push permeable pavers to improve water runoff conditions. Located in what company owner David Barglof calls the heart of the Chesapeake Bay region, many contractors and consumers still do not aggressively pursue the use of permeable pavers. But Barglof says his company pushes them at any and every opportunity.

**COMPOSTING & RECYLING.** Whether it is out on the jobsite or back at the shop, many contractors are looking for ways to reduce waste while improving the environment. Alternative Environments Landscape Management in Villa Rica, GA, owned by Matt DuCharme and Jeff Camp, focuses on upping their green game by recycling natural waste into compost which is then blended with soil to make topsoil. They also recycle vehicle fluids, paper, pallets, metal, barrels and old electronics.

Professional Grounds Management (PGM) in Portland, OR, has developed an organic maintenance program that utilizes compost tea. Compost tea—a steeped mixture of water and compost—extracts valuable nutrients and bacteria from compost, suspending them in water and making them easily absorbed by plants. The company has also installed a shop solar system.

**FUEL & EQUIPMENT.** Many equipment dealers have been helping set up contractors with more environmentally friendly equipment and fuel solutions.

Looking to maintain an “innovative edge,” Terra-scape Enterprises in Edgewater, FL, says it was the first in its area to undergo a propane conversion of its fleet. Alternative Environments Landscape Management plans to have converted its entire mower fleet to propane by the end of 2014. Silvis Group in Mount Pleasant, PA, has several battery-powered trimmers, leaf blowers and chainsaws as part of its fleet.

**EDUCATING THE MARKET.** Many sustainability-minded contractors proactively look for opportunities to spread knowledge about the benefits of sustainable landscaping practices in their communities. For example, staff from Alternative Environments Landscape Management speak at Chamber events.

Steven Davidson, owner of Earth Groomers in Toms River, NJ, holds several organic credentials, such as being named an NOFA Accredited Organic Land Care Provider, a Master
Composter, and having completed the Rutgers University Organic Landscape Certificate Program. He says his company has become the organic pioneer in its area, providing careers and education to employees, and helping its community by educating on composting, organics and native plants.

**Retention, referrals, and building a business**

Whether the year is 2014 or 1984, landscape contractor after landscape contractor will tell you that the key to building business is word of mouth. Of course, it also helps to have a well-planned marketing strategy that focuses on both your goals and the most effective tactics to help achieve those goals. Here’s a look at what some of this year’s Hidden Gems say is working for them.

**Acme Land Sculpting** in Sylvania, OH, is the classic story. Scott Horoszewski started his business part-time while working for another lawn care company. His company steadily grew through word of mouth until it reached a tipping point where Horoszewski had to decide if he wanted to begin focusing on it full-time. He did, and has now been growing his company more aggressively.

Average annual sales have more than doubled over the past couple of years. “I would have to say this is because we have done some home and garden shows, along with a lot of charity work,” Horoszewski says. “Also, showing people our hard work and how good our jobs are still lead to good referrals. When talking to new customers, they say they came to us because they have seen us working in the community, and also because I have personal interaction with my customers—talking face to face and being able to answer questions at any time of the day.”

Similarly, Tom Grosh of **Grosh’s Lawn Service** in Clear Spring, MD, doesn’t focus on being the biggest company, just the best. To him and his clients, it’s often the little things that matter most.
“We make sure we return each and every phone call and email each day, including Saturdays and Sundays,” Grosh relates. “I want to convey to my customers and potential customers that I will be there for them should the need arise. You would be surprised at how just returning a phone call or email allows the customer to see what kind of company you are and how you operate. A lot of potential customers will say, ‘Thank you for getting back with me.’ I think of the lost revenue at other companies that waste money on advertising and do not get back with the customer in a timely fashion. This reflects bad on the whole Green Industry.”

Linnemann Lawn Care & Landscaping in Columbia, IL, has a “director of first impressions” whose primary charge is to answer phones and provide exceptional customer service Monday through Friday. To further enhance the customer experience, the company has invested heavily in its website, linnemannlawncaresome.com, which now includes options for online chatting and online bill payment.

Diaz Lawn in Austin, TX, works hard to be viewed as a trusted adviser for its property owner clientele. “We do this by providing lawn care tips for HOA newsletters, blogging and social media, community speaking/workshops, and through internal education and professional development programs,” says Daniel Diaz, co-owner and general manager. “We are developing formal training programs at all levels of our company. Our management team is actively engaged in year-round training, both in Green Industry techniques (such as fire-wise landscaping and native plants) along with training in business topics such as human resources and management.”

LCS Lawn Service operates three branches—its original location serving the Milwaukee, WI, market, along with two branches serving the Minneapolis and St. Paul, MN, market. Client retention has never been below 89%, which is an impressive feat given the competitive nature of today’s lawn care business.

A few years ago, LCS was one of many lawn care companies that had the misfortune of using the DuPont Imprelis herbicide to treat turf. Imprelis ended up doing some serious damage to certain trees, particularly Norway spruce and white pine. A class action lawsuit ensued and has since been settled.

“Imprelis was the most environmentally friendly product ever