

SPRING 2026 ISSUE

MulchMatters

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Maintaining an Advantage

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Through Winter



AHEAD OF THE GAME

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From the Editor

The year's shortest month is associated with some big moments: A big football game, Valentine's dates and a groundhog named Punxsutawney Phil who is supposedly endowed with the weather wisdom to predict when spring will arrive.

This February is also a significant milestone for me. It marks my 20th year at Colorbiotics. In case you were wondering, I'm not going anywhere!



I suppose when you stay in a place this long, it's only natural to get questions about retirement. But my answer continues to be that I'm excited about what we're doing as a company, and Sika's investment in our business has reinvigorated that drive to get to work every day.

An essential part of our company's culture is to hit the road and spend time at our customers' yards. The site visits are truly an inspiration for this publication. When I see what a producer is doing and the things they've learned along the way, I want to share it with others in our industry.

Our second magazine edition of Mulch Matters includes stories from across North America and photos that showcase standout operations. It also includes industry news and important insights. Be sure to sign up to get the fall edition at no cost. I hope you enjoy it!

On common ground,

KENT ROTERT
VICE PRESIDENT, COLORBIOTICS

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A Discerning ‘Pallet’: How a Canadian Operation Stands Out

Perhaps no asset in commerce is as integral, utilized and as underappreciated as the humble wood pallet.

“As soon as the pallet is missing, production halts,” said Henk Vrugteveen, president of Oxford Pallet & Recyclers Ltd. in Norwich, Ontario.

“The pallet is a vital part of production, transportation and delivery to retailers.”

HENK VRUGTEVEEN

The unsung hero of trade also has an afterlife — and strong ties to the mulch industry.

Pallet material waste was the most common product for colored mulch in the early days of the industry. It continues to be ground for multiple uses, such as animal bedding.

WOOD WORK

Vrugteveen’s introduction to the world of pallets began as a 16-year-old while working at a large produce hub near Toronto. As a forklift operator, he handled countless loads of onions and carrots. His eye eventually spotted a need in the industry.

“Every pallet sitting on the side of the road and every pallet sitting on the docks represented a \$5 bill,” he said. That observation led him to get in his truck and start picking up discarded pallets.

The fledgling business began operation in 1999 in a rented facility, repairing pallets and selling them to local manufacturers in Norwich, a community about two hours west of Buffalo. Today, the business is a showcase of efficiency, repairing an estimated 20,000 pallets each week and building another 6,000 new pallets. It employs nearly 100 people and has a fleet of more than 160 trailers.

CHIPS OFF THE OLD BLOCK

With so many pallets coming in, wood waste was an inevitability. The business got into what Vrugteveen called the “necessary evil” of grinding pallet material; the cost of paying recyclers was no longer cost effective.

“I was going to make mulch,” he said. It was the beginning of the sister company called Premium Mulch Products.





PRODUCER SPOTLIGHT

TRUE COLORS

“What’s kind of neat about the mulch side of our business is it came from an issue at Oxford Pallet of having waste material,” said Eric Kok, the manager at Premium Mulch Products.

In the early days, pallet materials were used to produce colored mulch. “I remember the first 30 loads I gave away for free to get rid of the product,” Vrugteveen said. The business had to live up to its eventual name – Premium – and looked for a colorant and coloring machine to achieve that.

“We came across an ad from Colorbiotics, and we knew the company that had the best product in Ontario used them,” Vrugteveen said. “We connected with Colorbiotics and haven’t looked back since.”

In 2018, Premium Mulch Products moved away from coloring pallet material entirely. It now exclusively uses a virgin wood product and the Sahara X3 coloring system.

“We use Starburst Black, Coffee Brown and Red,” Kok said. “The colorizer controls everything down to the pounds of dye we put in our product.”

NORTH STAR

The trajectory of Oxford Pallet & Recyclers Ltd. has parallels with the mulch industry in general. The company identified an opportunity to meet consumer demand, it later took advantage of pallet waste material to produce colored mulch and it ultimately prioritized a premium product using virgin wood and high-quality equipment and colorant.

For Vrugteveen, the business’ commitment to faith, family and its fellow employees makes the success ever sweeter. “I love when I see my employees happy,” he said. “I love seeing the person starting out on the floor, coming into a better position in the company. I just love seeing people grow.”

SCAN THE QR CODE
GO INSIDE THE OXFORD OPERATION



WRITTEN BY DC LEGISLATIVE AND REGULATORY SERVICES

Issues to Watch in Washington in 2026

As Congress enters a new session in 2026, there are a number of issues of importance for mulch and soil producers. Here are some of the top takeaways from DC Legislative and Regulatory Services.

The Sunshine Protection Act of 2025 would make daylight saving time permanent across the U.S., eliminating the biannual clock change. This is a bill to watch for additional traction in early 2026 as Congress gets back to work.

Product standards, recycled content rules and PFAS packaging policy are active areas for federal and state action.

The Mulch & Soil Council tracks legislation and regulatory reviews involving materials, recycled content, compostability, soil carbon and PFAS in packaging. These policy areas shape labeling, allowable materials in consumer-facing bags and the future of container design for soil and mulch products. Federal agencies, including the EPA and the Food and Drug Administration, continue to evaluate PFAS contamination in

packaging, and state legislatures are considering extended producer responsibility programs.

Agricultural and conservation program decisions in the U.S. Department of Agriculture budget will affect soil-related markets.

The USDA budget summary for fiscal year 2026 identifies conservation programs, soil health initiatives and land management efforts that are under review and potentially will be recalibrated. These programs have direct commercial relevance because they influence demand for compost, soil amendments, mulch, recycled organic matter and specialty growing media. Congress may also consider adjustments to conservation funding levels or program eligibility rules during budget negotiations, which would further affect related markets. This could be addressed in the upcoming “skinny” Farm Bill which could gain traction in the spring of 2026.

SOIL & MULCH SMPN PRODUCER NEWS

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SAVE THE DATE



The Mulch & Soil Council’s 2026 Annual Meeting

September 29 – October 1, 2026
New Orleans, Louisiana



TRENDS AND TIPS

IT'S IN THE BAG

The Essential Role of Co-Packing

The adage, “It’s good to have a friend in the business,” rings true for, in particular, co-packing.

The partnership between lead companies and co-packing sites is an integral part of the industry. Despite its widespread use, most consumers are unaware of where the bagged product was produced. What they do expect is a quality product wherever they make a purchase. That requires a strong cooperation that extends to facilities across North America.

“Co-packing has become more and more of a factor in our industry because it’s hard to go build your own plant,” said Byron Morgan, general manager of Mountain West Bark. “Taking advantage of another person’s facility and cutting a lot of that freight out to maintain your business is really what co-packing is all about.”

Smith Creek, a sustainability-focused mulch, animal bedding and wood fuels production facility based in Borden, Indiana, knows the key to a good co-packing partnership is understanding the standards, recipes and mixes exactly as the lead company would want them – and then delivering on that promise.

“If it’s a Smith Creek-branded product, it’s probably going to have a different recipe than what it would be for the co-packers,” said Matt Smith, COO and managing partner at Smith Creek. “They give us their recipes and we make the soil mixes, mulches, and (animal bedding) pellets how they want it and then put it right on a truck or trailer, going to their stores. We work with several different large companies to ship directly to their stores, but the consumer never knows that it was manufactured here.”

As the lawn and landscape business has moved away from localized buying to national buying, producers have been forced to find ways to

get their product into major big box stores. But, to Morgan’s point, sometimes, you have to take advantage of another operation’s proximity to the market stores to cut down on freight costs.

“One of the main reasons people come to the Mulch & Soil Council’s Annual Meeting is to meet packers and co-packers,” said Bob LaGasse, executive director of the Mulch & Soil Council. LaGasse has seen trends in co-packing evolve over the years, to the point that now, they are essential for major companies that are placing products in big box stores located across the nation. He said the lead companies bear a lot of responsibility when it comes to product quality and the co-packing relationship.

“At the end of the day, it’s the lead company that is held responsible for any issues with quality. In a good relationship, the lead company has someone who is visiting the co-packing sites regularly to do their own quality assurance tests on the product to ensure they meet a high standard, whether that’s mulch, soil or something else.”

BOB LAGASSE

“The Mulch & Soil Council has its certification testing and we will pull random samples of product from across the country,” LaGasse explained.

Co-packing has played an essential role in the expansion of the mulch and soil industry. There are benefits around additional revenue for co-packers and location optimization for lead companies. The result of these strong partnerships is no matter which store a consumer goes to for landscaping products, they can expect quality in the bag.

INDUSTRY HAPPENINGS

LaGasse Honored with Leber Award

Bob LaGasse, executive director of the Mulch & Soil Council, has his finger on the pulse of the industry like no one else. But even he was taken aback by the most recent presentation of the John Leber Award for Distinguished Service.

MSC president Jim Weber presented LaGasse the award during the annual meeting in Disney Springs, Florida in the fall. The board had unanimously chosen LaGasse, who has been leading the organization for the past 44 years.

"I didn't think this industry could keep a secret," said LaGasse, as he accepted the award with surprise and a bit of humor. "I truly appreciate the recognition, and it has been a great pleasure to work for such a great organization."

The Council's 55th annual meeting returns to New Orleans Sept. 29-Oct. 1.



New Certification for All-Natural Mulch

Consumers continue to show a growing interest in all-natural and organic products. Over the past few years, the Mulch & Soil Council identified a similar interest in using mulch and soil products made from all-natural ingredients.

While many MSC Certified Products are indeed natural, the Uniform Voluntary Product Guidelines (UVPG) from 2003 did not specifically make that a requirement.

In 2025, the MSC adopted new guidelines for Certified All-Natural Horticultural Mulches. The purpose of the certification program is "to help identify products that comply with the more stringent definition and a higher level of inspection and testing for horticultural mulches wanted by today's gardening consumer,"

the MSC's announcement said. A new label (pictured below) helps consumers identify mulches that meet the all-natural standard. For producers, the certification can serve as both a differentiator and a marketing tool. The MSC continues to work on a similar all-natural certification for soil products.



Smith Creek MAINTAINS AN ADVANTAGE

"Animal Bedding. Landscape Products. Wood Fuels." The signs attached to an impressive fleet of semi-trailers reveal only part of what's on offer at Smith Creek.

The product selection itself may not turn heads. How the operation supports those products certainly does.

"We're a little unique in that we are providing a lot of our own transportation," Matt Smith, the COO and managing partner, said in a humble understatement. "We have 400 semi-trailers that haul raw materials in and out of here."

Amassing a fleet that size was not necessarily by preference. The operation, headquartered about 20 miles northwest of Louisville, Kentucky, could not find the service it needed to take care of the suppliers and customers throughout Indiana and Kentucky. So, it grew the fleet.

Walking floor trailers, van trailers, blow in trailers, chip trailers, roll offs, open-top trailers, auger trailers, flatbeds and tankers now traverse a 200-mile radius. And with them comes a relentless need for maintenance.



MATT SMITH
COO OF SMITH CREEK

THE FIX IS IN

Smith Creek has 14 dedicated mechanics, a supervising mechanic and three service writers. The 18-member crew focuses on the transportation and heavy equipment sides of the business.

"We do all of our own maintenance and have been that way from day one," said Smith, noting the operation has a different maintenance division that takes care of the plant. "This way of doing things is not cheap — we're employing experienced mechanics. But as a result, we avoid downtime, and that allows us to service our customers and suppliers without delays."

The maintenance facility is in the middle of the primary production yard. Just steps away, Smith Creek operates a parts department that could pass as a retail store. Shelves are stocked with parts that can be quickly utilized by the maintenance team for efficient repairs.

"Everything we do involves expensive equipment, and uptime is critical," Smith said. "We can't wait a day or two to get a technician here from a vendor or contractor. We've always chosen to fend for ourselves."



"We do all of our own maintenance and have been that way from day one."

MATT SMITH

PROVIDING THE WORKS

The work never stops at Smith Creek — literally. The bedding side of the business runs 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Another of its production facilities in Evansville, Indiana, runs 24 hours a day during the week. The entire operation employs about 145 people across all its locations.

The customers' needs are a key reason for the round-the-clock production and priority on maintenance.

"When it comes to animal bedding for poultry, we've only got a three-day window from the time they clean out the building until the time they have to put birds back in," Smith said. "So, there is no option to say, 'I can't get you this week because of a problem.'"

On the mulch side of the business, the hours have been greatly reduced since Smith Creek took delivery of the first Sahara XP colorizer. The company had used Colorbiotics colorant for its mulch products for about 20 years, but for most of that time it used a trommel to do the coloring.

"We didn't realize we had outgrown the trommel until we got the XP. It was a game changer as soon as we got it because we were able to produce the amount of yardage that we needed to in one shift without going to two shifts."

MATT SMITH

The improvement was such that the business purchased a second Sahara XP for its location in Louisville — a valuable gain in efficiency for an operation that never rests.



THE SECRET SERVICE

Any business can acknowledge the importance of customer service. Smith Creek takes that all the way to its own welders and a parts inventory for every need that can arise.

"We ship pretty quick, especially on the landscape side," Smith said. "If a customer calls in the morning, they're typically going to get their delivery after lunch. We stand out because of our service and having our own transportation fleet helps us with that."

SCAN THE QR CODE
WATCH THE SMITH CREEK STORY



EQUIPMENT SPOTLIGHT THE COLD WEATHER PACKAGE

OUT COLD

A New Way to Run Through Winter

Coloring mulch may not be so complicated when it's 75 degrees and sunny. But many producers operate in regions where locals quip, "If you don't like the weather, wait five minutes." The conditions may be volatile, but eventually winter's grip lays hold.

Sub-freezing temperatures generally require operations to pursue one of two options: either they shut down for the winter or they build a heated structure at considerable cost to protect the coloring equipment from the elements.

But a third path is available for the industry's most efficient coloring system.





“Every day you’re shut down costs money. And with the Cold Weather Package, we are here on a snowy, 20-degree day, and we are 100% operational.”

JUSTIN SMITH, CEO
C&J Bark Haulers, Inc.



THE SAHARA XP COLD WEATHER PACKAGE, SHOWN HERE, INCLUDES A HEATED BOX THAT PROTECTS THE COLOR AND WATER INJECTION SYSTEM AS WELL AS A HEATED BLANKET THAT PROTECTS THE HIGH-PRESSURE WATER PUMP FROM FREEZING.

Colorbiotics’ Sahara XP includes a Cold Weather Package as one of its customizable options. The add-on feature is purpose-built for the XP, and it enables producers to operate outside — even when the temperature plummets well below freezing. The heated box protects the color and water injection system from the elements.

C&J Bark Haulers, Inc. in Hemlock, Michigan, added the package prior to the 2025-2026 winter season to meet growing demand for its colored mulch products.

“When we started the business, we were able to produce enough material in the summer months

here in Michigan for the entire landscape season,” said Justin Smith, the CEO.

But the operation’s growth and eventual expansion into bagging led to more demand than was possible to meet in the warmer months alone.

“The first couple of years bagging was a huge struggle,” Smith said. “We had to be very selective on the days we could run and do production because of the winter weather. Every day you’re shut down costs money. And with the Cold Weather Package, we are here on a snowy, 20-degree day, and we are 100% operational. That’s huge when it comes

to the demands that we have to meet for all our bulk and bag customers.”

The heater is designed to kick in automatically when the temperature falls to 45 degrees, but operators can adjust the auto start to their preference. It can be ordered on new machines or installed in the field. It also comes with a heated blanket to protect the high-pressure water pump from freezing.

“A lot of operations have the business to keep working through the winter, so we designed a package to help them maximize that potential,” said Nick Lincoln, national sales manager at Colorbiotics. “The Cold Weather Package frees

them to continue operating well below freezing.”

For C&J Bark Haulers, it is the perfect solution for long winters. “When you have to shut down for three or four months in Michigan’s cold winters, that really hurts the bottom line,” Smith said. “Having the Cold Weather Package and being able to process year-round really improves business operations and profitability.”

NOTE: COLORBIOTICS RECOMMENDS CUSTOMERS CONTINUE TO DRAIN AND WINTERIZE THE EQUIPMENT IN CASE OF POWER LOSS.

You Are OK – Until You Aren't

In the mulch and soil industry, long hours aren't unusual — they're part of the season. Overtime can be appealing and many associates welcome the chance to earn extra income. But the reality is simple: Even the hardest workers have limits.

WARNING LIGHTS

Every operator knows the importance of paying attention to warning lights on loaders, grinders, trucks and conveyors.

A flashing light doesn't mean the equipment has failed; it means a problem is coming if you don't act. Maybe the hydraulics are running hot. Maybe a belt is slipping. Maybe fluid levels are getting low.

Machines warn us before the breakdown. Humans do, too, but we're not as good at listening to our own warning lights.

HIDDEN COSTS

Overtime in season can be a great opportunity. The work is steady, the days are full and the paychecks reflect the effort. But running hard for long stretches comes with real risks.

Just like a machine pushed past its limits, people don't break all at once. They wear down. And often, the person wearing down is the last one to see it.

ABOUT DON DUGGER WORKED IN THE MULCH INDUSTRY FOR ABOUT 35 YEARS, INCLUDING ROLES AS PLANT MANAGER AND REGIONAL DIRECTOR. HE IS A REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR TO MULCH MATTERS, WHERE HE SHARES INSIGHTS ABOUT THE BUSINESS.

OFF-SITE DEMANDS

What makes fatigue more complicated is the job isn't the only source of long hours. Associates have families, responsibilities and personal activities that start before they head in and long after they clock out.

When you add these to a demanding work schedule, even a tough, experienced worker can suddenly feel worn down. Humans tend to believe they can "push through" anything, but biology says otherwise. Being tired isn't weakness. It's a warning light.

CHECK ENGINE LIGHTS

People often tell themselves they're fine. But these signs can indicate they're pushing the limit:

- Trouble focusing
- Small mistakes that normally wouldn't happen
- Feeling irritable or mentally foggy
- Forgetting simple steps
- Physical exhaustion
- Difficulty making decisions

These are the human version of low-oil lights and overheating gauges. Ignoring them doesn't make them go away. It just points to a bigger problem later.

CRITICAL STEPS

To stay safe — and stay at your best — during long shifts and overtime, focus on the basics that protect your health and performance.

#1 Prioritize Sleep

- Long hours may mean going to bed earlier than usual
- Aim for consistent rest so your body can recover
- If you're tired before a shift, acknowledge it and adjust your activity where possible

#2 Eat and Hydrate

- Hard physical work burns fuel fast
- Keep meals balanced and drink water regularly
- Avoid skipping meals, especially early in the day

#3 Discretion with Activities

- Not every invitation or task can fit into a heavy work week
- If something cuts into your rest, think twice
- Protect your energy the same way you'd protect a piece of equipment you rely on

#4 Your Warning Lights

- If you feel "off," don't ignore it
- Speak up if you need a break, a moment to reset or help from a teammate
- Being responsible is not about pushing through — it's about staying safe





AHEAD OF THE GAME

Wisconsin is known for many things, including its reputation as America's Dairyland, its affinity for beer brewing and of course, the Green Bay Packers.

The home field of the beloved professional sports team is often dubbed "The Frozen Tundra." Suffice it to say, the Badger State along the Great Lakes is not renowned for its balmy weather.

About 30 miles northwest of Milwaukee, Ener-Con, Inc. has tailored its operation to suit the unpredictable — and often uncooperative — weather. As a leading supplier of landscaping products in the region, it flips the script on the traditional production schedule.

WEATHER OR NOT

"You never know what's going to happen here in Wisconsin," said Jeff Justman, co-owner of Ener-Con. "We could have a 12- or 16-week season, or it could be as short as eight weeks. So, we have to be ready for anything."

The constraints of that schedule inform the strategy to prepare for the season ahead — like a squirrel burying nuts before the onset of winter.

"We came up with the idea of producing 50% of our colored material in the fall to take a lot of pressure off in the spring," Justman said. "You just can't do enough in April, May and June. It's such a short window of time to move all our product."

From September through the end of the year, Ener-Con produces colored mulch exclusively for the following spring. That enables it to fulfill customers' orders for material, which start in earnest in March and April.

Because the mulch is colored in the fall and early winter, it has a chance to cure onto the wood chips and lower the risk of wash off in the wetter spring months.



MATERIAL EVIDENCE

"Ener-Con does a lot with a little; it's a very efficient, well-run operation," said Brad Blickley, a sales manager at Colorbiotics. "Equipment can play a huge part in an operation's success, especially when the season is short and the staff is small. That's a key benefit of the Sahara XP, which we demonstrated at a rate of 450 yards per hour."

"We don't take any shortcuts. We use the highest quality of raw feedstock and the best colorant on the market to make our products."

JEFF JUSTMAN

Ener-Con produces more than 130,000 yards of colored mulch annually with only two people working the mulch yard. Such output places additional importance on the equipment and technology.

The domino effect of those decisions limits excess colorant and water usage, which is significant for material that spends the winter exposed to the elements. The weight savings also benefits transport costs.

COLD COMFORT

The landscaping season in Wisconsin is limited and unpredictable. When customers want colored mulch, it must be ready. Ener-Con spends the fall stockpiling its products for the following season, taking advantage of high-quality materials and equipment. By the time the ground truly turns into a frozen tundra, piles of high-quality colored mulch products cover the yard, awaiting the first orders of spring.

SCAN THE QR CODE
UNCOVER THE REST OF THE STORY





A SIKA BRAND

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Introducing the Sahara® XP Mobile. Expand the horizons of your business with this self-powered, trailer-mounted coloring system. And follow the money from one mulch yard to the next.

colorbiotics.com/mobile