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Family business: Monticello's Luke, Greg, Matt and Kevin Holker have turned their Spring Green franchise into a family affair, serving most of Wright County and parts of Stearns, Sherburne and Hennepin counties. All three of Matt's sons have come into the fold since he started the endeavor in 2006.

Holker men keeping the "green" in the family

BY MIKE SCHOEMER

In any community, the pride of a property owner can be seen on the outside.

People spend hours of their time, hundreds of dollars and some of their sanity trying to keep a nice looking yard.

One Monticello family is giving homeowners from the northwestern suburbs all the way to St. Cloud an ally in that fight, as the Holkers of Monticello have taken over the Spring Green Lawn Care franchise here over the last four summers.

Leading the way is the family patriarch, Matt, who stepped down from a position with Value Plus Homes just before the contracting bubble burst, trying a new course in 2006.

"You could kind of see the handwriting on the wall, that things weren't going to continue at this breakneck pace," Matt said from Spring Green's headquarters - his home on Fenning Avenue just south of Monte Hill. "In the end, it looks like it was well-planned. But it was really a combination of things. I knew I had my time as a contractor. We did a lot of hard work, building most of the homes on Monte Hill there. But I thought it was time to get out."

Still young enough to work outside, and smart enough to know he couldn't "sit on my thumbs" for very long, he found the opportunity to take the Spring Green Lawn Care franchise for western Hennepin County, including Rogers, Plymouth and areas east of Monticello.

His first recruit was his son, Greg, who had been working outdoors as well, building pole sheds for Morton Building Systems. That sector, too, was about to take a hit from a sagging economy.

"I liked the work, but it was time. And I wanted to find something that would keep me outside, so this worked out well," Greg said.

The first summer, the two men would say, was a battle. They had to learn a new business, all the while trying to make money. The hardest part was-

n't necessarily in the field - training and time took care of lawn problems - but in the office, where Matt had to learn all about marketing, and running an office.

Enter Holker Son No. 2, Luke, who was working at a glass company in Albertville. Luke, too, liked what he was doing, but he was intrigued by his dad and brother's new business venture.

An advantage to bringing Luke aboard, Matt said, was that his son could tackle the office side of things.

"He has the mind for it. He can do the math. He has the problem-solving skills that maybe I don't have," Matt said.

After coming on in August of 2006, the end of the first summer, Luke still manages the office.

"I've had to learn a lot about accounting in the last few years," he said. "But I don't mind. I still get out and get dirty once in a while."

Youngest brother, Kevin, got into the act this year. Though he worked with Luke at Old Castle Glass while the Spring Green venture was beginning to unfold, Kevin felt a different calling would have to be followed through first.

He joined the United States Air Force in 2006, with an ambition to "see the world," he said.

"I wanted to get out for a bit," Kevin said. "I kind of knew I would be back. But I wasn't sure."

Two years stationed in England, where he was a crew chief on a C-130 cargo plane, assured him that Minnesota was home.

"I liked it, but I missed hunting and fishing, which I could do whenever I wanted back home," he said.

After the stint abroad, Kevin served two more years in Tuscon, Ariz. He was discharged, fittingly, on July 4, 2010.

He's now working in the field for the family business, carrying hoses and working closely with customers. It's laborious, but at least he gets a

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couple days off, unlike the USAF.

"He's on a learning curve right now, and it's pretty steep," Matt said. "And he's come back for a tough year."

Weather conditions, including the recent hot, muggy weather, have made everything from crabgrass (it was tough to get herbicide down in the wet month of June) to fungus prevalent in local lawns.

"They're going from great one month to just tough shape a couple months later, so we've really had to stay on top of things this year," Greg said. "It's been a really funny season for a lot of different things."

Beyond turf, Spring Green also works with clients to keep trees, shrubs and other ornamentals in good health.

"The best thing a homeowner can do is be there when we come to do our services, so we can communicate, and know what it is they want," Greg said. "If we can talk to them, we can solve most of the problems just by telling them what

they need to do when we're not there - mow, water and aerate, for example."

Working with his sons has turned out to be a great arrangement, Matt said.

"It's kind of cool. Like most things it has its pluses and minuses, but you know you have a built-in network of people you can trust. And you can have full confidence in your employee or coworker, because you know it's family."

He's added another franchise area, too, incorporating Monticello and Big Lake, all the way to St. Cloud area.

"We had more mouth to feed," Matt said with a laugh.

But when it comes to work there are limits imposed.

"We can't talk business at family functions," Luke said. "Mom and our wives have pretty much laid down the law there."

Information about the Holkers' family business can be found on www.Spring-Green.com/mholker.

There, you can find information about how they can get local lawns through the fall and ready for winter with fertilization, weed control, seeding and tree feeding.

Residents can also call Spring Green at 763-295-1142.