

ON THE JOB

Jim Penman (in his yard) says the best gardeners "use their minds as well as the best doctors. Every decision, like where you place the grass pick-up bin in the trailer, can save you thousands of dollars."



Jim's
Mowing

Lawn Order



Mowing mogul Jim Penman has built a garden empire by trimming other people's grass

Jim Penman sits in the yard of his modest, sparsely furnished home in Bayswater, Melbourne, not the slightest bit perturbed that his garden needs weeding. Nor is he particularly bothered by the state of his pool—half-filled, toy-strewn and crying out for a clean. Yep, no doubt about it, Penman could use the help of someone from ... Jim's Mowing, the lawn-cutting and home-maintenance firm he established in 1989, which now turns over \$70 million annually. But he'll let things ride. "The image people have of me is this multi-millionaire who drives a Porsche and leads a luxury life," says Penman, who clearly believes in not bringing his work home. "In fact I am very austere. I don't care about material possessions or a sensual life. All I care about is what I achieve."

That's been plenty. Today the tendrils of Jim's Mowing and its offshoots—car cleaning, dog washing, rubbish removal, tree felling, fencing and handyman services—entwine Australasia, as the former battler has turned his one-man backyard lawn-mowing operation into the world's largest lawn-mowing franchise business. More than 1,400 hand-picked franchisees (who wear regulation khaki uniforms and drive a van with Penman's face on the side) pay between \$8,000 and \$30,000 for equipment and "territory rights." Penman says about 80 per cent of franchisees make \$800 a week. From this, they pay running costs and an average of \$350 a month to Penman's "master franchisor," who oversees their beats. "I tend to argue with people," explains Penman, 46, "so I have people who are better at personal relations dealing with franchisees."

Penman has just published *Surprised by Success*, a book about his life and business secrets fertilised with a few homespun homilies. "There would be a number of people who started with me who would be millionaires by now," he asserts of his green thumb for business.

Penman, whose third wife and fellow executive Perri says is "temperamental, not easy to work for," operates from a skeleton-staffed office. He claims he shovels all profits back into the business and pays himself a wage of just \$60,000 a year. Most, he says, is eaten up by support payments to his six children by past marriages. He, Cambodian refugee Perri, 26, and their son, William, 14 months, exist on what's left. "I drive a battered \$1,000 car. I live in a \$130,000 house. We eat out rarely and if we do it costs \$20."

Penman says he has a higher mission than making money: "Every franchisee who does well, every client who gets good service, that to me is an affirmation. To create a business providing good income for thousands is a tremendous achievement. But if a franchise does badly, a client is let down, I feel that deeply. It offends my sense of purpose."

That sense bloomed when, as a teen, Penman mowed lawns for \$1.50 an hour to help fund a history degree and PhD. But after uni, his part-time job overran him. The business flourished like rampant lantana and soon he was hiring workers to toil under his banner: "Selling off my lawn-mowing rounds was what got me started. Building businesses, then splitting them." By the '90s, Jim's Mowing was thriving.

Now he's planning a new range of services. "Car maintenance, rustproofing, laundry pick-up, ironing, plumbing ... I can think of a thousand ideas. I am driven. I am obsessive. I am always wanting more. Life is about achieving things. Relax? The only time I relax is when I sleep."

■ LARRY WRITER, WITH ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY LOUISE TALBOT