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July 2004

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**Employee Retention
Solutions**

**Get the Green Light
for Landscape
Lighting**

**Special Focus:
Turf Renovation
Equipment**

Future First

The Chalet has built a thriving company
based on concepts used today
to secure the business' tomorrows.

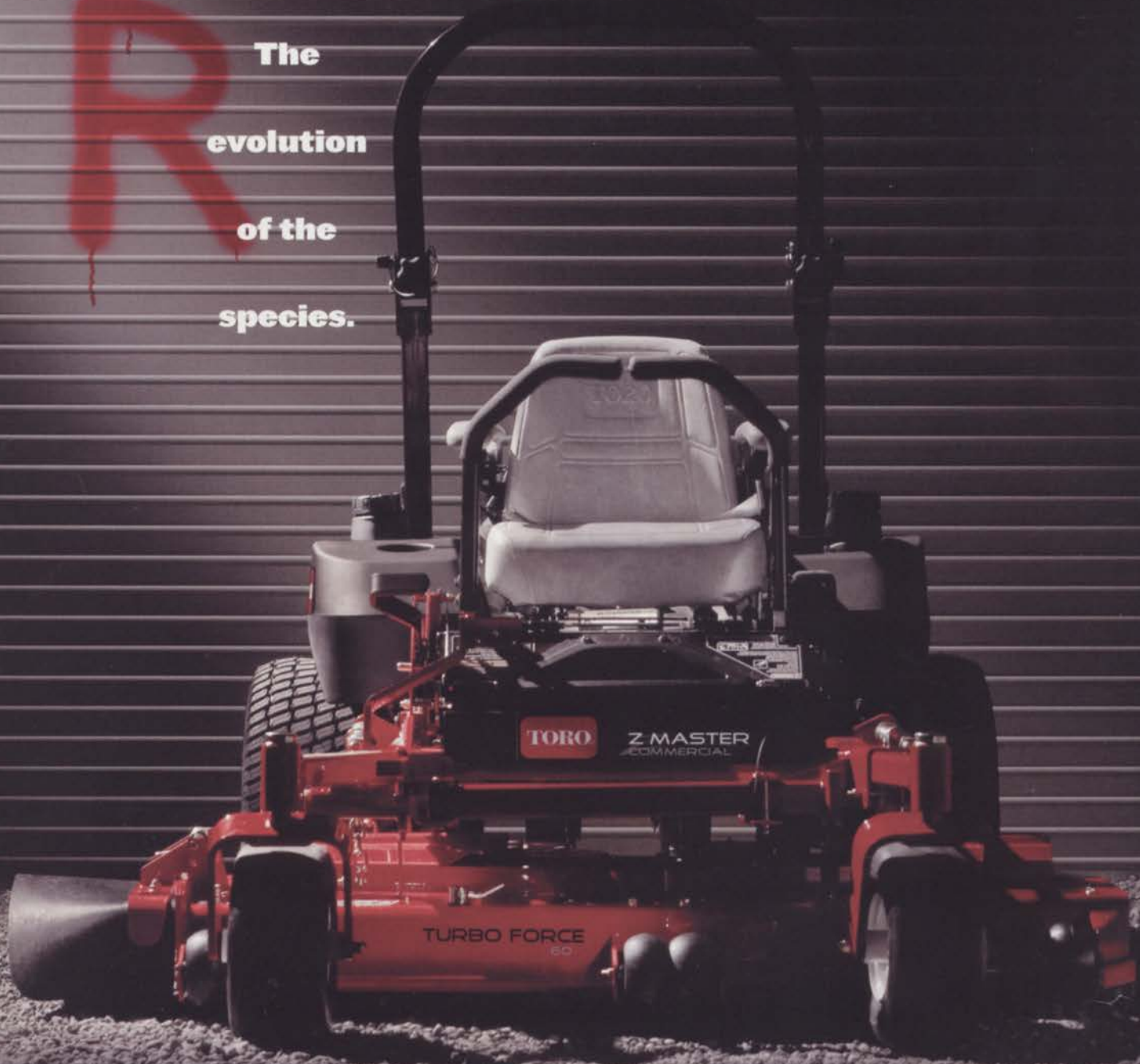
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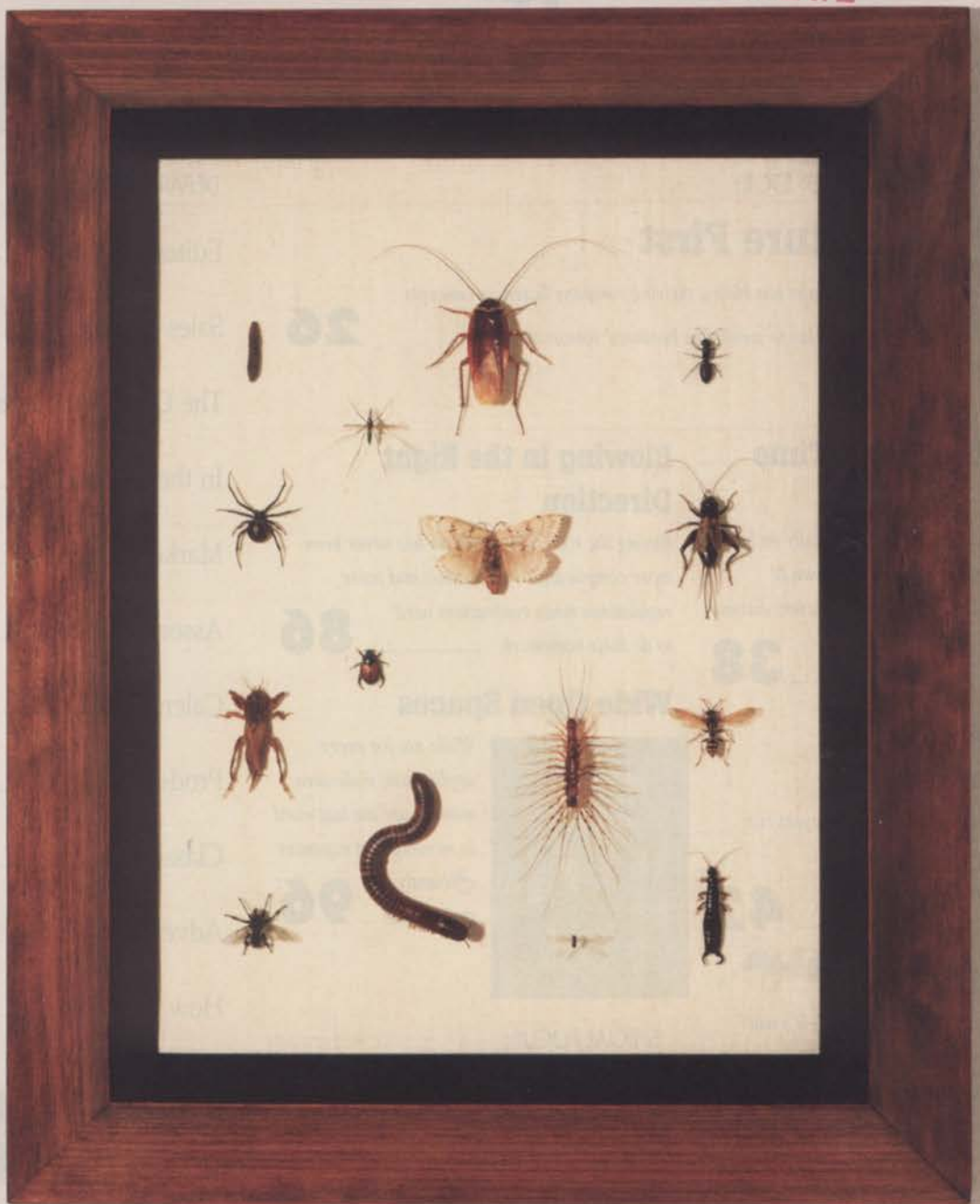
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COVER STORY

Future First

The Chalet has built a thriving company based on concepts used today to secure the business' tomorrows.

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The *Lawn & Landscape* Weed & Insect summit is only a few weeks away! Make plans now to attend this educational event to be held in Chicago, Ill., August 18 to 20. Covering specific topics like how to maximize grub control profits to more broad subjects like lawn care marketing strategies, the summit will put you in touch with leading green industry professionals and top researchers from universities around the country. Check out www.weedinsectsummit.com for more information or visit the *Lawn & Landscape* Events link on the *Lawn & Landscape* Online homepage.

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Best of the Web

Check out this month's Best of the Web feature on page 38. This Web-related article eavesdrops on what *Lawn & Landscape* Online Message Board users had to say about charging for travel time.

Lawn & Landscape
ONLINE
Extras

ONLINE EXTRAS

Browse *Lawn & Landscape* Online for a collection of exclusive Web stories relative to this month's issue:

- This month, visit *Lawn & Landscape* Online for information on charging for dethatching services and properly maintaining dethatcher blades.
- Brighten up your clients' landscapes and your profits with tips on marketing and pricing landscape lighting in the July Online Extras section.
- Feeling the heat from fire ants? Visit the July Online Extras section for more tips on handling these hot pests.
- Summer's here, but fall is around the corner. Before fall clean-up starts. Visit our Online Extras section for more information on purchasing blowers.

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USE READER SERVICE #13

Reality is Reality

Roger Stanley is editor-in-chief/associate publisher of *Lawn & Landscape*. He can be reached at 800/456-0707 or rstanley@gie.net.



One of the phrases I hate is the statement that "perception is reality." I cringe when I hear it. In our business it's often stated as a truism that you can't do much to change public opinion. The green industry is sometimes accused of pollution, wasting resources, damaging wildlife habitat and creating a public health hazard.

Two things really bug me about the "perception is reality" statement. First, it is not true logically. Logic says that reality is reality. Need an extreme example: People at one time accepted the fact that the earth was flat – that was the perception. Enough said on that score.

The second thing about the statement is that it amounts to throwing in the towel. People often shrug a shoulder when making the statement.

Now it is absolutely true that you can't change some or even many peoples' minds. Communication studies show that most of us filter whom we listen to and what messages we accept based on our beliefs. It's an election year and one poll I read said that 90 percent of the population has already decided if they will vote Republican or Democrat. If that's true, then the candidates are working hard on the undecided 10 percent.

I think the same is true in our dealings with the public. It's certainly true in my own experience. I worked for a chemical company in the 1980s that was fighting what was a losing battle in terms of keeping a popular pesticide on the market. That's when I first started to hear the "perception is reality" line.

It was during this time that I was responsible for manning a toll-free line. I did this for more than a year and I literally responded to hundreds of calls. One-third of the callers were applicators and two-thirds were from the public, often spurred by negative media reports.

We mailed printed materials to all callers but I also talked to them about key points from the printed materi-

als. In the vast majority of cases I was able to effectively get people to understand some of the facts behind the issue and at least keep an open mind. The public does not understand what is involved in getting a product labeled and maintaining it. They do not understand studies used to evaluate dermal or inhalation hazards. They do not understand licensing or certification requirements.

By the end of this ordeal the people who had said "perception is reality" turned out to be correct. But it was not because of public perception. The product was removed from the market when the applicators decided to make perception reality. Without industry support, no manufacturer can sustain defense of a product.

The process continues. There have been and are still challenges relating to noise pollution, water quality, pesticide use and industry reputation. I most recently heard it stated in an industry roundtable. I asked what the top three public obstacles were for LCOs and one contractor replied, "They (the public) think we're all hacks, they think we're all the same and they think we damage the environment."

Some people who hold that perception of you will not change their minds no matter what you say or do. That is a fact. But others like our industry and the service it provides. A third group sits between those two poles. They have heard negative things about lawn care and landscaping companies but are open to information from the other perspective.

Everyone reading this should realize that you are ambassadors for your profession and your industry. Every day you and your employees have hundreds of opportunities to change peoples' perceptions. You can do that by driving courteously, by doing the job as promised, by showing up on time and by listening. You can also do it by being able and willing to discuss the benefits of your services and the facts about the products you use. You can use reality to change perception. ■

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Roger Stanley".

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USE READER SERVICE #15

This Is My Final Offer

Marty Grunder is a speaker, consultant, author and landscape contractor with Grunder Landscaping Co. He can be reached at 937/847-9944 and via www.martygrunder.com.



Successful landscape sales professionals know the value of asking the right questions and consistently sell hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of work as a result. The reason for asking clients questions is very simple. You ask questions so you can deliver exactly what your clients want.

Knowing that, use some or all of my 15 best client questions in your next sales calls to learn how to give your clients exactly what they want.

1. Where did you hear about us? A prospect who says he or she called because one of your best clients referred them to you is a much better lead than someone who says they are getting several quotes and got your name from the phone book. Spend your time on good leads.

2. Have you had professional landscaping before? Someone who has had professional landscaping in the past tends to appreciate the value of what you have to offer more than someone who has never hired a professional.

3. Are you a Democrat or Republican? Just kidding! Never ask this question – religion and politics have no place in the selling process.

4. Do you enjoy working in the yard? This will tell you how interested your clients are in the work you are proposing and will help you determine the amount of detail to give your prospects. People who have some knowledge of landscaping like to know more details. Successful salespeople communicate the details that are important to their clients.

5. How can I make your job easier? This is a great question to ask a property or facility manager. You might identify an overworked client's problem, be able to address possible solutions and come away with a sale.

6. How many bids are you getting? Only ask this question if the prospect has commented on getting other bids. These are often "low bid" jobs you don't want or need. Generally, competing on price is not a successful sales strategy for most landscape contractors.

7. What are you looking for in a landscape contractor? Your prospect will be impressed that you asked this question; chances are they will tell you all the problems they had with their previous contractor, giving you a chance to address these issues in your proposal.

8. How long did the prior contractor work with you? I like to work with people who are loyal. In asking this question you might find that this prospect changes landscape contractors more than they change the channel on their television. You should be looking for long-term relationships.

9. What are your favorite colors? If you had a contractor out to design a landscape for you, wouldn't you want to be asked this question? Also, offering a proposal that incorporates the corporate colors of the company you are calling on shows your attention to details.

10. What do you do in your free time? If you find out the homeowner likes to play golf, why not propose a putting green or your maintenance services so your client can spend more time golfing? If a property manager likes to fish, make a note so you know what to get that person for the holidays.

11. How many people are in your family? If you know how many people are in your client's family, you can design a patio with enough room to accommodate them. At Grunder Landscaping, we frequently draw the family on the patio enjoying the new environment.

12. How can I impress you? Most prospects will actually forget you asked this question when you come back with exactly the details they said would impress them.

13. What is your budget? A tough question, but a fair one – don't be afraid to ask it. After all, how can you create an accurate proposal if you don't know the budget?

14. How long do you expect to live here? I will take a more conservative sales approach if someone is not going to be at their current location very long. If they say they will be there "forever," I pull out all the stops. Good salespeople do what's best for the client – not what's best for their wallet.

15. Tell me your biggest headache on this property? The best thing you can do to get a sale is to deliver a solution for your client's problems. Whether their problems are big or small, if you ask enough questions, you will find out all you need to know and make a lot of sales in the process.

The next time you go on a sales call, try some of my questions. I think you'll find they will help you earn some more sales. We'll talk more about asking questions next month and what to do with that information once you obtain it. **LL**

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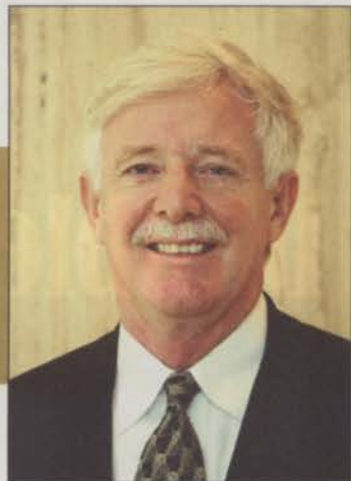


USE READER SERVICE #16

The Operating Room

Reviewing Maintenance Profitability

Jack Mattingly is a green industry consultant with Mattingly Consulting. He can be reached via email at jkmattingly@comcast.net, through his Web site www.mattinglyconsulting.com or at 770/517-9476.



Maintenance contractors must regularly review individual projects to confirm that they are providing the proper services and making the necessary profit. Developing a system ensures that this information is checked often.

A usable "system" consists of computer software that enables you to generate productivity information from payroll dollars and man-hours. The primary information you need as a landscape contractor is twofold: One, the budgeted vs. actual man-hours per project, per visit; and two, the gross profit dollars earned per project, per month. If you have these two pieces of information flowing to you on a regular weekly and monthly basis, you know where you stand on each individual project. Using that information allows you to make the necessary decisions that ensure your company's profitability.

Good quality systems can be obtained through standard, inexpensive software, such as QuickBooks and Excel. Every program will have limitations and users must take the time to develop templates for Excel, but I have seen contractors producing \$5 million with substantial profit by using this approach. Be sure to thoroughly research the different types of software available to you – especially those that offer other modules for scheduling, budgeting, etc. Obtain demo CDs if available, and test them during the mid- to late-summer. This will allow you to make a decision and have the new software up and running prior to the new year.

In the meantime, review your individual maintenance projects and see where your company really stands year-to-date. Here is a down-and-dirty way of putting up a "red flag" on projects that may be costing you money.

First, determine the project's total amount of square footage for both turf and bed areas. This could be a chore but the detail is necessary. Not only do you need it for this exercise, but you also need it to develop an estimating system to use next year. The estimating system will require production rates and, thus, square-footage measurements.

Next, take the contractual dollars you will earn this year for a given project. Do not include the dollars you

received for any of the extras such as enhancement work, annual color, mulching, etc. Divide the basic income from that project by the size of the work to come up with a cost-per-square-foot for the project.

As an example, assume you have a 12-month contract of \$350 per month, equaling a total annual income of \$4,200. By measuring the area you determine that you have 2,050 square feet of bed area and 24,000 square feet of turf area, equaling a total area of 26,050 square feet. From here, divide \$4,200 by 26,050 to find that you will earn 16 cents per square foot on this project. Is this good or bad? At this point, it is impossible to tell. However, you can compare this square-foot cost to those of other projects. This review will likely confirm the individual projects that you suspected were less than profitable and will reveal the highly profitable accounts that you do not want to lose and to which you should pay close attention.

Because every company will have some projects with a lot of turf area and very little bed areas and vice-versa, I recommend grouping projects into separate work categories, such as residential, shopping centers, industrial, etc. You may come up with a cost-per-square-foot range for each category, which will help identify red flags the next time you estimate a similar project. This could save you the time and energy of submitting a bid that forces you to lose money.

Remember, these calculations do not tell you if you are actually making enough money to stay profitable. The best quick guide to determine this is to regularly compare the actual man-hours spent per week or month and year-to-date with the actual man-hours for those periods. A spreadsheet is all you need for this and if you know this information you will be able to tell if you are performing as you expected. Monthly financial statements confirm all of that information by showing you the other expenses in your business. As business owners, you should be excited to receive financial statements. Embrace these numbers and learn to use them as tools to your company's success. It will take time to fully understand what you are looking at, but you must learn. **■**

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USE READER SERVICE #36

Personnel Files: Friends or Foes?

Jean L. Seawright is president of Seawright & Associates in Winter Park, Fla. She can be contacted at 407/645-2433 or jseawright@seawright.com.



Editor's Note: This month, Jean Seawright discusses the importance of keeping a personnel file and what should be included in it. Next month, she will focus on keeping confidential files.

Personnel files are intended to establish a location for all of the job-related, historical documents that a company acquires on individual employees. By now, most employers are aware that labor attorneys and government investigators rely heavily on personnel file documentation to build their cases against employers.

Because personnel files contain job-related documentation that can be used to make employment decisions (promotions, terminations, transfers and the like), one agency in particular – the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (the federal agency that regulates fair employment in the workplace, also known as the “EEOC”) – has a vested interest in personnel file documentation. In addition to the EEOC, there are a number of other federal agencies with regulations that address record-keeping. To properly position your company to defend a discrimination claim or lawsuit, you must ensure that your personnel files are maintained in a manner consistent with all regulatory enforcement principles and provisions.

To reduce the liabilities associated with personnel files, most businesses create two separate files: a “personnel file” and a “confidential file.” The personnel files are used to make employment-related decisions and contain documents and information that are strictly job-related, such as the application form, disciplinary notices, performance appraisals, dates of pay increases, pay rates and others.

PERSONNEL FILE DOCUMENTS. Specifically, your personnel files should contain the following documents (assuming these documents do not reveal information related to one of the protected classes):

- Employment application
- Resume
- Pre-employment profile/test results
- Conditional job offer letter
- Performance appraisals
- Historical summary of pay increases
- Employee acknowledgment of 90-day introductory period

- Attendance records
- W-4 (although this document contains marital status, it is a generally accepted practice to maintain it in the traditional personnel file)
- Employee coaching and disciplinary action notices
- Commendations
- Job descriptions
- Receipt for employee handbook
- Records of seminars and workshops attended
- Training records
- Return-to-work statements from health-care providers
- Payroll deduction authorizations or change notices
- Change in job status forms
- Termination/separation reports
- Resignation letters
- Other job-related documents

PERSONNEL FILE ACCESS. More than 12 states have enacted laws or regulations that give private-sector employees the right to inspect their personnel records, although that right is seldom absolute.

For example, employers in some states legally may impose reasonable restrictions on employees’ right of access (e.g., time, place or frequency of the review or review in the presence of a designated employer representative). Some state regulations permit employees to obtain copies of their files and some state regulations apply only to employers with a minimum number of employees or to employees with a minimum length of service. Among the states with regulations, there are also those that limit third-party disclosure and that allow for reasonable fees to be charged to the employee for copying the file. The wording and provisions of state laws that address access to personnel files vary.

Prior to developing a policy or practice related to personnel file access, employers should consult a human resource or other professional with knowledge and understanding of these employment-related regulations. In addition, employers also should maintain a file of confidential documents pertaining to their employees, which we will discuss in depth next month. **LL**



Brown Patch Program Can Boost Your Bottom Line

Identify New Revenue Opportunities and Increase Your Service Offering With Heritage® Fungicide

Looking for new ways to increase your service offering and positively impact your bottom line? Incorporating a brown patch control program with Heritage fungicide from Syngenta Professional Products can do just that. A Heritage brown patch program offers you an opportunity to capitalize on an existing problem that few of your customers recognize, while increasing your service fees—boosting your bottom line.

With the active ingredient azoxystrobin, Heritage is a fungicide with a novel mode of action that consistently provides exceptional disease control and improves overall turf quality. Heritage controls a broad spectrum of diseases, including brown patch, and also offers:

- Curative activity against certain diseases, after infection occurs
- Long-lasting, broad-spectrum preventative disease management
- Control of the six toughest turf diseases

Additional Syngenta resources available to you when implementing a Heritage brown patch program include pest outlooks and the 30-year disease mapping features on GreenCast™ (www.greencastonline.com). Utilize GreenCast to help you sell the Heritage brown patch program by determining when brown patch is most prevalent in your area and when to make Heritage applications.

For more information about how to increase your service offering—and bottom line—with a brown patch control program that incorporates Heritage fungicide, contact your local Syngenta representative.



How to Spot Brown Patch

The symptoms of brown patch can vary depending on the grass cultivar, soil, climatic and atmospheric



conditions, as well as intensity of the turfgrass management. Brown patch typically causes rings or patches

of blighted turfgrass that measure 5 inches to more than 10 feet in diameter. It also causes leaf spots and "smoke rings"—thin, brown borders around the diseased patches that appear most frequently in the early morning. After the leaves die in the blighted area, new leaves can emerge from the surviving crowns. On wide-bladed species, leaf lesions develop with tan centers and dark brown to black margins.

Brown patch favors high humidity as well as temperatures of over 85 degrees Fahrenheit during the day and over 60 degrees Fahrenheit at night. Brown patch can be quite active at cool temperatures on warm-season grasses in the spring and fall. It also occurs in areas that experience more than 10 hours a day of foliar wetness for several consecutive days.

Brown patch infestation is more severe when the turf is cut to a height less than the optimum for the turfgrass being grown.



FREE CD



Heritage product demonstrations, disease management tips, labels, disease identification guide...It's your own reference library, all on one CD. Order yours today at www.heritage-fungicide.com.

LANDSCAPE TRENDS

Lawn & Landscape 30-Second Surveys

How long has your company been in business? What's your most profitable maintenance service? Do you charge a fee for landscape designs or consultations?

From company operations to employment practices to profitability, *Lawn & Landscape* wants to know how you do business and *Lawn & Landscape Online's* weekly poll is just the place for business owners and managers like you to share your views.

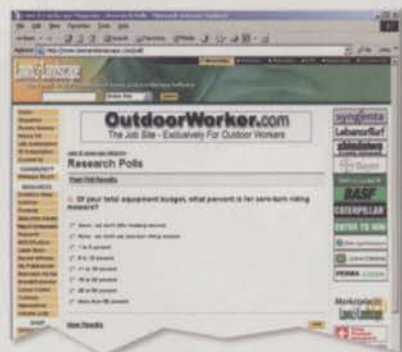
As readers, you're welcomed and encouraged to participate in these informal online polls. Check *Lawn & Landscape Online* on Mondays for new 30-second surveys about business- and industry-related topics. Use these weekly opportunities to identify the business challenges you're facing, the opportunities you see in the industry and the tasks you face on a daily basis. Moreover, visit *Lawn & Landscape Online* regularly to

check poll results and see how your responses compare to those of your industry colleagues.

The *Lawn & Landscape Online* poll serves as a pulse for the green industry, keeping participants informed of how contractors around the country tackle the same issues in different ways. Likewise, information gathered from these polls gives *Lawn & Landscape* editors a sneak peek into what's important to readers and occasionally serves as supportive information to in-depth *Lawn & Landscape* articles. Imagine your poll contribution printed for more than 71,000 *Lawn & Landscape* readers to see.

To start contributing to online polls, visit www.lawnandlandscape.com and scroll down to the "Poll" section to answer this week's question. Simply select the response that best applies to your business and click "Vote." After voting, scroll down again to

www.lawnandlandscape.com



see the current results for that week's poll or click "View Past Polls" to see what other information has been gathered by *Lawn & Landscape Online*. If you have poll question suggestions, please e-mail or call them in to Lauren Spiers at lspiers@gie.net or 800/456-0707.

Most recently, readers have shared information on their mower preferences and how their companies handle maintenance and repairs. Stay tuned to *Lawn & Landscape Online* for more opportunities to contribute to these informative surveys.

INSECT UPDATE

Aphid Invasion

This spring, if your clients' trees have leaves, they probably have aphids too. Roses, columbine, ash, aspen, honeysuckle, maple, spirea, fruit trees, pines and spruce are all likely candidates for aphid infestation.

Always less than 1/4 inch in size, opaque, green, brown and gray aphids are found on the under sides of leaves. In the case of conifers, they are found along and at the base of the needles.

Why are aphids so numerous this year? Some of the possible causes are:

1. A mild winter allowed for overwintering eggs and adults to survive.
2. A warm and early spring fostered early insect infestations.
3. April precipitation resulted in lush and early plant foliage.

Aphids prefer plant material with succulent growth and high sugar content. The early growth, along with the April rains produced this. A subsequent dry weather decreased the

amount of water in the plants – concentrating the sugars (photosynthate) in the foliage. The result: a banquet for aphids. Normally just a nuisance, an aphid infestation can lead to problems. If severe infestations are encountered, loss of vigor to the plant will occur. Aphids also can cause leaf discoloration, distortion, stunting and drop. This spring, many infestations will require treatment.

Some telltale signs of infestation include ants, bees, shiny foliage, sticky items or decks underneath and around the affected plants. Aphids secrete a sticky honeydew substance, which attracts ants and bees. A sooty substance on the wood – aptly called sooty mold – notes chronic aphid infestation. This mold grows on the honeydew.

Control options are many. Soft insecticides, like soaps and oils, are often used. Horticultural oils are effective in smothering the insects, but read the label and check for plant sensitivity.

Topical insecticide sprays will work for



most infestations, except when the aphids cause the leaves to curl. If you have to uncurl the leaf to see the aphids, a topical insecticide spray is often ineffective, as the spray can't get to the offending insects.

Systemic insecticides (those that translocate in plant tissues) offer the most complete and longest lasting control of aphids.

As the weather warms this summer, plants should get some respite from aphid infestations. However, aphid populations generally build beginning around Labor Day and continue into the fall. – *Swingle Tree & Lawn Care*

BUSINESS COSTS

Gas Prices Generate Internal Combustion

DURHAM, N.C. – The first time it cost \$80 to fill up one of his landscaping company's trucks with gasoline, Clint Kels knew he was in trouble.

While Kels and his employees use gas to power their mowers and other lawn equipment, it's the company's trucks that consume the most fuel, driving from job to job.

Kels watched skyrocketing gasoline prices drive up his costs for nearly two months, then he took action. Last week, he sent letters to his 300 customers informing them that the company would be raising rates by \$1 to \$3 per job.

"When they're forecasting [gas prices] to possibly go up to \$3 per gallon, how long were we going to sit and absorb the cost ourselves?" he asked. "There's not an incredible profit margin in the prices we charge already."

Kels isn't trying to make extra money, he says. He's just making sure his profits don't decrease too much as his operating costs rise. So far, he's seen no signs that any of his customers plan to cancel. "I think it's gone

over pretty good," he says.

Like Kels Co., many businesses are struggling to cope with the burden of escalating gas prices on their budgets. While some businesses, like car dealerships, are benefiting as consumers downsize their vehicles, others, such as landscape companies, are feeling the strain.

"For convenience stores, gasoline is a loss leader for their snack and soft drink sales," says Michael Walden, an economist at N.C. State University.

Gasoline retailing typically operates on a thin margin, often tied to volume rather than price, Walden says. According to the U.S. Department of Energy, North Carolinians consumed 11.4 million gallons of gas a day in 2001, the 10th highest consumption in the nation.

U.S. consumption of oil has fallen by half in proportion to gross domestic product since the 1970s, mostly as a result of higher efficiency, Walden says. Moreover, contrary to often-heard pronouncements, gasoline prices are not the highest ever, at least when adjusted for inflation.

But landscape contractors probably can expect generally higher prices at the pump for the foreseeable future. Gasoline could ease to \$1.60 to \$1.70 a gallon by this fall, Walden says, but higher-than-expected global demand and downward revisions of oil reserves spell a higher floor price.

The impact has been mixed for companies and organizations that use diesel fuel, which hasn't risen in price as quickly as gasoline.

PEST TRENDS

Fall Army Worm Alert

RALEIGH, N.C. – According to Rick Brandenburg, turfgrass entomologist, North Carolina State University, this year fall armyworms have been found earlier than they ever have in eastern North Carolina. As a result, Brandenburg warns all lawn care operators to keep an eye out for this insect since it may pose a "real problem this year," he says. "They do not overwinter here in North Carolina, so this means they are getting a big head start."

All turf locations including golf courses, home lawns, sod farms, newly-laid sod, and anywhere else that includes turf is at risk. "Remember that fall armyworms often lay their eggs on shrubs, fence posts, signs and other objects," Brandenburg says. "And their movement and/or damage often begins at the edge of the turfgrass. A dry summer will make the problem more serious."

To get ahead of the problem, lawn care operators should inspect turf closely over the next summer and fall. "Use a soapy water drench to bring the worms to the surface," Brandenburg advises. "Larger worms feed more early in the morning and late evening to avoid being picked off by birds. Treating late in the day is often beneficial."

Overall, Brandenburg says "this is not nearly the infestation we have seen in recent years, but fall armyworms appearing this early can still be very damaging."

For more fall army worm information, visit www.turfinfo.ncsu.edu.

Association NEWS

The **American Landscape Contractors Association (ALCA)** promoted Debra Holder to chief executive officer. ALCA president Kurt Kluznik praised Holder for her more than 24 years of dedicated service. Under her leadership, ALCA has grown to represent approximately 2,800 members nationwide.

The **Texas Nursery & Landscape Association** installed three new officers to round out its leadership for the 2004-2005 year. Newly elected were Michael Branch, chairman; Michael Bracken, chairman-elect; and Trey Wyatt, retail director.

The **Ohio Lawn Care Association** elected new officers and trustees onto its 2004 board of directors. Officers serving one-year terms will be: Dennis Imler, president; Jeff Bisker, vice president; Dave Winter, treasurer/secretary; and Kim Kellogg, immediate past president. New trustees serving three-year terms are Jeff Benton and Joyce Pelz.

The **Institute of Certified Franchise Executives** recognized U.S. Lawns President Kenneth Hutcheson as a Certified Franchise Executive (CFE). Since Hutcheson joined U.S. Lawns in 1995, he helped expand the company from 15 franchises to more than 125 franchises in 26 states. To earn the CFE designation, candidates must complete a course of study that includes attendance at institute-sponsored educational seminars and workshops.

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Market Trends

DROUGHT IMPACT

Landscape Industry Tries to Keep Jobs from Drying Up

DENVER – Lush, eye-pleasing lawns are shrinking in parts of the West. Ornamental fountains have been restricted in Las Vegas while gardening with outdoor pots is gaining a new following.

As homes and businesses curb water use amid a multiyear drought, the landscaping industry has fallen on hard times, prompting some businesses to lay off workers or close. Others are surviving by offering water-conservation designs or expanding into related services.

Many say they face difficult challenges as Western communities try to find more water to meet demand in the fast-growing region.

"I'm very concerned for the future," Las Vegas landscaper Scott Walker says. "Everybody wants a spot of grass in their yard for their kids to play on or for their dogs. It's hard to tell your kids to go out and play on a pile of rocks."

Extreme drought conditions range from Montana to Arizona and are expected to persist, according to the Drought Monitor at the National Drought Mitigation Center at the University of Nebraska.

In Colorado, the drought hit hard about two years ago, forcing many cities to restrict water use and impose surcharges on those who use excess amounts. Some also banned new lawns. Many cities have imposed restrictions and surcharges again this year.

About 2,000 landscape-related jobs in Colorado were lost between 2002 and 2003, according to a Colorado State University study of the state's \$1.67 billion industry, which includes landscaping, nurseries, garden centers and commercial florists.

Revenues dropped \$60 million last year, study author Dawn Thilmany says. Some businesses closed while others consolidated.

When the effects of the drought became evident, Todd Williams of American Civil Constructors in suburban Denver decided to boost his business in artificial turf and change landscape designs to promote water conservation by using drought-tolerant plants and grouping plants by water use.

"We've seen a very positive response from our customers. That's been a silver lining in the cloud of the drought," he says.

Other landscapers added services such as maintenance and snow removal. Many emphasize designs that offer more efficient irrigation systems, says Sharon Harris of Green Industries of Colorado, a trade group.

"So many people have gotten lean and are looking at doing things differently and better," she says.

At Tagawa Nursery in suburban Aurora, customers are offered classes in drought management, xeriscaping and reshaping gardens. Sales of gardens in containers and drought-tolerant plants like Russian sage are soaring.

"Customers as well as our industry have really tried to adjust," manager Beth Zwinak says. "I think it's probably hurt parts of our industry more than others. When there is lawn planting limits or sod bans, that was devastating."

It is difficult to track drought's effect on the industry, but landscapers across the country have taken similar steps, says Bob Dolibois, executive vice president of the American Nursery and Landscape Association.

"For long-standing companies that are well-capitalized, that have long-standing customer relationships, this is less of an issue," he says. "There is no question that startup and undercapitalized companies that are dealing with a couple of down years are being affected."



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USE READER SERVICE #19

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K-PAC offers the Lawn & Garden industry a hook lift system that provides a safe, versatile and economical way of delivering service to the job site. Multiple vehicle costs such as insurance, purchase price, fuel, maintenance and labor costs are eliminated with the utilization of a single 12,000 pound capacity or 20,000 pound capacity hook hoist. This system will handle easily detachable dump bodies, flat racks for service vehicles, mowers, liquid tanks, storage containers plus a host of other purposes.



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Ask Dr. Tattar

Q: What additional services can I offer my clients to increase my profits using microinjection products?

A: Mauget microinjection technology allows the applicator the advantage of quickly treating insects, diseases or nutritional disorders on the clients property, thereby increasing the number of services for pay that are offered. Since microinjection can be performed at the same time other landscape services are performed, additional revenue from use of microinjection will add to the profit potential of each landscape job.

Q: What insecticides are approved for the control of Emerald Ash Borer and the Asian Long-Horned Beetle?

A: Imicide, from Mauget, has been demonstrated to be effective against the Asian Long-Horned Beetle in large USDA multi-year trials in New York, Chicago and in China. It has also been demonstrated to be effective when microinjected against the Emerald Ash Borer in recent trials conducted in Michigan by Michigan State University and the US Forest Service. It is also being used successfully in the USDA's operational Asian Long Horned Beetle program for the past four years in those states.

Q: What is the difference between microinjection with a passive, low-pressure system and a high pressure system?

A: Low pressure systems, such as the Mauget Microinjection system, utilize low pressure to allow the liquid contents of capsules to completely empty; the tree provides the natural force to uptake the chemicals into its vascular system. Uptake speed depends on the activity of the tree's sap stream at the time of injection. High pressure injection utilizes the force of compressed gases to move the liquids from bulk reservoirs into the tree's vascular system.

Dr. Terry Tattar, Professor Emeritus, Dept. of Microbiology, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA

USE READER SERVICE #21

Market Trends

IN THE FIELD

Think Safety First: Follow These 8 Basic Equipment Safety Tips

The busy landscape season is underway and multiple reports of severe and even fatal on-the-job injuries have already made headlines. To keep more accidents from occurring, contractors must make job site safety a top priority this summer.

Though contractors should thoroughly train employees on equipment use and follow manufacturers' recommendations in terms of proper equipment operation, job site safety often comes down to a few basic steps. The following eight safety tips, provided by the Outdoor Power Equipment Institute (OPEI), can help contractors keep themselves and their employees safe all year.

OPEI also offers a more detailed safety tips on specific types of equipment. Visit www.opei.org for a PDF-format brochure with safety information in both English and Spanish.

1. Know how to operate the equipment.

Read the operator's manual before using any power equipment. Know where the controls are and what they do. Follow safety instructions.

2. Dress properly for the job.

Wear long pants, close-fitting clothes, sturdy shoes, and safety glasses. Don't wear anything that could get caught in moving parts (loose jewelry or clothing; be careful of long hair).

3. Handle gas carefully.

Fill up before you start, while the engine is cold. Don't spill when you fill. Store gas in an approved container in a cool, ventilated area. Never smoke around gasoline.

4. Clear the area before you start.

Pick up rocks, twigs, cans, golf balls,



anything that could be thrown by mowing equipment.

5. Keep children and pets away from the area until you're finished.

Never allow children to operate a mower. And never carry children as passengers on a riding mower.

6. Operate equipment carefully and follow recommended procedures.

Always turn off the engine and disconnect the spark plug wire before attempting to unclog or work on outdoor power equipment. When leaving equipment unattended, turn off the engine and remove key.

7. Keep hands and feet away from moving parts.

Never work on equipment while it is running. Never remove or tamper with safety devices and labels – they're provided to protect you and those around you.

8. Always wear hearing protection.

When working with equipment that generates increased sound levels, be sure to protect your ears. Wear hearing protection such as special earmuffs to prevent potentially damaging sounds from reaching your ears without eliminating the sounds you'll need to hear. Protect your ears from sounds that are too loud and too close for too long.

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Visit *Lawn & Landscape Online* every day for updated industry news, articles from the magazine and special Online Extras not appearing in print.



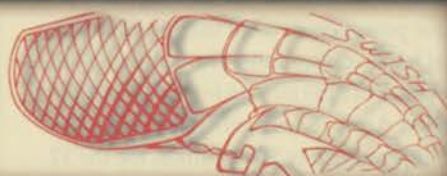
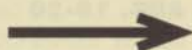
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USE READER SERVICE #22

Market Trends

(continued from page 22)


ACQUISITION NEWS

Briggs & Stratton Buys Simplicity

MILWAUKEE -- Briggs & Stratton's Power Products of Wisconsin signed an agreement to buy Simplicity Manufacturing of Wisconsin for \$227.5 million.

The cash price is subject to adjustments.

Briggs & Stratton produces air-cooled gasoline engines for outdoor power equipment. Simplicity Manufacturing is a manufacturer of a broad range of outdoor power equipment used in commercial lawn applications. The company had net sales of \$285 million for the 10 months ended April 30 and anticipates net sales of approximately \$350 million for the 12 months ending June 30.

Briggs & Stratton says it expects the deal will lead to diluted earnings by 35 to 45 cents a share in fiscal 2005 based on preliminary purchase price allocations. 

Calendar of Events

JULY 22 Green Industry Professional Field Day and Trade Show, Washington, D.C. Contact: 703/250-1368

AUG. 5, 6 Lawn & Landscape Growing Your Business Seminars – Managing Labor and Improving Profits, Detroit, Mich., on Aug. 5, and Cleveland, Ohio, on Aug. 6. Contact: 800/456-0707 or www.lawnbizseminars.com

AUG. 11, 13 Lawn & Landscape Growing Your Business Seminars – Managing Labor and Improving Profits, Nashville, Tenn., on Aug. 11, and Houston, Texas, on Aug. 13. Contact: 800/456-0707 or www.lawnbizseminars.com

AUG. 18 Ohio State University/Ohio Turfgrass Foundation Turfgrass Research Field Day, Columbus, Ohio. Contact: 888/683-3445 or www.OhioTurfgrass.org

AUG. 18-20 Lawn & Landscape Weed & Insect Management Summit, Chicago, Ill. Contact: 800/456-0707 or www.weedandinsectsummit.com

AUG. 27, SEPT. 17 Lawn & Landscape Growing Your Business Seminars – Managing Labor and Improving Profits, Milwaukee, Wis., on Aug. 27, and Kansas City, Mo., on Sept. 17. Contact: 800/456-0707 or www.lawnbizseminars.com

SEPT. 24-26 2004 International Lawn, Garden & Power Equipment Expo, Louisville, Ky. Contact: 800/558-8786 or www.expo.mow.org

SEPT. 25-26 Real Green Technology Fair, Walled Lake, Mich. Contact: 800/422-7478 or www.realgreen.com

TO ENSURE that your meeting date is published, send an announcement at least 12 weeks in advance to *Lawn & Landscape Calendar*, 4012 Bridge Ave., Cleveland, OH 44113.



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USE READER SERVICE #24



—Chuck Yanneli, V.P., South Florida Bushhog

"About the only thing that gets in our way is gators."

Chuck's crews tackle the toughest the South Florida landscape has to offer — all day, every day. Sawgrass, Bahia grass, even the occasional water moccasin. His trimmer of choice? The STIHL FS 250. With its compact design, increased torque and high power-to-weight ratio, Chuck's crews can run longer and faster with the FS 250 than with anything else. As Chuck says, "When you're waist-deep in swamp, cutting sawgrass and snakes, your trimmer better be the best there is."

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USE READER SERVICE #25

The Chalet has built a thriving company based on concepts used today to secure the business' tomorrows.

by Nicole Wisniewski

THE CHALET

HEADQUARTERS: Wilmette, Ill.

LANDSCAPE DIVISION FACILITY LOCATION: North Chicago, Ill.

FOUNDED: 1917

2003 REVENUE: \$23 million total, \$13.1 million just in the landscape division

2004 PROJECTED REVENUE: \$25 million total, \$15 million just in the landscape division

CLIENT MIX: 99 percent residential, 1 percent commercial

SERVICE MIX: 65-percent design/build, 30-percent maintenance, 5-percent lawn care.

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 50 to 60 year-round and 200 during peak season

EMPLOYEE RETENTION RATE: 95 percent

Nuts

Bolts

The Chalet landscape division management team. Photos: Todd Fedler

Future First

Life's lesson tells people they should prepare as if there were no tomorrow – live life to its fullest today.

But, in business, each day's work is only as good as how much the end results secure a company's future stability.

This philosophy is one Larry Thalman has embraced throughout the past decade of operations at The Chalet, Wilmette, Ill.

Thalman's grandfather, L.J., started the landscape services business in 1917. Much like other contractors in the industry, he was a passionate gardener who ventured out to clients' homes with a pickup truck, a wheelbarrow and tools, offering his expertise to solve their landscape problems.

During the past 10 years, Thalman veered away from his father's and grandfather's more conservative business theories, hiring a number of consultants, joining industry-specific mentor groups and ultimately streamlining the company's operations.

The end result is a business full of special committee chairmen, recruitment champions and people development specialists, where survival systems execution is the name of the game.

TOMORROW, TOMORROW. The Chalet is made up of two equally successful halves – a landscape division and a retail nursery division, which feeds clients to the prior, helping to boost its growth.

Both of Chalet's landscape and retail nursery divisions operated out of the same facility until 1976 when the landscape business was moved to a 40-acre farm in West Lake Forest, Ill. "We couldn't add new people because we were already operating on top of each other at the old facility," Thalman says. "This new facility gave us more room to add vehicles and trucks and grow this business segment."

However, there was a downside. "We made due for a couple of years until the suburbs started developing more and traffic got heavier," Thalman explains. "We had three guys sitting in a truck and the 45-minute to one-hour drives to and from job sites were killing us on downtime."

So, in 1989, the company bought 16 acres in North Chicago on Route 41 – 18 miles closer to its main service area – the North Shore, a 12-mile long and 6-mile wide stretch of high-end estates along Lake Michigan. This facility houses all landscape division departments,

(continued on page 30)

Downtime – it's a scary word for many landscape contractors, particularly when it adds up and negatively affects bottom line profits.

Like other companies, The Chalet's downtime was becoming a serious problem, until three years ago when it took control of the situation by hiring a security guard to manage the crews between 3:30 and 7:30 p.m. – the bulk of time when most of the damage was being done. "Employees would loiter here at the end of the day," explains Chalet's Landscape Division Manager Kevin Marko. "For instance, if a crew came in at 5 p.m. and they were giving someone from a different crew a ride home and that person's crew didn't come back until 6 p.m., instead of clocking out and waiting that employee remained on the clock talking to the other crews."

Enter the security guard, whose main responsibility is checking the crews as they come in. When crews return to the office, the security guard has them sign in their name and time. From there, crewmembers have 15 minutes to turn in their cell phones and tools, unload their trucks and time out for the day.

Senior architects receive a daily sheet of crews' check-in times, and they compare them to workers' individual time cards to ensure they are respecting the 15-minute rule. If a gap wider than 15 minutes is apparent, senior architects will discuss the extra time with the crewmember and, if need be, adjust his or her time card accordingly. The payroll processor only pays employees after the senior architects approve their time cards.

Additionally, the security guard inspects returning trucks to look for stray equipment or plants and empty alcohol containers. This keeps theft to a minimum and enforces the company's strict policy forbidding drinking on the job, Marko says.

With the evening hours taken care of, all Chalet had to do was tweak the morning hours a bit for increased a.m. efficiency. To do this, Chalet staggers crews' start times so they all aren't trying to drive out of the shop simultaneously. For instance, materials handling crews start at 6 a.m., maintenance crews and two senior architect crews start at 6:30 a.m. and the other three senior architect crews start at 7 a.m.

To limit crew pit stops for coffee and donuts on the way to jobs, Chalet has on-site vending machines and has a truck come by to sell hot breakfast food in the mornings. However, Chalet ensures the breakfast truck is gone by 6:50 a.m. – 10 minutes before the bulk of the crews have to leave to minimize late send-offs.

These decreased downtime ideas originated from Chalet's site planning committee, which was formed in 1998 and constantly researches ways to smooth the crew exit and entry systems.

Today, downtime is 7 percent less thanks to these programs, Marko shares, adding: "We've saved more money on downtime in the last three years than it cost us to employ the security guard full time."

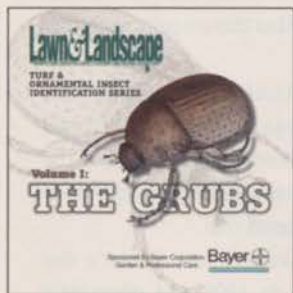
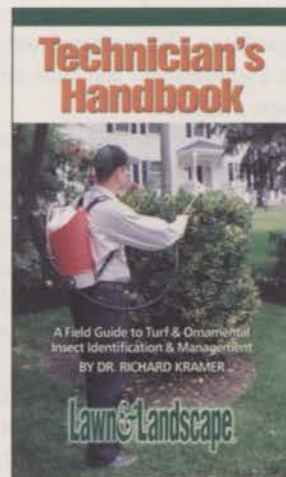
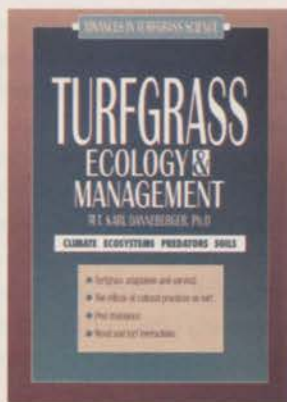
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Cover Story

(continued from page 27)

including design/build, maintenance, turf management and plant purchasing. The site also serves as a distribution yard for plants and landscape materials for both the retail nursery and landscape divisions.

Now that the company was equipped to grow landscape sales, it had to focus on its salespeople. Chalet had a landscape divi-

sion manager, Tony Graft, who was one of the top sales people in the company. However, as Thalmann explains, after moving to the new facility, it became apparent that as experienced salespeople flourished, new ones didn't. "It was obvious that we were spending too much time on sales and not enough on employee development - there



Kevin Marko

was no cohesiveness among the group," Thalmann says.

To reinforce his assumptions, Thalmann brought a consultant into the business who advised him to conduct a full battery of behavioral testing on 30 key staff members and all perspective job applicants to check if the right people were in the right positions.

The results were "earthshaking," Thalmann says. "For the first couple of years we did this, I'd lay awake worrying how employees were feeling about it - it was gut wrenching. But when we were finally ready to tell some people that they weren't in positions that matched their strengths and that we'd like to see them try different positions instead, many of them were relieved and are now thriving in those positions."

One such example was Graft. In 1997, Thalmann made the decision to move Graft into a prime selling position and make long-time landscape architect/salesman Kevin Marko the landscape division manager focusing strictly on employee management and growth, eliminating the majority of his sales and design responsibilities.

Almost instantly after the change, the company saw the potential to grow new people into strong salespeople like Graft because there was someone - Marko - championing employee development the majority of his time. To set this up, Marko and Thalmann formed design teams comprised of senior architects who are responsible for the group's sales, design, estimating, installation, supervision and all follow-up communication with their clients concerning future maintenance on their properties.

Today, Chalet has five full teams focusing on design/build customers and one team handling the design/build needs of the company's existing maintenance clients.



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Generally, teams are made up of four to six members. On a larger team, the senior architect (A) sells and supervises the design work; the landscape designer/architect (B) is an intermediary between the senior architect and the support staff and does the majority of the designing, estimating and remaining supervision; and the entry-level designer/draftsperson (C) measures, troubleshoots, obtains permits and draws the rough design concepts for the job. Then there is a construction supervisor who helps manage all of the installation crews.

During a typical job, the rough drawings are often passed on to the senior architect, who ensures all the ideas are what the client expects and then they go back to the B and C team members for the final drawing and coloring so it's ready for presentation. From there, the senior architect takes the work to the client and sells the job. Once a job is sold, he turns it in for production so the Material Handling Division can tag and assemble the plants and materials. "The teams run like they are their own mini companies," Marko says, adding that all of the senior architects report to him. "The sales volume for each team determines how many support components a team will need."

Another thing Thalmann did in the early to mid-1990s to reinforce these changes was accept an invitation to join the Alexis Group, an organization of 30 non-competing green industry companies across the country. The companies were broken up into three 10-member peer groups of like-sized and similarly diverse businesses. "We met four times a year at one of our places of business for a two-day meeting," Thalmann explains. "It was full disclosure - we treated these Alexis Group members as if they were absentee owners of our business. We shared full financial figures, showed them around the facility, explained the decisions we were making and exposed our key managers to the process as well."

Hiring a consultant and being a part of the Alexis Group wasn't cheap, Thalmann says. The consultants Chalet has used ranged from \$1,000 to \$5,000 a day, and the first consultant they worked with for three years. And the Alexis Group had a membership fee that covered some of the group's full time staff, including a marketing specialist focused on providing new ideas to these 30

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Cover Story

companies. In addition to the fee, Chalet had to pay travel time and expenses to and from quarterly meetings.

When spending the extra money on these business-building concepts, Thalmann says

he had to keep his No. 1 goal top-of-mind to reassure himself that they were doing the right thing – investing in tomorrow's success of the business vs. today's never-ending to-do list. "If we want to develop and grow

people and systems as much as we do," Thalmann says, "then we can't worry solely about the sales of today and be farsighted and not realize that the steps we take today

(continued on page 34)

Many landscape contractors across the United States are feeling the negative impact rising gas prices are having on their businesses' bottom lines.

For instance, Kevin Marko, landscape division manager, The Chalet, Wilmette, Ill., says that the business' fuel expenses are already 30 percent higher compared to last year, and he expects that number to reach 50 percent by the end of the summer.

To limit some of these extra expenses, the company started charging their maintenance clients a \$2 fuel surcharge per visit this year. Though the surcharge has eased some of the rising fuel cost burden, it doesn't cover the bulk of it. "For example, five visits at \$2

each per month is \$10," Marko explains. "Multiply that times 450 clients and you only get \$4,500 a month, which barely covers half of our monthly gas bill."

The company also has its own on-site pump, so Marko says the company made the decision to purchase this summer's fuel supply in advance in March after realizing that the gas prices were going to continue to rise. However, the fuel companies were only permitting contractors to do this with diesel fuel – not regular or unleaded – so it only helped control some of the costs.

To alert clients to the surcharge, Chalet lists it in a separate line item at the bottom of clients' invoices. Most clients understand the need for this extra minimal charge, Marko says, adding that only three of them have shared complaints. – *Nicole Wisniewski*

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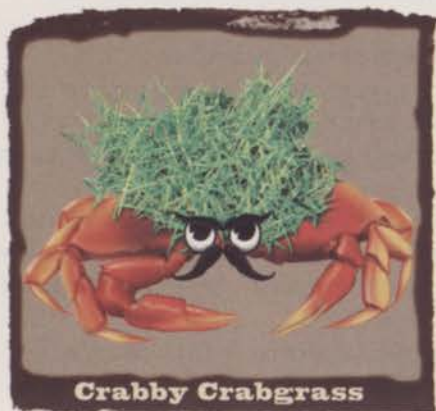
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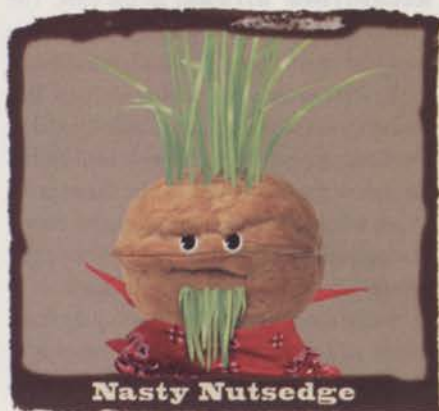
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USE READER SERVICE #30

Cover Story

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could greatly benefit us in two or three years. The mindset we have to overcome is that we don't have all of the answers. The minute we realized there was a great wealth of resources out there we could be taking advantage of was the first hurdle."

RECRUITING RITUAL. In the past, The Chalet had trouble hiring employees. When they had needs, they'd put advertisements in the local newspapers and wait. Since this concept was reactive, Thalmann decided that the ideal would be to have a well-suited candidate recommended to him through referrals when a position opened up vs. hiring through advertising, wondering if the right person would walk through the door.

So the company created a recruiting committee and went to work. The concept is to recruit all year long whether the business was adding employees or not to put the focus on networking and relationship build-

(continued on page 36)

Wilmette, Ill.-based Chalet employs Fleet Manager Bill Cook who oversees two small engine mechanics, two regular mechanics and two yard men, who paint and detail equipment. Cook himself is a truck mechanic but spends the majority of his time managing paperwork. This is what keeps Chalet's equipment in check throughout the year.

But when operating equipment, reminding employees to use safety gear is always a challenge, which is why Chalet expanded upon an existing safety program in 1999 to help keep employees' priorities in check. Chalet Lawn Care Division Manager Bill Leuenberger is one of the committee members who goes on random site checks to ensure employees are wearing their proper safety gear while operating equipment. Employees learn the safety equipment rules from regular safety meetings conducted by this committee. Monthly meetings usually take place 30 minutes before the start of a work day, and employees get paid for this time. Employees caught not wearing the proper gear are warned and reminded of their safety and the points stressed at meetings.

And to further enforce various protective gear when operating various pieces of equipment, when crews check out machines from the fleet manager, each piece comes with a set of safety gear specific for that machine to encourage employees to follow safety rules, Leuenberger says.

"Another key to safety is that our insurance rates improve as we improve our safety," Leuenberger says, estimating that the company's insurance rates are 50 percent less than the current market's prevailing rates because it implemented this program and improved its safety record.

Other topics the safety committee focuses on are stretching and protecting the back while lifting. — *Nicole Wisniewski*

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USE READER SERVICE #34

Cover Story

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Larry Thalmann

ing. "Our goal is to become so desirable that kids coming out of college want to come work for us – we want to attract the Michael Jordans of the green industry," Thalmann says.

Marko, the head of the recruiting committee, started calling up his old University of Illinois professors and building a relationship with the college's alumni association. "Once we got into the mindset of getting our name and philosophies out to schools and learning about their programs, it totally changed our entire focus on labor," Marko says, adding that he now receives more resumes than he ever has via advertisements throughout the year from applicants looking for landscape-related work.

The discussion with local schools inspired Chalet to start a structured internship program in 1998. The company brings in two interns each summer and pays them \$8 an hour and provides them with on-site housing or \$9 an hour for local students. Applicants must be college sophomores, juniors or seniors and in a four-year accredited horticulture or landscape architecture program.

Internships last 12 weeks – typically mid-May to mid-August, Marko explains. Each intern is assigned a mentor to guide them through the whole program. The first six weeks are spent working 60 hours, and each week is dedicated to a different area of the business – lawn care, maintenance, construction, retail, material handling, etc. "They have specific requirements of what they learn each week and specific people are assigned as trainers to make sure they are on track," Marko shares.

The next six weeks can be spent earning overtime by continuing this schedule or cutting back a bit to five instead of six days a week, focusing on all aspects of design/build.

This year, the company had 112 students apply for the program, Marko enthuses. The experience has kept the Chalet name top-of-mind for many college professors. "We get calls from professors telling us they are impressed

(continued on page 106)

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Visit the July issue online for Chalet's landscape revenue figures and for a look at how it runs its lawn care division.

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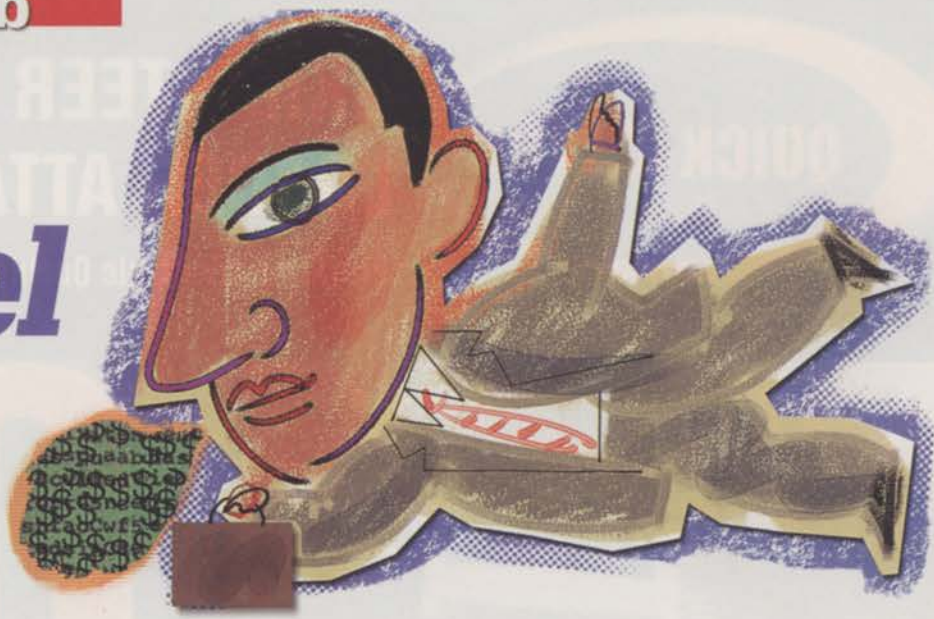
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USE READER SERVICE #35

TIME Travel



Travel expenses can pile up, especially on long commutes to and from job sites. Lawn & Landscape Online Message Board users discuss whether travel costs should be included in customer billing.

by Jonathan Katz

One recent thread on the *Lawn & Landscape* Online Message Board questioned whether contractors should include travel expenses in their fees when billing customers. Issues addressed included how to bill customers, when to bill them and how much. And while the discussion hit on a few specifics, forum participants have more to share.

"For the most part, my jobs have fallen generally within a 10- to 15-mile radius of where I'm located," writes John Palasek, owner of JonKar Design Group, Yaphank, N.Y. "Consequently, since I'm more toward the eastern end of Long Island, my travel time is usually measured in minutes, so I never really thought much about it other than to add a bit to an estimate to cover fuel."

But Palasek may be thinking twice about the company's traditional practice of eating travel costs ever since his company expanded into two new markets farther west where there is more traffic congestion. "I looked at a job today, for instance, which was 35 miles one way through very congested roads during rush hour," Palasek says. "I can see this trip taking an hour to an hour and a half. So my question is: Do I bill my regular hourly rate for travel, or do I bill a percentage of it?"

Palasek adds that his regular hourly rate is \$42 per man for a three-man crew, which he figures would cost him about \$189 travel time each way.

TO BILL OR NOT TO BILL? Bill hourly for each way traveled per worker, suggests Andrew Aksar, owner, Outdoor Finishes, Walkersville, Md. Outdoor Finishes charges for a minimum of 25 minutes travel time each way, Aksar says.

"If you really want the job, bill travel time at cost," he writes. "In other words, bill enough to cover employee time, payroll taxes and insurance, and forget about the profit. As far as fuel, I calculate how many gallons we will use annually, and that goes into the indirect overhead recovery."

A company that pays \$30 per employee for a three-man crew could lose about \$22.50 per day, \$112.50 per week, \$600 per month or \$6,000 per year if it doesn't charge for travel time, according to Robert Shauger, owner, Advanced Applications, Deerfield, N.Y. Shauger also estimates that if companies have employees working at least one hour a day of non-billable

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BEST OF THE WEB

The *Lawn & Landscape* Message Board is a hotbed of green industry chatter and professional dialogue. Playing host to a diverse collection of opinions and ideas, the online forum often bounces between detailed discussion and dynamic debate.

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(continued from page 38)

time, they could lose approximately \$90 per day, which he calculates out to \$450 per week, \$1,800 per month or \$18,000 per year.

But Palesek still doesn't seem completely convinced that charging for travel is the best policy. He points out that the customers shouldn't have to bear responsibility for heavy traffic delays. "I don't really see

where it's the customer's fault if there was an accident, and I had to wait an hour for the road to clear," Palasek says. "Especially since I'm looking at a work area where that very well may happen. If I choose to seek out this market, then it's my problem getting there."

Aksar responds by saying the only thing

"IF YOU REALLY WANT THE JOB, BILL TRAVEL TIME AT COST. IN OTHER WORDS, BILL ENOUGH TO COVER EMPLOYEE TIME, PAYROLL TAXES AND INSURANCE, AND FORGET ABOUT THE PROFIT. AS FAR AS FUEL, I CALCULATE HOW MANY GALLONS WE WILL USE ANNUALLY, AND THAT GOES INTO THE INDIRECT OVERHEAD RECOVERY." — ANDREW AKSAR

a contractor has to lose by not charging for drive time is money. He also suggests that contractors don't tell customers that travel time has been included in their price. Customers will be willing to pay a higher price for quality service, according to Aksar.

"If someone wants a competent, experienced contractor who dumps his or her entire heart into the job, there is a price to pay for this service," he says. "They can take it or leave it. You don't get this service from everyone."

Aksar adds that he tells clients Outdoor Finishes typically charges 10 to 20 percent more than other contractors in the area.

"The clock is ticking while you're sitting in traffic," Aksar says. "If you weren't doing that job Helen Homeowner just had to have, you could be working with production ahead of schedule. You have to look out for yourself and your wallet."

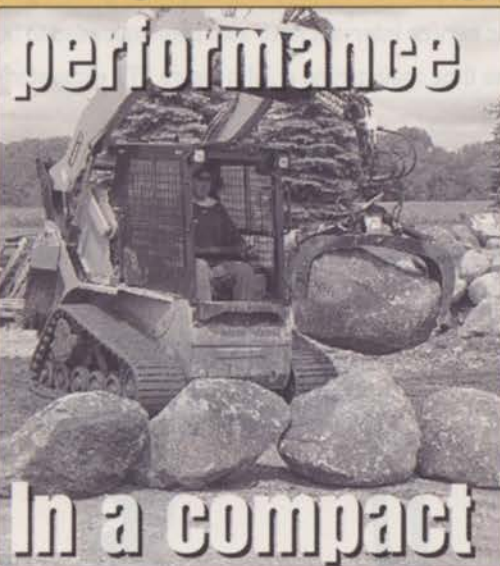
The only time Aksar says he doesn't include travel expenses in customer bills is when they live within 7 miles of his shop.

EMPLOYEE COMPENSATION. Deciding whether to pay employees for the drive time is also an option to consider. One contractor says he pays employees just to travel one way. Others say laborers deserve better. Long Island, N.Y.-based Landscape Design pays its employees each day a flat rate of \$125 to start and \$150 after a month on the job, according to company Owner Sal Mortilla. That includes travel time for both ways. "If you want good help, you have to pay for it," Mortilla says.

Aksar agrees. "It's not the employee's fault that a company decided to take a job 20 to 120 minutes away." **LL**

The author is associate editor of Lawn & Landscape magazine and can be reached at jkatz@gie.net.

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by Lauren Spiers

No matter the industry or the type of job, most members of the workforce will find themselves in a rut from time to time. Job responsibilities stagnate, work gets redundant and rewards may seem few and far between.

But in service industries like landscaping and lawn care, employers can't afford to let their employees become bored at work only to leave the company for one that suits them better. Instead, implementing some strategic incentive plans and even closing up shop every once in a while for a day off can be refreshing enough to pump up production throughout the company.

Knowing this, many contractors have developed creative methods to consistently motivate and retain employees. *Lawn & Landscape* spoke with three industry professionals with unique approaches to the topic

and found out how these employers made their programs work.

CASE STUDY No. 1 - Lifestyle Landscaping: Work Meets Play. All work and no play might produce more billable hours for a landscape company, but playing in the dirt all day may not be an employee's idea of a good time.

At Lifestyle Landscaping, North Ridgeville, Ohio, President Dave Hoffman would much rather give his employees a well-deserved day off than risk an exhausted and irritable workforce. "It's easy during the busy time of year to decide not to take a day off for your crews to go golfing, especially when you're behind schedule," he admits. "But at the end of the year, you look back at events like golfing days and company picnics and you forget all about the Johnson job that was delayed one day because you went out and had fun."

(continued on page 44)

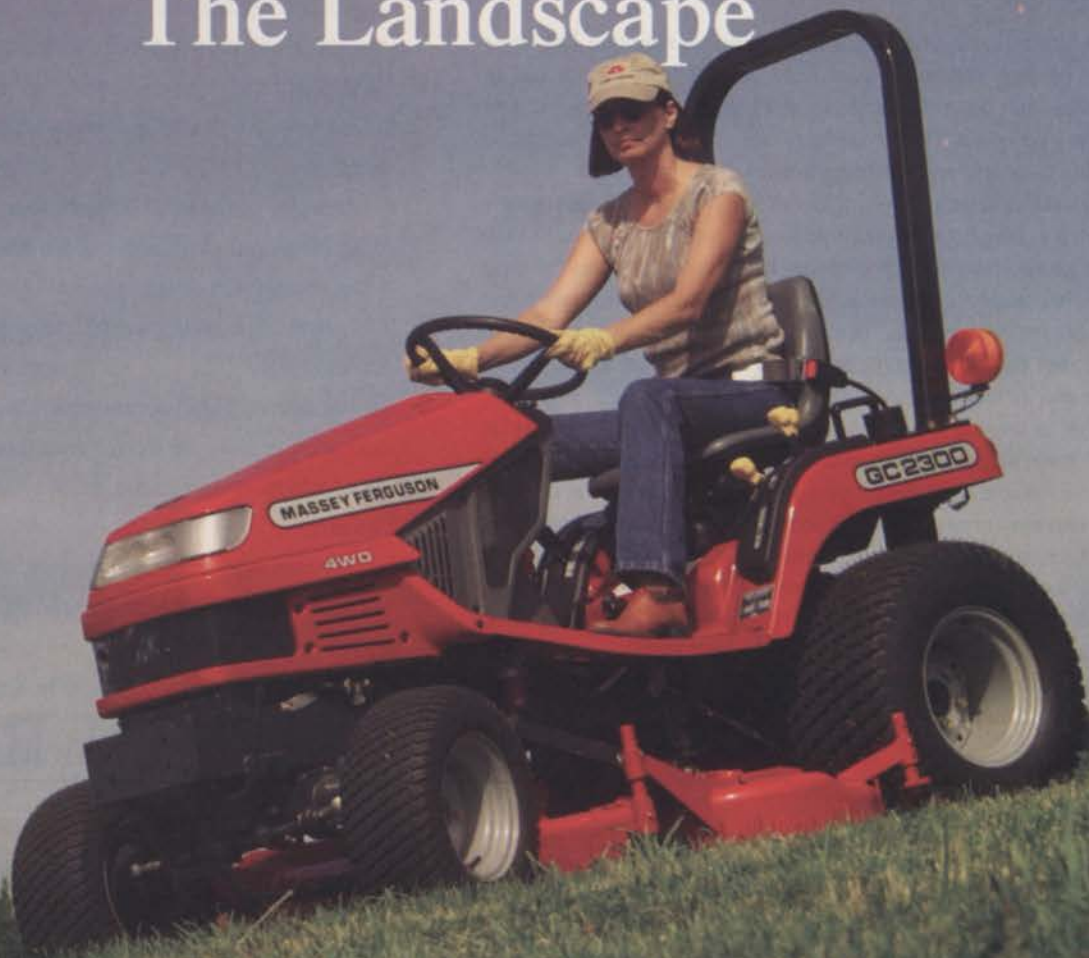


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Employee Motivation

(continued from page 42)

At Lifestyle, Hoffman notes that employee retention has never been a concern. He credits motivators like company picnics and an occasional fun day off to building the family atmosphere that employees appreciate. "We try to keep our operation as close-knit as possible so people enjoy coming to work," Hoffman says.

Mandatory monthly meetings for all employees are the company's first step to keeping everyone updated on company events. But the meetings also provide opportunities to reward employees for their hard work the previous month. "At the company meetings, we name an employee of the month," Hoffman says. "For that award, all of the peers vote for an employee who's been caught doing something above and beyond their responsibilities."

Also, at the end of each project, clients receive survey sheets on which they can grade crews on their level of service and then submit them to the company. Employees who accumulate points through these surveys are eligible for the company's "MVP" award, which is also given out at the monthly meetings, Hoffman says. "Our MVPs get a \$50 gift certificate or cash and an MVP hat, and the employee of the month gets a paid day off and a write-up in the monthly employee newsletter that we mail to each employee," Hoffman says. "But beyond the recognition, the employee of the month and MVP awards are voted on by clients and peers, which gives them a lot of impor-

(continued on page 46)

Like most green industry companies, Lifestyle Landscaping bulks up its crews in the summertime by hiring H-2B workers, local folks and college students looking for summer jobs. The company reportedly has little trouble finding the two dozen people it regularly adds to its workforce during the peak season, and employees have an added incentive to refer quality, potential new hires to the company.

"We give out referral bonuses to our people here if they bring in someone new, and that's worked out really well," comments Dave Hoffman, president of the North Ridgeville, Ohio-based firm. "We give the referring employee \$100 if the new person stays on for 90 days and when the new person reaches 1,500 hours of work, the referring employee gets another \$200 and a point toward teammember of the year, which is announced at our success banquet in January."

Hoffman says existing employees will refer about five prospective new hires each year and the company will hire based on level of experience and how many additional crewmembers they need. — **Lauren Spiers**

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Employee Motivation

(continued from page 44)

tance and makes them really fun for our employees."

To choose the winners of these awards, Lifestyle employees may nominate their coworkers by submitting nomination forms during the month, which are collected by the company's internal rewards committee (IRC). At the monthly employee meeting, each employee-of-the-month nomination is read and the company takes a group vote to determine the most deserving candidate.



Dave Hoffman

A little away from work also is a motivating factor for Lifestyle employees. Annual events like the company picnic involve employees' families, and the annual "Paper Chase" builds friendship and teamwork among the staff.

"We've been doing the Paper Chase for about eight years," Hoffman says of the scavenger hunt-style game. "The team that won the previous year gets to put it on, so they go out and put together a packet of clues that all the other teams have to go around North Ridgeville and try to solve." When one of the four-member teams solves the final clue and reaches the last location for the game, the team often has to perform a goofy stunt – all of which is videotaped and later shared at the company picnic.

On the more professional side of Lifestyle Landscaping's employee recognition is the annual success banquet held at the beginning of the year. "It's a black tie affair and we invite all of our employees and their significant others to an awards dinner with a speaker and PowerPoint presentations of jobs that the company did during the year," Hoffman explains. "Our guys and girls really get a kick out of having their spouses participate in that and seeing the quality of work that they do when they're here. We also award the teammember of the year at the success banquet and that person gets an additional week's vacation in addition to other benefits."

Similar to employee of the month, the teammember of the year is selected by a popular vote at the company's annual holiday card-signing party. If there happens to be a tie, points accumulated through nominations or other good works serve as tie-breakers. The IRC coordinates all of Lifestyle's activities, including the success banquet, and tallies votes for employee of the month, MVP and teammember of the year awards. Hoffman says an annual employee welfare budget of \$8,000 to \$10,000 pays for these events.

On top of having a little fun on the job, Hoffman notes that above-average compensation, compared to some industry surveys, also helps the company retain and satisfy employees. "We pay above average and when it comes down to it, that speaks volumes," he says. "We try to keep people year-round, which attracts people who are going to college to be in our industry, and those people generally stick around longer. If I can offer them year-round employment and pay them above-average wages and I can put them in good situations with clients in terms of above-average design work and customer service, that's what they're looking for. Our secret to retention comes from the quality of pay and work that we do."

(continued on page 48)



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Employee Motivation

(continued from page 46)

Hoffman says field employees are not salaried workers, but that account managers generally earn between \$13 and \$18 per hour depending on experience and tenure, and crewmembers start at \$8 to \$9 – always above minimum wage. The company also shares profit with its employees at the end of the year and practices open-book management to keep employees apprised of the company's progress on that front.

"We get together biweekly and look at just about all of the company's numbers," Hoffman explains. "Different people have certain accounts to keep track of, such as fuel, how much a mechanic is spending or a small-tool budget, and after looking at all of that, we see where we're at for profit." At the end of the year, a percentage of the company's profit beyond the first \$150,000 is divvied up among employees. Factors such as amount of experience help determine how much money each individual will get. The cash

payout is provided to employees just before the holiday season and any profit that has yet to be calculated goes into employees' 401k plans after the first of the year.

CASE STUDY No. 2 - Western Lawns: Pay for Production. Many green industry professionals got their starts by mowing lawns for neighbors when they were teenagers. But how many of those up-and-coming entrepreneurs would have spent day after day pushing a mower in the heat of the summer if they hadn't been getting paid for it? Moreover, how many of them would have tried to pick up additional clients if they were paid by the hour rather than by the lawn?

In 2001, Lorne Hall started to see employees at his company, Western Lawns, revert to unproductive tactics like stretching out hours worked on a job in order to make a little overtime without doing any extra work. But, tempting as it may be to

take things a little slower when the sun's beating down, the president of the Oklahoma City-based company knew that profits would slip if hourly employees didn't get back on the ball.

"As it was, working more hours was the only incentive option they had to impact next Friday's paycheck," Hall says. "We had been using some bonus and reward systems that were paid out monthly and based upon the total company's performance, but we came to a point where we realized that the guys who were getting paid weekly and were behind pieces of equipment weren't connected to or hadn't bought into the

Lorne Hall



(continued on page 50)

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Employee Motivation

(continued from page 48)

monthly bonus system because they couldn't see how they could impact it. Nothing was better than just getting more hours."

To remedy the situation, Western Lawns implemented a "Pay for Production" system, which uses principles of piece-work compensation. "The point is that the crews are assigned so many production hours a day and they get paid for those hours that they produce instead of being paid clock time," Hall explains. "If a three-person crew has 30 production hours for the day, the crewmembers will all be paid for 10 hours each whether it takes them nine hours or 11 hours to finish the job."

By tying compensation directly to the amount of work produced, hourly employees were able to see a stronger connection between the company's profitability and their own paychecks. Likewise, as workers took advantage of being able to make the same pay even if they finished work early,

Western Lawns became highly efficient by allowing employees to pick up more work once their original jobs were finished.

"Our employees began to produce more work than they had before, and because our labor was fixed, we benefitted from the fact that we covered our overhead quicker," Hall explains.

The first year that the Pay for Production program was in place, Western Lawns' crews beat the average production times for the previous year by 7 percent. Moreover, they beat average times by 6 percent the next year and still consistently beat the numbers by 3 percent annually. "We've been able to take on more work because of the increased efficiency, without adding more equipment or more people," he says.

In terms of numbers, Western Lawns budgets 135 hours per week for an average three-person maintenance crew - 45 production hours per week, per person. And

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while Hall notes that the average budgeted wage for employees is \$9.35, that number can fluctuate quite a bit if there happens to be poor working conditions one week or overtime hours to handle. Still, because the company is an H-2B employer, hourly workers are guaranteed a minimum wage of \$6.48 to comply with federal guidelines.

"We use the H-2B minimum wage that we've been assigned as our company's minimum wage, so any time the crews have a bad week, that's as low as their pay is going to go," Hall says. "If they have 50 hours budgeted and they work 50 hours, you can calculate overtime based on that, but if they had a bad week and were budgeted 30 hours but

(continued on page 52)

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Employee Motivation

(continued from page 50)

had to work 40 for whatever reason, that would actually make their pay per hour as calculated by the labor department less. We put that minimum wage floor on it so that nobody drops below \$6.48 per hour because you can't use a payment system to circumvent minimum wage or overtime laws. You still have to know how many actual clock

hours your employees worked and how to compute those items."

Once Western Lawns had a payment system in place that motivated employees to work more efficiently, the company's concerns turned toward job quality. After all, a program that stimulates productivity really doesn't work if quality suffers as a result.

"The first year we used our Pay for Production program, we had a small quality pay component, but the crews realized that they could cut quality and produce more hours and still get paid," Hall remembers. "What we did was change the payment structure for the crewleader because he needed to be as responsible for quality as he was for production."

As it stands, crewmembers are still 100-percent production paid, but full-time crewleaders' compensation is split between salary, quality and production pay. "Twenty-five percent of the crewleaders' pay is pay for production, another 25 percent is quality pay and the remaining 50 percent is a base salary that's there year round," Hall says.

For the quality pay component, Hall explains that Western Lawns' account managers are required to walk each of their sites, preferably with the property manager or owner, at least once per month. During those

(continued on page 54)

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Implementing a new payment structure can be confusing for crewmembers, but it also can take a toll on an accounting staff. When Western Lawns first introduced their Pay for Production system in 2001, the new style of calculating compensation required some extra TLC with the payroll staff.

"The new payment system was a little bit of a challenge for the payroll staff, but what we did was fix a simple spreadsheet and, every day, each employee's production hours and clock hours are put in and it calculates the pay as the week goes on," explains Lorne Hall, president of the Oklahoma City, Okla.-based company.

In addition to calculating each employee's pay based on their per-production-hour wage, the spreadsheet includes an "If" statement that maintains an hourly wage at the company's minimum of \$6.48 per hour, should a bad week upset the pay scale.

- Lauren Spiers

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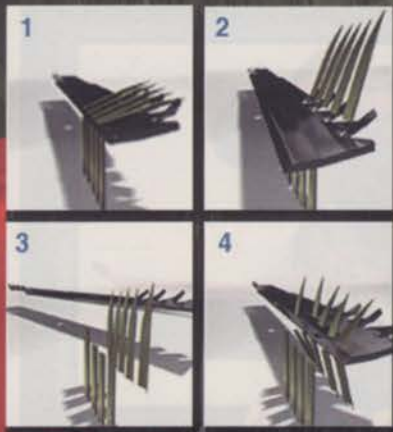
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USE READER SERVICE #51

Employee Motivation

(continued from page 52)

inspections, the account manager will go through a 100-point inspection of the property using the company's Quality Inspection Form. The form breaks down the property into lawn maintenance functions like mowing and weedeating, as well as shrub and bed area functions, lawn care, tree and shrub care, insect control, irrigation and tree trimming. "If the account manager comes up with a rating of 75 out of 100 for the property, the crewleader will receive 75 percent of his quality pay, which starts at \$125 for 100 percent," Hall says. "The account managers also are supposed to give the crewleaders a copy of the inspection form and talk over it with them to discuss what areas were done well and what areas need improvement."

Additionally, Hall notes that the company gives the same rating to all crewleaders who service the property – the mowing crewleader, the irrigation crewleader and the lawn care crewleader. "If the rating on

the property is 75 percent, everyone receives a 75 percent," he explains. "The reason we do this is that it helps all the crewleaders take ownership of the property. If you're working on an irrigation line and you notice a few dandelions, you need to communicate that to the lawn care crewleader to make sure it's taken care of."

Though the Pay for Production system is an overall success for Western Lawns, Hall notes that there was some initial frustration and turnover among employees who didn't buy into the system. "The first season that we used the Pay for Production system, our best employees excelled and consistently made more per hour than they had the previous season," he says. "Our average employees made similar wages, but our poorest-performing employees found themselves making less money and gradually left for jobs at other companies."

To alleviate some of the initial resistance

and confusion to a system like this, Hall recommends being patient when first rolling out the system and explaining it in the most simple terms possible. "What we did was show our employees that their schedules and what the normal weeks hours were was what they were getting paid for," he says. "You just have to keep it simple and not hold a bonus over their heads when they don't understand their stake in it. This program is directly related to what the crewmembers are doing on a daily basis and that's what makes it such a great tool."

CASE STUDY No. 3 - Tecza Environmental: Go for Your Goals.

At Tecza Environmental Group, Elgin, Ill., the daily focus is on more than just landscape installation and maintenance. This company focuses on people to create an atmosphere of teamwork throughout the organization.

"In the peak of the season, we hire approximately 90 total employees – 15 of us are

(continued on page 107)

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Fire in the Hole

Fire ant management is no picnic – it's war! Lawn & Landscape gets tips from the pros on how to tackle this complicated service without getting stung.



by Will Nepper

Of all the creepy crawlies a landscape contractor could encounter, there's not much that beats the fire ant's sheer nastiness. Persistent, resilient and downright painful, the fire ant is backyard enemy No. 1 for most of the southern United States.

"Fire ants are a serious problem, especially in the Southeast," explains Richard Patterson, professor of entomology, University of Florida, Gulfport, Fla. "Wherever they are found there are serious health problems as well as possible lawn problems."

And the problems don't look as though

they'll be going away anytime soon, which means many lawn care operators (LCOs) in the affected states must decide whether to offer fire ant management as a service. But different rules apply to fire ant management than to other pest control areas. In fact, in many regards managing fire ants requires more patience, customer education and entomological understanding than many LCOs may be equipped to deal with. But the LCOs up to the challenge may find themselves treated as superheroes by the customers whose back yards they've won back from the beasts.

TRACKING THE BEAST. Specific signs to look for before treating a property can give an LCO an idea of how many colonies exist and what parts of the property are serving as pest pathways.

The quickest way to identify an infestation is to spot any of the many mounds the ants have built around the property. "The mound is like an ice cream cone shape that goes down into the ground with the rounded top sticking out of the ground," explains Bobby Jenkins, president, ABC Pest & Lawn Services, Austin, Texas. "When you disturb it, those ants are going to boil to the top to let you know they've been disturbed."

Patterson says that a single mound can indicate a colony that could be made up of several hundred thousand to one million ants. "The mounds are quite noticeable and they'll be scattered across the lawns, especially around the edges of gardens and walls and yard perimeters," he says. "A regularly mowed yard will cause them to move their mounds to

(continued on page 58)



Often fire ants create pathways along yard edges to limit disturbances. Photo: ABC Pest & Lawn Services

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Insect ID: Fire Ants

(continued from page 56)

the edges where they won't be disturbed."

Jenkins explains that in some cases fire ant mounds may turn up next to outdoor power boxes. This is why often you'll see mounds around a property's power source.

Also, a freshly mowed lawn helps make ant activity around the property more observable for a more thorough inspection,

Jenkins says. "Looking over the turf and spotting the mounds is just the tip of the iceberg – and that's the easy part of fire ant control," he says. "The challenge becomes moving rocks, moving timbers, looking along sidewalks and really hunting for those smaller mounds that are not as readily identifiable. That's where a good technician sepa-

rates himself from an average one. He knows you can't just go in and treat the easy spots."

Though science has provided LCOs powerful new tools to manage and treat fire ants, the sad truth is that they almost always come back, which means that fire ant management is an ongoing process. "The ants always eventually move back into the treated zones," Jenkins says. "You can kill all of the ants in one zone, but they'll return to that area eventually. We can achieve control, but I don't think permanent elimination is available."

CHOOSE YOUR WEAPON. A fire ant treatment program can have one of two objectives: a quick fix or a long-term solution. There are reasons to employ both methods, depending on specific customer needs.

If a property owner is preparing for a backyard barbecue, perhaps their best course of action would include a treatment that could knock out a population in one or two days before guests arrive. The ants might be back within a few weeks, but they won't be terrorizing Uncle Joe while he's attempting to garnish his cheeseburger. On the other hand, customers who are serious about long-term solutions would tackle their entomological enemies with their eyes on the future. Results won't be as expedient, but in many cases, they can last an entire season.

Short-term curative methods include the use of contact solutions that can be applied as liquid mound injections – often applied with guns that shoot the chemical directly into the mound – the use of ant baits or a combination of the two.

Patterson explains that these methods are less about knocking out the queens (the key to long-term control) and more about killing the forager ants, which are the one's that pose the most immediate threat. "If you come in and spray with a contact application, you can knock the visible population down very quickly. This can be very effective if you're about to have a party on your patio and you want to make the ants disappear."

However, because the ant population is so quickly rendered disabled, none of the dead foragers have a chance to make it back to infect the colony, Patterson says. "The queen, her reserves and all of the younger ants are still right there beneath the surface –

(continued on page 60)

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Insect ID: Fire Ants

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alive," he explains. "This is why you use a contact compound – it's very quick and you go out the next day and you don't find anything. But then in a week they're back in full-force because the reserves have moved into place."

This is why neglecting to control the queen with longer lasting compounds can

be like spinning your wheels, Patterson says. To this end, baits are perhaps the most cost-efficient and effective methods of curative control, and are often used in combination with granular applications for



A technician makes a mound application.

Photo: ABC Pest & Lawn Services.

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preventive control.

Jenkins explains that, like contact applications, baits are good for controlling fire ants on a mound-by-mound basis. "If we inject a mound with a contact application, we're going to kill that mound, but the problem is that with multiple queen colonies, they're all interconnected," he says. "That's when you really need to make sure that you're getting a good broadcast treatment with a bait."

He adds that baits are good in situations where mounds are difficult to identify because they work as ants come above ground to forage, making a bait's proximity to a mound less significant. "You could go in and inspect and not find any mounds and yet you still have a pretty severe fire ant problem. But baits allow you to broadcast to a wider area."

"Baits are often preferred because they're the most environmentally friendly and the least expensive," says Charles Barr, an instructor at Texas Cooperative Extension, College Station, Texas. However, bait applications can be tricky if not done correctly. "They can't be irrigated or rained on and they can't be put out when it's too cold."

Jenkins explains how timing is one of the biggest disadvantages of baits. "There's more pressure on the applicator to try and make an effort to apply them at the optimal time," he says. "It's a very short window of time in which the ants will pick up the bait, but if you make that window, you'll get the consumption and the transportation of that bait back to the colony."

If treating fire ants were as easy as throwing down some bait and letting nature take its course, then even homeowners would be able to offer the service. But the truth is it's a little more complicated than that.

Jenkins says that there are preferable times of year to make applications for fire ant programs. "The best time to treat is in spring," he says, explaining that when temperatures create dry conditions, moisture-loving fire

(continued on page 62)

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Insect ID: Fire Ants

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ants move further underground. "But when the spring rains come the mounds are up, identifiable and easy to treat. Your results will be better because you'll get a quicker acceptance of bait, and quicker transport the contents of the bait back to the colony faster."

However, a contractor wouldn't want to throw down baits too early in the season because the ants will still be underground, Jenkins adds.

Used properly, baits are very effective, but also temporary, unless they are employed as a part of a bigger broadcast program that includes granular applications.

In the past few years, some manufacturers have developed broadcast granular treatments and baits with newer active ingredients that promise better management. These applications, when applied as specified and with careful adherence to labels, can provide long-term control of fire ants that lasts from one season to up to a year, by some accounts.

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Can they make you sick? Can they put you down for the count? Can they (gulp!) kill you? Before landscape contractors make the commitment to add fire ant control to their services, it may behoove them to get to know the little buggers.

Richard Patterson, professor of entomology, University of Florida, Gulfport, Fla., offers the fire ant rap sheet: "They will attack anything that comes in contact with their colony, mound or nest," he says. "They have venom and when they sting many people go into anaphylactic shock. If you step in a mound, you could get hundreds of stings before you even realize what has happened, and that amount of toxin in your

system could cause a severe reaction."

These charming creatures are even responsible for several deaths annually – "especially toddlers or elderly people who are immobilized in nursing homes and hospitals," Patterson adds.

Charles Barr, an instructor at Texas Cooperative Extension, College Station, Texas, does assure LCOs, however, that unless you are allergic to their venom, the average person is in no real danger from a sting. "You'll get stung, you'll get a pustule and maybe you'll get a little scar," he says. "But a few bites could make a hand or foot swell up and there's certainly a chance of secondary infection from scratching." – **Will Nepper**

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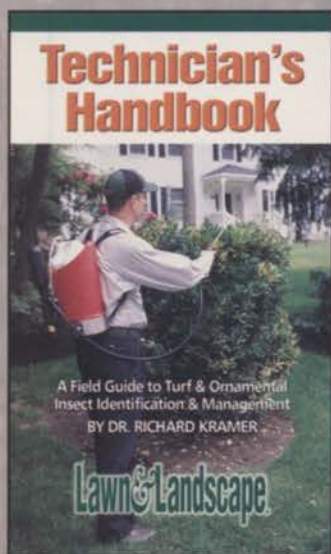
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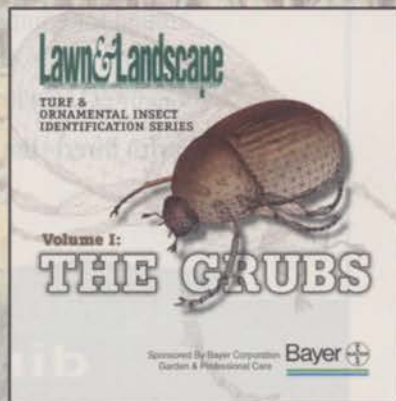
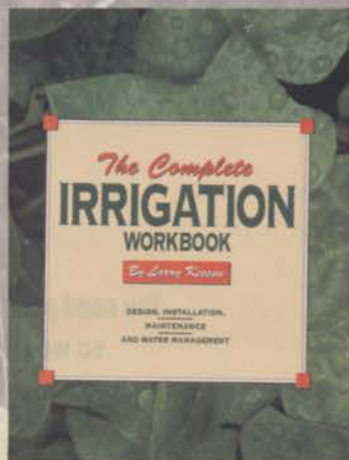
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Insect ID: Fire Ants

(continued from page 62)

In addition to their powerful residual effect, Barr attests that some of these newer broadcast treatments work best in conjunction with baits. "Some of the new broadcast granulars work in two to four weeks but have a residual effect that keeps them working for months and months," he explains. "The primary problem is the time it takes to show its effectiveness, which means you'll have to educate your customers who don't understand why it's taking two weeks to get rid of their mound. Treating mounds with curative baits or injections can supplement a treatment to give the customer what they want while the real results are taking effect."

Jenkins says that with some granular applications it's preferable to make the application even earlier than you would with curative products. "Once that product is down, it's ready to do its thing even earlier and you can't expect from baits," he says.

Barr explains how watering a property can have an effect on a treatment. "About the only thing that could go wrong with granular broadcast treatments is failure to water it in," he says, adding the opposite is true of baits. "With baits, irrigation within 12 hours would probably ruin their effect or at least reduce it."

Also, if it's either too hot or cold, there is a reduced chance of ants foraging and making it to the baits, Barr adds. But that's not all to consider when using baits. "Baits can go rancid," he explains. "That can pose a problem when they are kept around in a hot warehouse for extended periods of time."

Jenkins advises educating the customer as well as possible to eliminate any misunderstanding regarding what effects they should be expecting after treatment. "It takes a relationship and communication between the technician and the homeowner for the realistic expectation of the service to be understood," he says. "With fire ants, the technicians ability to communicate what he found, what he did and what expectations are reasonable will reduce the incidence of call-backs."

This kind of educating is also integral to the process of selling fire ant control.

Barr says that accurately educating the client is a better sales practice than terrifying them into a treatment. "A lot of contractors use the scare tactic - 'Your children are in danger. Your pets are going to be eaten

alive!'" Barr says. "Some of them do go to those extremes and to some degree those methods work."

However, there are more responsible ways to sell the service, Barr says, adding that ABC Pest & Lawn Control has a good solution. "Their tactic is 'Take your yard back,'" Barr says, adding that most everyone who lives in a southern fire ant state is affected. "Even if they are not causing a homeowner a particular problem, there's a good chance that if they go to sit down in their back yard they're probably going to get stung by a fire ant. Even if they don't realize it, they've probably curtailed their outdoor activity significantly because of it, and you can help them take their yard back."

Jenkins further explains ABC's selling tactics. "We sell by inspection," he says. "If someone calls us about a carpenter ant inspection, our technician will go out, inspect for those, but he'll also inspect the entire property thoroughly."

Jenkins adds that his inspector will not only look for fire ant activity but also for conditions conducive to fire ant problems. "Based on what he finds from that inspection, he will then recommend the type of service that would solve their problem," he says. "Then it becomes an added value to what they've called about - that's our most popular type of service."

Buechner explains that even though fire ant control is definitely conceivable, contractors should be careful about guaranteeing the service.

"Putting a liability statement in a contract would not be something I see as desirable," he explains, adding that controlled fire ants are not the same as permanently absent fire ants. "A contractor would be making a mistake to guarantee that a customer would never be bit or bothered again. I would rather use phrases like, 'Suppression and control to reduce the incidence of fire ant bites.' That way you're not guaranteeing that there won't be any left, but that

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Night Lighting



Creative placement of landscape lights in strategic areas help contractors showcase their work and increase sales. Photo: Green Earth

While landscape lighting continues to grow as an add-on service, landscape contractors are finding innovative ways to market this portion of their businesses.

by Jonathan Katz

Get the **Green Light**

Brian Riddle is the first to admit his Davidsonville-Md.-based Homestead Gardens is light years away from where he'd like the company to be when selling night lighting services. Riddle, the company's director of facilities, says his sales team has been restructured and that other marketing tools haven't panned out for this add-on service.

"Last year was an off year for us in lighting," Riddle says. "There's been no growth, and we've probably been denied through our own internal organization. We have landscape design sales people, and their passion and their love is landscape design, so lighting has never been something that has gotten that aggressiveness out of them."

Riddle estimates 2003 lighting sales for the \$20 million company at \$150,000. Homestead's net profit margins for lighting are much weaker than in other areas, according to Riddle. The company is expanding, and Riddle says he would like to grow Homestead's lighting arm in the future. The company advertises its lighting services through direct mail, phone directories and its Web site. But some industry professionals say these older methods of selling don't always work with landscape lighting. Effective marketing and pricing are keys to successful landscape lighting sales.

A GROWING TREND. Those who have been successful marketing landscape lighting are realizing rapid growth. Landscape lighting sales are increasing at a rate of 10 to 15 percent annually while the rest of the landscape industry has remained relatively steady, according to Chuck Hoover, vice president of sales for landscape lighting manufacturer Rockscapes, Chatsworth, Calif. Also, Hackensack-N.J.-based Green Earth Landscaping has grown its night-lighting services anywhere from 10 to 30 percent each of the last several years, according to company President Mark Moore. "I have not seen one year where it's leveled or gone down," Moore says. "We've bought a dedicated enclosed trailer just to handle all the lighting."

Elite Lawn Irrigation and Maintenance, Rochester Hills, Mich., achieved 15 to 20 percent growth in 2003 for its landscape lighting business, according to Owner Joe Lendo. On a smaller scale, Stone Oak Landscapes, Milwaukee, Wis., has grown from only one installation every other year since it began night lighting five

(continued on page 68)

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Night Lighting

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years ago to five last year, according to company President Patrick Devereux. Stone Oak has already matched its total from last year, and Devereux says he expects the number to double this year.

Landscape lighting is primarily an add-on service that accounts for a small percentage of most contractors' total revenue. It's less than 10 percent of Elite's revenue, Lendo says, and 3 to 5 percent of Green Earth's overall jobs, according to Moore. The company completes anywhere from 20 to 60 lighting jobs per year, Moore says.

The work is often sporadic but profitable, which is why the three companies say they've been able to manage growth without drastically expanding their operations. In fact, that's one reason some contractors choose night lighting as an add-on service.

"It's a perfect fit for my business because I can handle large increases in growth within my infrastructure," Lendo explains.

Moore agrees, that currently, lighting doesn't require substantial expansion. Green Earth bought a dedicated enclosed trailer specifically for lighting to decrease loading and unloading time. As part of its new design center, Green Earth also is creating a \$10,000 "dark room" that will feature different types of lighting

and allow customers to see the lights at various angles and in different situations, Moore says.

The company has not increased staff because it may go two or three straight weeks without any landscape-lighting jobs, Moore says. "You really don't want a full-time guy that's geared just towards that because then what's he going to do for three weeks when

"IF YOU ASK A LOT OF THE CONTRACTORS HOW THEY GET THEIR BUSINESS, IT'S MOSTLY REFERRALS. THEY DON'T ADVERTISE IN THE *YELLOW PAGES*. THEY DON'T SPEND A LOT OF MONEY THAT WAY. THEIR BUSINESS IS COMING FROM THE PREVIOUS JOBS THAT THEY'VE DONE IN THE AREA. I THINK IT'S A COMBINATION OF REFERRALS AND DEMO INSTALLATIONS." — **CHUCK HOOVER**

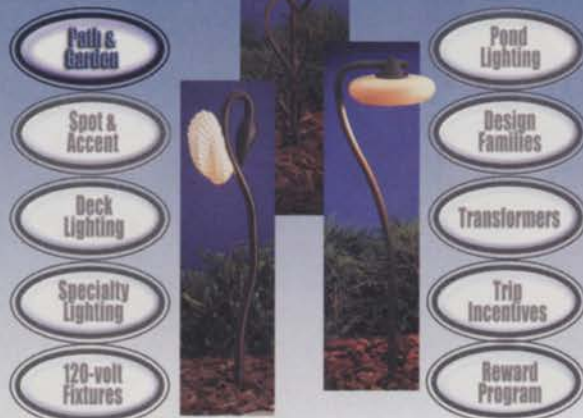
you have nothing," Moore explains. "We've found it's best to cross-train our existing employees and make sure we have the right kind of schedule for when those types of jobs come up."

Stone Oak hasn't increased its workforce and currently has one crew working on lighting installation in addition to its everyday landscape projects, Devereux says.

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Night Lighting

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Sometimes the little things make all the difference. That's why landscape contractors often shortchange themselves when pricing night lighting projects. It's much simpler to quote customers a set price, such as \$200 per fixture, but unexpected expenses can add up and hurt profits.

"What I tell contractors is take your materials costs, put your overhead in and your profit, and put a fudge factor in for those things that won't work," says Chuck Hoover, vice president of sales for landscape lighting manufacturer Rockscapes, Chatsworth, Calif.

When Hackensack, N.J.-based Green Earth Landscaping began installing night lighting, the company did not include the cost of conduits used to protect exposed wires, says Green Earth President Mark Moore. On larger jobs, that could total an extra \$200 to \$300, according to Moore. The company now includes a 5- to 10-percent error factor when pricing a job to cover these costs, Moore notes.

"You could have a tough site that's hard to work on where you need machinery - maybe a really hilly site. The price may be one third or higher with that site," Moore explains. "That's why we stay away from unit pricing. Every job is going to be different. If you've got a hard job, you're going to lose money."

Green Earth first looks at the overall difficulty of a site and determines the transformer location when pricing a job, Moore says. Hiding a transformer in a certain spot for aesthetic reasons may not be ideal for lighting. In that case, the company may have to purchase longer, higher-priced cable, Moore explains.

Wiring typically costs 20 cents per foot, Hoover says. Transformers can range from \$150 to \$500 depending on size. The average 600-watt transformer costs approximately \$200, according to Hoover.

After determining the transformer location, Green Earth establishes the wire location, which includes totaling the linear footage plus a 15 percent error factor. "That way we know we're covered in case we hit some stumps or boulders, and now the wire's not going the way it was originally supposed to go," Moore says.

Green Earth then adds fixture costs to material costs and projected man-hour time. Green Earth utilizes an estimating format for calculating profit that focuses heavily on labor rather than unit pricing. Using this formula, Green Earth marks up materials by 10 to 15 percent but may double or triple labor estimates depending on job size, Moore explains. This ensures profit for jobs with few fixtures but high labor costs. Green Earth selected this method because in the past the company charged based on unit price and was not as

profitable, Moore says.

Green Earth's profit margins on lighting range anywhere from 10 to 30 percent, according to Moore. The only service that is more profitable for Green Earth is snow plowing, which is 10 to 15 percent higher.

Stone Oak Landscapes, Milwaukee, Wis., uses a similar formula for pricing. The company shoots for a 30 to 35 percent profit margin on its lighting projects, which is slightly higher than other services the company offers, according to company President Patrick Devereux. There's a higher markup for lighting because Devereux says he considers it a specialty service. "You should be able to make a better profit on it than sodding lawns or something," he says. "It's going to take a little more time - you've got to work odder hours, and you have to go out at night to adjust the lights."

Devereux estimates \$200 to \$250 per fixture for lighting projects, which includes labor and materials, but he says that varies depending on size and difficulty level. For instance, a project that includes uplights requires workers to mount the fixtures in trees, which can take longer depending on the height and width of the tree, Devereux says. When pricing a lighting job, Devereux says he measures the wire length and adds 30 percent to the lineal foot. He also includes labor time for burying the wire in PVC pipes.

Devereux says he's still developing standards for determining average labor time. Stone Oak's typical project consists of approximately 40 to 50 fixtures, which the company charges anywhere from \$8,000 to \$12,000 to install, Devereux says. Materials comprise about one third of the cost with the balance being labor and profit.

Elite Lawn Irrigation and Maintenance, Rochester Hills, Mich., estimates labor plus overhead and profit to price a lighting job, says Joe Lendo, president. Once a homeowner decides what he or she wants, Elite draws a design that includes the transformer size and number of runs.

Lendo estimates profit margins anywhere from 17 to 30 percent. In the future, Lendo says he'd like to bundle lighting, irrigation and landscaping into the cost of a newly built home. Lendo says he's in the process of collaborating with builders to include the price in the buyer's mortgage. "Then it becomes an easy upsell," he says. "You add \$2,000 for the price of home landscape lighting, and the mortgage only goes up \$3 to \$6 for each monthly payment over 30 years, so they kind of forget how much they're spending."

- Jonathan Katz

THE PRICE IS **Bright**

(continued from page 68)

SELL, SELL, SELL. Riddle's use of advertisements is common but usually not effective, according to Hoover. He says landscape lighting clients are typically more upscale, making them less likely to "roll the dice" with a phone directory advertisement and more likely to use referrals.

"If you ask a lot of the contractors how they get their business, it's mostly referrals," Hoover says. "They don't advertise in the *Yellow Pages*. They don't spend a lot of money that way. Their business is coming from the previous jobs that they've done in the area."

Green Earth has found success marketing through demonstration kits. On the last day of a project, Moore says the company will propose a lighting design and show the customer pictures of work samples. Without telling the client, the company installs a \$1,200 demonstration kit. After three days, Green Earth dismantles the lights. About half the customers will call back shortly after

asking for permanent installation, according to Moore.

"People don't like it when you take stuff away from them," Moore explains. "It's hard to sell lighting on a one-dimensional design plan, especially to people who aren't quite familiar with it."

Green Earth has experimented with direct mailing, but Moore says it's generally not effective. "We tried it twice to see if something would happen, and nothing did," he says. A lot of money was spent on a next-to-nothing response." Moore estimates that less than 5 percent of the company's revenue is spent on marketing lighting. The marketing materials cost approximately \$2,000 to \$3,000 annually, Moore says.

Lendo estimates Elite spends only about 1 percent of its revenue on marketing. The company advertises by blind mailing coupons that offer discounted rates.

Elite also gets a large percentage of busi-

ness through referrals, Lendo says. "Happy customers talk and tell people and their friends 'I think I'm going to do landscape lighting, and these guys did a great job,' and then we get a phone call," he says.

Lendo adds that design experience and knowing how to strategically place lights also helps attract customers. "You have to be creative in design," he says. "A lot of these guys are out there trying to land the space shuttle. They've got so many lights that it loses the effect. Simpler is better." **LL**

The author is associate editor of *Lawn & Landscape* magazine and can be reached at jkatz@gie.net.

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Pulling Plugs

Aeration is the most popular form of turf renovation. Make sure you have the right machine for the job.

by Lauren Spiers

Operating an aerator can cause operator fatigue, so contractors should look for models with better ergonomic designs.
Photo: Bluebird International

What's the best treatment that landscape contractors can give to a client's lawn? Fertilization? Pesticide applications? Weed control? They're all meant to create full and healthy turf, but what good are those liquid and granular products if they can't reach turf roots?

Enter aeration. "Aeration is one of the few things you can do to a lawn that isn't stressful and actually helps turf develop a deeper, stronger root system," says Richard Borland, service manager, Bluebird International, Beatrice, Neb. Indeed, simply by punching into the ground and pulling out plugs of dirt, aeration is one of the easiest ways to open up compacted soil and allow nutrients into the root zone.

"The benefits of aeration are multifold," says Rose Mary Becker, sales manager, Classen Mfg., Norfolk, Neb. "If you have compaction from mowing or foot traffic, by pulling these cores you're making more room down by the turf roots. Also, by leaving the cores on the turf, you're bringing fresh soil to the surface, which can help break down thatch if that's a problem."

To make sure aeration is as helpful as it can be, contractors must choose the right equipment and use it properly on their customers' lawns.


AERATOR INFO. Of the different types of aerators on the market, the most popular is the core aerator, which uses dozens of hollow tines on a drum to remove dirt plugs from the ground. This is in comparison to other

"WHEN A CONTRACTOR GETS A LAWN ON A GOOD AERATION PROGRAM, IT REQUIRES LESS WORK AND WORRY BECAUSE THE STRONGER THE PLANT, THE MORE RESISTANT IT IS TO DISEASE." — BOB BROPHY

models that punch holes in the ground with solid tines. "Spike tine aerators are less effective because they actually cause more compaction," Borland says. "Core aerators are much more effective at opening up the soil, but the spike tines may be necessary on sites like

golf greens where aesthetics is an issue and the operator can't let cores sit on the turf."

(continued on page 74)



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INSECTICIDES



USE READER SERVICE #67

SPECIAL FOCUS: Turf Renovation Equipment

(continued from page 72)

In addition to tine type, contractors also can choose between roll-style or reciprocating aerator models, though most users lean toward the former. "The reciprocating machines tend to be a little more fatigue-inducing for the operator," Becker explains. "They do a great job, but on the reciprocating models, the tines go into the ground straight, rather than at an angle as they do on roll-style aerators, and all that jolting is tiring after a while."

To counter fatigue, Becker says that new steerable aerators eliminate the need for operators to lift and turn the machine at the end of every pass. "At the end of every lot line, the operator would have to lift the 300-pound machine and turn it around to make the next pass," Becker says. "That limited the number of jobs you could do in a day because of the extra time and fatigue. With the steerable option, the operator doesn't have to lift the machine at all, so productivity is up because they can work more efficiently."

A recent *Lawn & Landscape Online* poll asked readers: What turf renovation service is most profitable for your company? Aeration won by a landslide, mostly owing to the frequency of aeration services, when compared with other services like overseeding or dethatching. Moreover, readers also reported that aeration became a popular add-on service for landscape contractors in 2003 and 2004. — **Lauren Spiers**

Q: Which turf renovation service is the most profitable for your company?

SERVICE	% OF CONTRACTORS
Aeration	58 percent
Overseeding/Slitseeding	23 percent
Sod replacement/Patching	11 percent
Dethatching	8 percent

Q: In your opinion, what is the most popular add-on service for landscape contractors in 2003 and 2004?

SERVICE	% OF CONTRACTORS
Snow Removal	30 percent
Landscape Night Lighting	28 percent
Aeration	18 percent
Holiday Lighting	15 percent
Mosquito Control	5 percent
Perimeter Pest Control	4 percent

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SPECIAL FOCUS: Turf Renovation Equipment

Contractors also must consider the landscape in which they plan to aerate. "Your environment will really dictate what kind of equipment you buy," says Bob Brophy, director, lawn products division, Turfco, Minneapolis, Minn. "If you deal with small gates, you need small equipment. Hills require machines that work well in those conditions. There's no perfect machine for all environments, but if contractors can find something that works well on 80 percent of the lawns they do, they've done well."

To handle hilly or tight conditions, manufacturers have sized aerators accordingly. "On a site that might have narrow areas or garden gates to go through, there are aerators available in 17- to 19-inch widths all the way up to 25- or 26-inch models that are better for companies that handle larger, open areas," Becker says, adding that some new ride-on aerators entering the market will be narrow enough to fit through 36-inch gates and will increase productivity and operator comfort.

PRICING POINTERS. For the most part, aerators range in cost from \$1,500 to \$4,000 or may rent for about \$50 for half a day, according to manufacturers. While this can be a hefty investment for a lawn maintenance company, Brophy says that by selling the value of the service, contractors can pick up a number of customers who may require aeration as often as twice a year.

"When a contractor gets a lawn on a good aeration program, it requires less work and worry because the stronger the plant, the more resistant it is to disease," Brophy says. "It can be a great money maker and customers won't call back as often be-

cause their lawns are looking better."

Contractor Scott Lawn can attest to the profitability of aeration, which is the backbone of his lawn maintenance business. "We have upwards of 20,000 clients and about 80 percent of the lawns we service are about 2,000 square feet," says the president of Green Way Lawn Aeration, San Diego, Calif. "The smaller lot sizes put us in a unique market, but our pricing structure allows us to stay profitable."

Lawn charges \$35 to aerate a customer's front lawn and \$55 to aerate both the front and back of an average size lawn. "These prices include the cost of doing business, and



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SPECIAL FOCUS: Turf Renovation Equipment

we have had to increase our prices recently because of increases in the cost of gas and workers' compensation. Still, we try to reach a profit of 20 to 25 percent."

In terms of timing, most manufacturers recommend aerating in the spring or fall – or both – if heavy compaction warrants it. "If you have kids playing in the yard or any

type of foot traffic, or if you live in an area with clay soil, you're constantly fighting the battle of compacted soil," Borland says. "April and May are good times to go in and relieve that stress, and a lot of contractors aerate in September, as well."

To keep aerators in tip-top shape during the long window of use, maintenance is key.

Brophy notes that machines should be cleaned daily, and Becker advises that operators keep an eye out for debris while working.

"When you take equipment out into a yard, you can never be sure of what's out there," Becker says. "You need to keep your eyes open and watch out for plastic bags or twine that can get caught up in the tines. Also, the tines will wear because of rocks and other rough areas in the earth. Those tines are the parts of the machine that get the most use, so you have to make sure that they're all in place when you get started and be ready to replace them just in case."

Brophy agrees. "Change tines any time they're broken or bent because the metal can't be restraightened," he says. "If you try to straighten them, they'll break as soon as you get started across the lawn again and the steel will be left in the lawn. Contractors should carry spare parts because you don't want to have to bring the machine to a dealer in the middle of the day. A little "tailgate surgery" is easy and can let the operator keep working without losing much time."

Also, Borland adds that having customers water their lawns the night prior to service will make aeration easier. "The soil has to be prepared before aeration," he says. "A good rule of thumb is that the soil should be penetrated easily by a screwdriver to a depth of 3 inches. Assuming it hasn't rained, having the customer water the lawn the night before is a good idea, and also putting up flags by any sprinkler heads or other underground parts like control panel boxes will keep the operator from running over them because the aerator will destroy them."

Armed with these tips and the right piece of equipment, contractors can put their aeration knowledge to good use, both by strengthening clients' lawns and putting a little more profit in their pocketbooks. **L**

The author is associate editor of Lawn & Landscape magazine and can be reached at lsapiers@gie.net.

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SH4174	5 Gal	Arbutus Vire	1.00	\$85.00	\$710.00
SH4182	5 Gal	Lurid, Blue Chip	1.00	\$87.00	\$114.00
TR8104	2.0'	Black, Japanese Laurel	1.00	\$270.00	\$270.00
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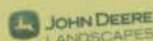
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TRASH Thatch

Dethatching equipment makes the first step in turf renovation quick and easy.

by Lauren Spiers

The golden thatched roofs on Irish country cottages are often quite pretty in such quaint settings, but they're also functional. "In Ireland, thatched roofs keep rain out of the house," comments Bob Brophy, director, lawn products division, Turfco, Minneapolis, Minn. "But think about that same thatch on your lawn. It keeps out nutrients, water, air – all the good stuff – and traps the bad stuff like bacteria and insects."

For these reasons, thatch removal is an important part of keeping turf healthy. "If you mismanage turf and allow thatch to accumulate, you create a very shallow root network because the roots will grow to the surface in order to get the water and nutrients they need," explains Richard Borland, service manager, Bluebird International, Beatrice, Neb. "Dethatching is the first step in turf renovation and in encouraging roots to grow deeper so the grass plants become more durable."

DETHATCHER DETAILS. Rather than simply run a hand rake across the turf to try to break up thatch accumulation, contractors should turn to dedicated dethatcher machines that use a series of blades to pull up the spongy layer of offending roots stems.

"You can hire 50 day laborers with garden rakes or 10 laborers with sod cutters to strip the lawn, but the least labor-intensive option is a power dethatcher or power rake, that needs just one person to operate," Brophy says. "The vertical blades will easily tear that thatch up for you and then it's just a matter of going back and raking up the debris."

Like most turf maintenance and renovation equipment, dethatchers are walk-behind units that operators push across the turf area to allow the machines' blades to do their job. "If you think of it like a lawnmower, you have a machine going across the ground with a blade



going around in a circle to cut the lawn," notes Rose Mary Becker, sales manager, Classen Mfg., Norfolk, Neb. "The only difference in a dethatcher is that the blades are vertical and are set on a shaft so that as the shaft spins, the centrifugal force of the swinging action helps the blades power through and rake the grass."

But Borland notes that dethatchers' blades, though sharp, are not designed to cut into the soil. "Blade height is critical when you're working with a dethatcher," he says. "You don't want to go too deep or you'll actually end up damaging the crown of the plant and dulling the blades. In cases of severe thatch, two light rakings may even be better than trying to do it all at once."

As a guideline, Borland suggests that dethatcher blades should sit about 1/2 inch off of the ground when the machine is resting on a hard surface like a driveway. This setting will allow the machine to work through moderate thatch accumulations, which manufacturers agree should not exceed 1/2 inch.

With the proper settings in place, contractors can safely dethatch a

Without a bagging attachment, contractors must rake up debris after dethatching a lawn. Photo: Bluebird International

lawnandlandscape.com

Visit our July Online Extras section for information on pricing dethatching and how to maintain dethatcher blades.

lawn without causing undue damage, though Brophy notes that dethatching should be considered a last-resort service in many cases. "Some people will say that dethatching refreshes a lawn, but that's not always true," he says. "The best way to remove thatch is to first scalp the lawn with a mower and bag the clippings, then use the dethatcher and follow up by bagging the thatch debris. That whole process really puts a lot of stress on a lawn."

HOW MUCH & HOW OFTEN. As a turf renovation service, dethatching is less common than aerating or overseeding. Becker notes that annual dethatching probably isn't necessary on most lawns and that many lawn maintenance customers never need to dethatch. As such, dethatching is often a prime candidate for equipment rental.

"To buy a \$2,000 machine and have it sitting on the books when you only end up using the machine twice isn't the best idea,"

Brophy says. "Deciding on whether to rent or purchase really depends on how much you're going to use it. If you have to rent the machine 10 or 12 times a year, you're prob-

"BLADE HEIGHT IS CRITICAL WHEN YOU'RE WORKING WITH A DETHATCHER. YOU DON'T WANT TO GO TOO DEEP OR YOU'LL ACTUALLY END UP DAMAGING THE CROWN OF THE PLANT AND DULLING THE BLADES." — RICHARD BORLAND

ably better off buying it, but even if you only rent a couple of times a year, you have to remember that along with the cost of the rental is the overhead involved in picking up and dropping off the machine, gas mileage and lost labor. You have to evaluate the hidden costs."

In general, manufacturers report that dethatchers generally range in cost from

\$900 to \$2,000, depending on special offers from dealers and available features. For instance, bagging attachments for some machines may cost an additional \$200 or so, and hydrostatic machines also will be on the higher end of the price scale. On the other hand, Borland says dethatcher rentals can hover around \$40 for half a day.

Once contractors acquire their dethatchers, properly timing the service also is important. "Dethatching in the fall is usually best – around August or September – though doing it in April or May is possible, too," Borland says. "The advantage to doing it in the late season is that there's more moisture available and the grass is going into a dormant stage, which gives it the opportunity to really develop that root network." **LI**

The author is associate editor of Lawn & Landscape magazine and can be reached at lspiers@gie.net.

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USE READER SERVICE #73



Use these tips to brush up on overseeder equipment purchases before the prime seeding season starts.

by Lauren Spiers

SEEDY

Characters

Landscape contractors spend countless hours every week maintaining lawn areas for their clients. But with turfgrass being one of the most prevalent and familiar forms of groundcover in this country and others, there aren't always enough fertilizer applicators and lawn mower operators to keep an eye on every square foot of lawn all the time. As a result, an occasional dead or bare lawn area makes an appearance and opens the door for another lawn care service.

"Overseeding is the best method to use to repair dead or bare sections of a lawn," says Richard Borland, service manager, Bluebird International, Beatrice, Neb. "Some people will overseed grasses in the fall to give them some green color in the winter, but it's really the bare or thinning spots that are the targets of this service, which isn't to be confused with seeding a new lawn — that's very different."

Though some homeowners may view overseeding as simply throwing down a little all-purpose grass seed and letting Mother Nature take over, contractors and seeder manufacturers know that there are differences. Choosing the right piece of equipment and using correct techniques helps contractors achieve the results that homeowners only wish they could.

SEEDER SPECS. In the world of seeders, the terms "overseeder" and "slit seeder" come up regularly.

Though many industry professionals use the terms interchangeably, some manufacturers note that there are differences between them.

"A slit seeder or 'drill' seeder has a blade that will actually cut a little trench in the soil as the machine moves along," explains Rose Mary Becker, sales manager, Classen Mfg., Norfolk, Neb. "There are usually about 10 blades in a machine and off the seed box there is an equal number of hoses positioned directly over the slits. They're designed for accuracy, so the machine will drop seed down the hoses and small injectors at the end of the hoses will place the seed right in the trench."

On the other hand, Becker notes that overseeders work on the same principle, but will drop the seed first and then follow-up with a blade that pushes the seed into the ground to achieve germination. "In the case of overseeders, you haven't got any control over where the seed is being placed," Becker says. "With slit seeders, you're often using less seed because there's not as much wasted seed falling in between the rows because the hose puts the seed right where it needs to be."

Still, Becker notes that the less complex overseeder style is more popular in the industry and other manufacturers note that many overseeder models have ways of ensuring the seed-to-soil contact necessary for proper germination without the intricacies of a slit seeder. "The seed basically just needs to touch the dirt and be lightly

Certain overseeder models known as slit seeders have tubes that place turf seed directly into trenches cut by the machine's blades. Photo: Ryan

**"OVERSEEDING IS THE BEST METHOD TO USE TO REPAIR DEAD OR BARE SECTIONS OF A LAWN."
— RICHARD BORLAND**

(continued on page 82)

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SPECIAL FOCUS

(continued from page 80)

covered, so the dirt you bring up during overseeding is replaced by a rubber flap that spreads the soil back over the seed when you're done," Borland explains.

In order to properly operate both types of seeding machines and achieve good germination, manufacturers recommend setting the blades to cut into the soil no more than ¼ inch. "Unlike dethatchers, the blades on overseeders are specifically designed to cut into the soil, but only to about ¼ inch," notes Bob Brophy, director, lawn products division, Turfco, Minneapolis, Minn. "Cutting ½ inch into the soil is too deep and will put too much wear on the machine."

But even through regular use, seeders' blades will wear down, which is why choosing a machine that allows for easy blade replacement is important, especially considering that blade replacement can take one to three hours according to some manufacturers, Brophy stresses.

"When you're looking at overseeders, you want to take into account how much trouble it is to change the blade," Brophy says. "You can look at it the same way you would for mower blades. If it's a pain to get

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under the machine and take the blades off to sharpen them or replace them, you probably won't do it as often as you need to."

Depending on the amount of use and the soil in which the seeder is working, the amount of time between blade changes will vary, so most manufacturers suggest examining blades after every 25 hours of use to ensure that they are still sharp or require replacement.

TIMING & TUNE-UPS. As with any other landscape plantings, there is an appropriate time of year to overseed lawns. Because of that timing, seeders are often good candidates for equipment rental rather than purchasing.

"Some southern grasses can be planted in the spring, but when you get into the ryegrasses and bluegrass mixes that are in most of the country outside the south, you want to overseed in the fall because soil temperature is more important than air temperature," Borland explains. "In the fall, the soil will still be warm from the summer, so the seed will germinate better and then you

(continued on page 84)

Even if a contractor purchases the best overseeder on the market and an ideal grass seed blend, that combination isn't necessarily enough to ensure good germination in the area of lawn that he or she is planning to renovate. The key, according to most overseeder manufacturers, is in the seeding technique, which involves making two passes over the area to be seeded.

"Crossing the lawn more than once, and making the second pass at a 45-degree angle to the first is important for a good overseeding application," says Richard Borland, service manager, Bluebird, Beatrice, Neb. "You don't want the grass to come up in nice neat rows. The more irregular the application pattern, the better-looking the finished product."

Bob Brophy agrees, adding that paying attention to the amount of seed being used on each pass also is important. "If you know it's going to take 60 pounds of seed for the area you're doing, you're going to want to split that between the two passes," says the lawn products division director of Turfco, Minneapolis, Minn. "First, adjust your seeder as best you can to spread the first 30 pounds and when you finish the first pass, if you've only spread 20 pounds, re-adjust the spreader to put down the remaining 40 pounds when you make the second pass." This method, Brophy explains, is highly preferable to making adjustments in the middle of a pass over a lawn area and risking the application being too thin on one end and too heavy on the other. — Lauren Spiers

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Because of activists, extremists and misinformed politicians, consumers are questioning whether the products and resources (such as water) used to care for their lawns, landscapes and other green spaces are a waste—or a harm to the environment. Yes, legislation and regulations have been throwing the green industry some rough punches. And we're about to start fighting back.

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SPECIAL FOCUS

(continued from page 82)

can use a preemergent in the spring. If you try to overseed in the spring, you won't be able to use a crabgrass preemergent because you'll kill all the seed."

With a small seeding window of only about six weeks in late August and September, Borland explains that a \$45 half-day rental may be a better investment than purchasing a \$1,500 piece of equipment that might not get much use. "You really have to consider how often you're going to be overseeding," he comments. "Unless you're a large landscaping firm, it might be better to just coordinate who needs overseeding equipment and then rent a machine for half a day or a day. Overseeders really lend themselves well to the rental market."

Still, there are some advantages to purchasing overseeders, especially for companies that do a good deal of renovation work. For instance, some manufacturers offer machines with interchangeable parts that allow them to operate as seeders when a seed box attachment is used or as dethatchers if the seed box is removed.

"If a contractor already owns the power unit for the dethatcher, they can easily convert it to a seeder, and there are verticutter attachments, as well," Becker comments, referring to verticutting - another form of turf renovation. "A seed box assembly can run about \$250 and blade assemblies are about \$300. So, for just a few hundred dollars vs. the minimum cost of buying another piece of equipment, the contractor can have two machines in one."

For contractors who would rather purchase dedicated equipment or only need one machine, seeders generally range from \$2,000 to \$5,000, with higher-end machines offering features like hydrostatic transmission or speed controls for easier handling on hills and other rough terrain.

In order to make such large investments worthwhile, manufacturers advise contractors to properly maintain their machines by lubricating any bearings or steel-to-steel contact points and keeping debris out of the blade area. With proper use and maintenance, renovation machines like seeders can be expected to last 10 to 15 years. **LL**

The author is associate editor of Lawn & Landscape magazine and can be reached at lspiers@gie.net.

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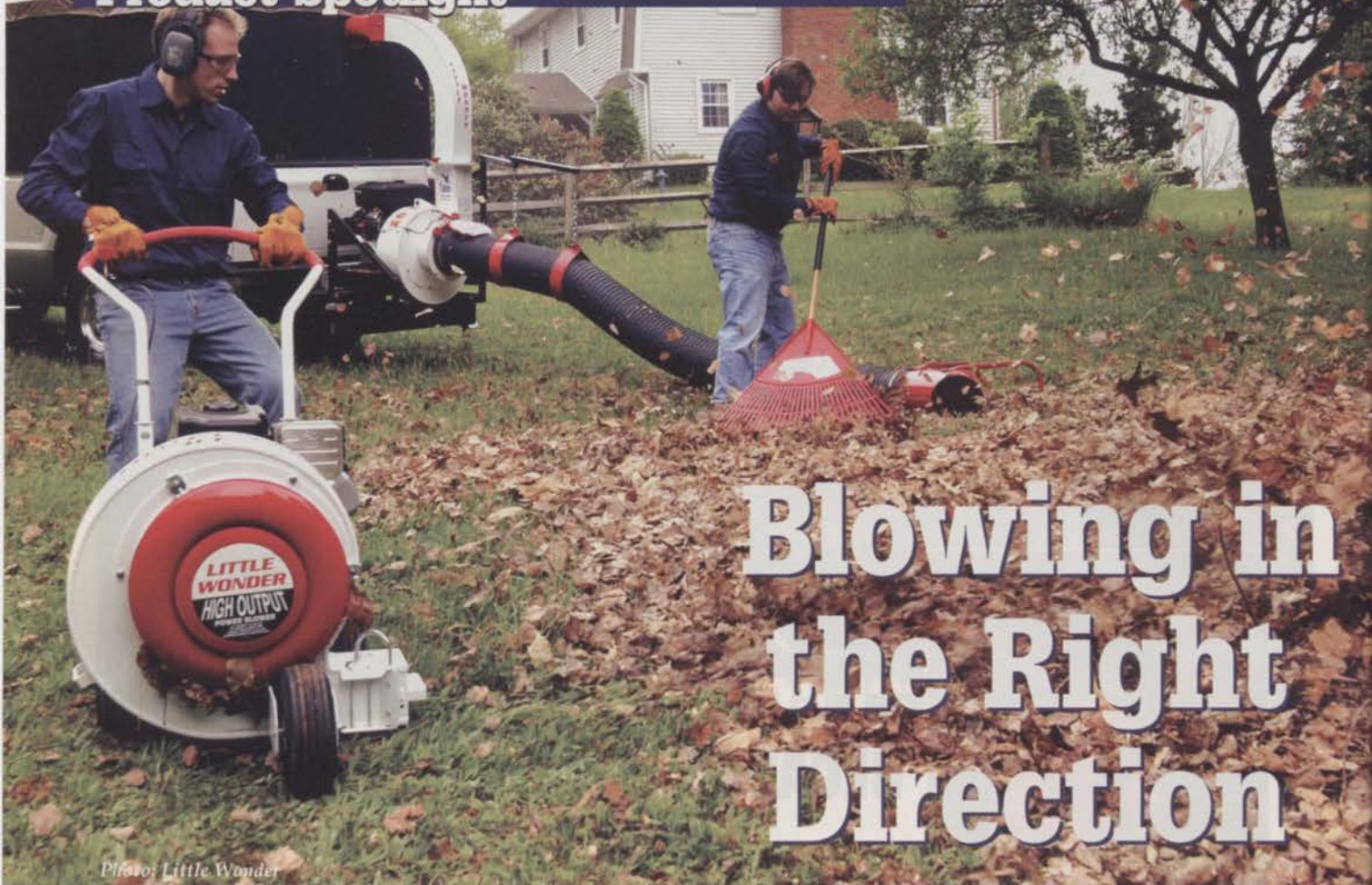


Photo: Little Wonder

Blowing in the Right Direction

Buying the right power blower has never been more complicated. New models and noise regulations mean contractors need to do their homework.

by Jonathan Katz

Whether it's environmental regulations or demand for more powerful yet lighter machines, power blower manufacturers find themselves entangled in a costly balancing act, resulting in evolving products.

Finding the most effective blower depends on affordability, regional laws and personal preference. The most common types of blowers landscape contractors use today are the backpack, handheld and walk behind model, with backpacks being the most popular with contractors, according to Mark Michaels, product marketing manager of handheld products, Husqvarna, Charlotte, N.C.

Power blowers have come a long way since they first hit the market in the early 1970s. They were originally designed to spread fertilizers and pesticides on crops and fruit trees.

Use of power blowers continues to increase, with the average landscape contractor spending \$952 annually on backpack and handheld blowers and 47.2 percent purchasing backpack or handheld blowers in the past 12 months, according to *Lawn &*

Landscape research. Manufacturers also continue to report sales growth despite rising costs associated with emissions regulations and power blower bans in some regions, forcing companies to increase prices.

For these reasons, contractors need to do adequate research before they buy their blowers.

NOISY NUISANCE? By the late 1990s, about 20 cities in California had adopted bans or regulations on power blowers on grounds that the noise caused a public nuisance. And, in September 2003, the City of Portland, Ore., extended leaf-blower bans from nine hours (10 p.m. to 7 a.m.) to 12 hours (7 p.m. to 7 a.m.) in residential zones, according to the City of Portland Auditor's Office. But blower regulations aren't limited to the West Coast. "In the Northeast, there are a lot of communities that if they haven't passed blower regulations, they're considering it, so if it isn't already an issue it

(continued on page 88)



— Coleman Burnett, V.P., Contemporary Landscapes, Charlotte, NC

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Product Spotlight

(continued from page 86)

probably will be in the very near future," says Jeff Marcinowski, manager of engineering and product development for Little Wonder, Southampton, Pa.

However, the bans haven't stopped product sales growth. In 2003, the Outdoor Power Equipment Institute (OPEI) reported

that backpack blowers increased 19.6 percent in product shipments. And some manufacturers are even reporting 20- to 30-percent increases, despite the fact that they limited the number of blowers they sell to California because of the regulations, according to Michaels.

Manufacturers attribute the increased sales to engineering advancements in the products and more awareness among landscape contractors regarding noise levels. Many manufacturers are now providing blowers that meet the 65 to 70 decibels on the A-weighted scale (dBA) standard set by many communities. For instance, most companies changed the design of the fan blade to eliminate the "whining" sound typically produced by blowers.

Since the bans haven't decreased the need for blowers, landscape

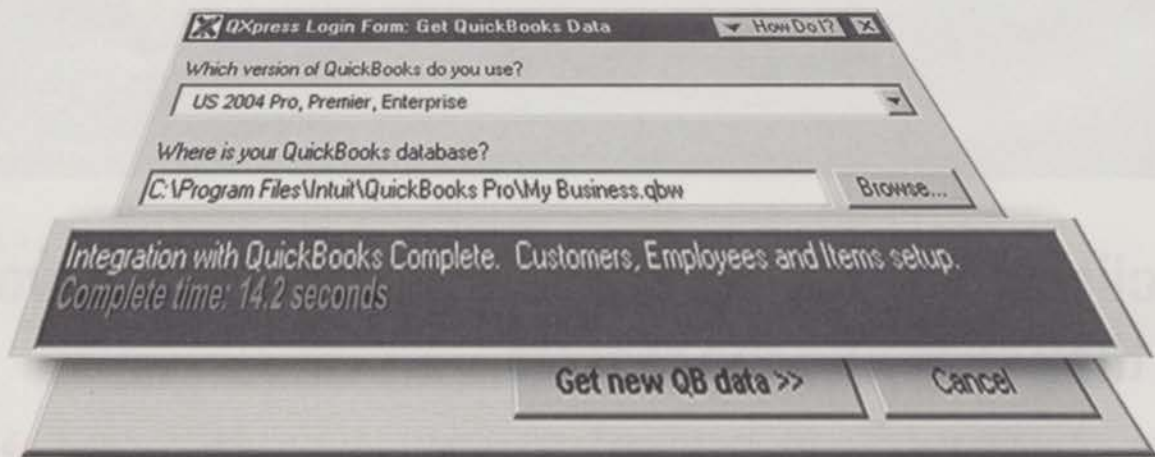
contractors can take steps to lower noise levels. San Rafael, Calif.-based Gardeners' Guild even uses lower-powered electric blowers on occasion when its crews work in areas where there are gas-powered blower bans, according to Paul Swanson, operations manager for the company's exterior division. But Swanson says employees need to take a proactive approach toward reducing blower noise.

"There's a big cost associated with not using the gas blowers," Swanson says. "But it really doesn't affect us as much as it does the customer. They're the ones who have to pay for the labor."

Gardeners' Guild trains new employees on every piece of equipment, including power blowers, Swanson says. A company mechanic must confirm in writing that the new employee has received formal training and is proficient at operating each piece of machinery. Even after the initial training, the com-



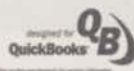
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USE READER SERVICE #82

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For years, power blower manufacturers have scrambled to meet California's tough emissions standards for products marketed in that state. But now, this constant product renovation is increasing the price end users will pay for their handheld equipment.

Environmental Protection Agency standards require small-engine manufacturers to cut emissions from 180 grams per brake horsepower hour (g/bhp-hr) to 37 g/bhp-hr by 2007. The new exhaust emission levels imposed by the EPA represent an approximate 80 percent reduction over the original California limits. As a result, manufacturers must redesign the exhaust systems of their products at a costly price.

"It has seriously impacted the cost of our products," says Larry Will, consultant and former vice president of engineering, Echo, Lake Zurich, Ill. "We have had to spend millions of dollars in development. We have maybe 50 products, and each one had to be redesigned. It's been very expensive, and we're not done yet."

Within the last year, some manufacturers have invested more

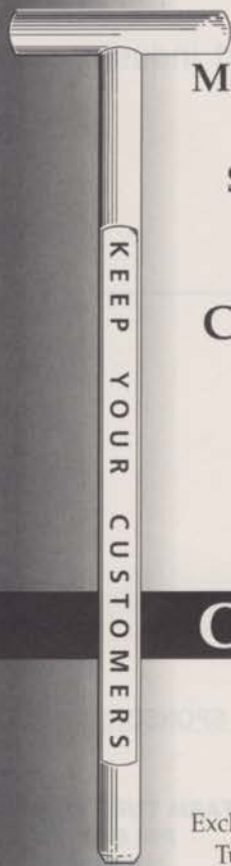
than \$10 million on their product lines to meet EPA standards, Will estimates.

In the past, regulations did not affect retail price, but manufacturers say those days are over. Will says costs may rise by 10 percent this year. Some blowers may rise by \$10 per machine, according to Tommy Tanaka, marketing manager, Red Max, Norcross, Ga.

"Every product requires a new manual – a new operator's manual, a new parts manual – people on the phones need to be trained to answer questions, and much of that cost is absorbed as a part of doing business," Will says. "It's cost us a lot more than we have passed along – otherwise prices would be much higher."

Will adds that there are ways contractors can offset price hikes. "They can buy a smaller blower, which would reduce the cost," he says. "Contractors should use a smaller blower in areas where it's important to use them and to use the larger blowers in industrial areas and so forth. You also increase the life of the blower by switching products like that." – **Jonathan Katz**

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Wednesday, August 18, 2004

- 1:00 – 6:00 p.m. Registration
2:00 – 3:30 p.m. **Trends and Impact of Weed & Insect Management**
Moderator: Roger Stanley, Lawn & Landscape
Panelists: John Buechner, Lawn Doctor
Jim Campanella, The Lawn Dawg
Barry Troutman, Valley Crest
- 3:30 – 4:30 p.m. **The Economic Value of Landscapes**
Speaker: Dr. Parwinder Grewal, The Ohio State University
- 4:30 – 5:30 p.m. **Invasive Insect Pests In Trees and Ornamentals**
Speaker: Dr. Deb McCullough, Michigan State University
Dr. Cliff Sadoff, Purdue University
- 5:30 – 6:30 p.m. Welcome Reception

Thursday, August 19, 2004

- 7:30 a.m. Registration
7:30 – 8:00 a.m. Continental Breakfast
8:00 – 8:30 a.m. **Market Report: Lawn Care By The Numbers**
Speaker: Gary Curl, Specialty Products Consultants
- 8:30 – 9:45 a.m. **What's New In Research**
Speakers: Dr. Rick Brandenburg, North Carolina State University
Dr. Karl Danneberger, The Ohio State University
Dr. Dave Shetlar, The Ohio State University
- 9:45 – 10:15 a.m. Break
10:15 – 11:15 a.m. **Teaching Proper Insect Identification To Field Staff**
Speaker: Dr. Richard Kramer, American Pest Management
- 11:15 – 12:00 noon **Tips For Subcontracting Tree Work**
Speaker: Chris Klimas, The Davey Tree Expert Co.
- 12:00 – 1:00 p.m. Group Lunch
1:15 – 2:00 p.m. **Effective Pre- and Post-Emergent Treatment Strategies**
Speaker: Dr. Karl Danneberger, The Ohio State University
- 2:00 – 3:00 p.m. **Delivering Effective Perimeter Insect Treatments**
Speaker: Joe Welch, Middleton Lawn & Pest Control
- 3:00 – 3:15 p.m. Break
3:15 – 4:00 p.m. **How To Maximize Grub Control Profits**
Speaker: Jack Robertson, Robertson Lawn Care
- 4:00 – 5:00 p.m. **Packaging Lawn Care Programs For Maximum Profit**
Moderator: Roger Stanley, Lawn & Landscape
Panelists: Terry Kurth, Weed Man
Lee Schaber, Scotts Lawn Care
- 5:00 – 6:00 p.m. Networking Reception

Friday, August 20, 2004

- 7:30 a.m. Registration
7:30 – 8:00 a.m. Continental Breakfast
8:00 – 9:00 a.m. **Generic Products: Pros and Cons**
Moderator: Roger Stanley, Lawn & Landscape
Panelists: Leading Product Distributors
- 9:00 – 10:00 a.m. **Target Marketing Strategies Of Lawn Care Services**
Speaker: Bill Leuenberger, Chalet
- 10:00 – 10:15 a.m. Break
10:15 – 11:30 a.m. **Keeping Up With Safety & Pesticide Compliance**
Speaker: Dr. Fred Whitford, Purdue University

Product Spotlight

(continued from page 89)

pany spends \$4,000 to \$6,000 on an annual "jamboree" where employees review proper handling procedures for all equipment. When reviewing blower usage, the company encourages employees to be conscious of pedestrian traffic and to be aware of open windows and wind direction, Swanson says. Employees are advised to not use a full throttle and to avoid using blowers in beds to avoid dust emissions.

"We firmly believe that it's a matter of working with city and state officials and these manufacturers to continue to reduce the noise levels, and it's also the operator," Swanson explains. "One of the core problems is actual blower use and knowing how to use a blower properly."

THE BIGGER THE BETTER. One possible solution to the noise issue is using smaller models. But most landscape contractors use commercial-sized backpack blowers for the

majority of their work because they're more powerful than handheld blowers and are easier to maneuver than walk-behind blowers.

Handheld blower engines are typically much smaller and less powerful because they must be light enough to carry. These usually sell for \$200 to \$250. They typically have an engine displacement of 20 to 30 cubic centimeters (cc). "The market is leaning heavily toward power, but there is still a large market for light weight," Michaels says. "The lighter-weight blowers are still the largest seller because of their quickness and convenience."

Handheld blowers save time for quick jobs, such as blowing dry grass clippings, bark dust and sand from driveways and

sidewalks and are typically quieter than backpack blowers, according to Jay Larsen, product marketing and communications manager, Shindaiwa, Tualatin, Ore. But they cannot compare to the blowing performance of the backpack tools, he says.

Many contractors who still use handheld blowers are switching to "mini-backpack" blowers, which manufacturers recently introduced to the market, according to Michaels. These are backpack blowers that

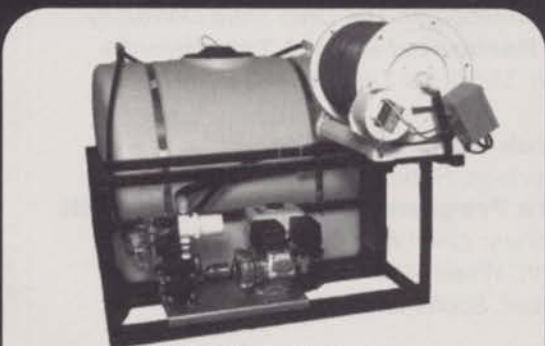
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Product Spotlight

(continued from page 92)

use the lighter handheld engines. These blowers generally cost around \$230. "It's more of an entry point for a contractor," Michaels says. "We don't have commercial landscapers moving down to it. They're replacing the handheld blower with the mini backpack."

A 40- to 50-cc backpack blower generally ranges from \$300 to \$330, according to Tommy Tanaka, marketing manager, RedMax, Norcross, Ga. Start-up landscape companies typically use these mid-sized models because of their affordability. In the \$400 to \$500 price range is the 48- to 58-cc engine, Tanaka says. Blowers that are 60 cc and above usually cost more than \$500. These are for commercial landscapers who are involved in heavy leaf pickup.

The only downside to the backpack blower is the fact that they can get heavy, especially after a long day on the job, Larsen says. But some manufacturers have improved lumbar support and incorporated

more convenient release points for backpack straps, says Andy Kuczmar, director of national service, Echo, Lake Zurich, Ill.

Gardeners' Guild uses a majority of backpack blowers and some handheld blowers, Swanson says. The company uses more backpack blowers because they're generally more effective, according to Swanson. Gardeners' Guild spends approximately \$2,500 to \$3,000 annually on new blowers.

MAINTENANCE MATTERS. With all this power comes dust, and air filtration systems on backpack and handheld power blowers must be large enough to handle the amount of dust that can enter the blower's system, according to Kuczmar.

For these reasons, when shopping for a backpack or handheld blower, Kuczmar recommends contractors look for blowers with large air filtration systems or systems that are paper pleated. These accordion-shaped

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filters can triple or quadruple the surface area of air filtration, Kuczmar explains.

Once the blower is in use, the air filter should be cleaned regularly or replaced, industry experts say.

Also, make sure the air-intake vent is clear from leaves and debris, which can cause the engine to overheat.

"When you build that blower, that air filtration system better not leak, that air box better feel tight because if it doesn't, you're going to be taking in dirt at 141 times per second," Kuczmar says. **LL**

The author is associate editor of Lawn & Landscape magazine and can be reached at jkatz@gie.net.

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SPACES

While not for every application, wide-area mowers are the last word in mowing vast expanses efficiently and professionally.

by Will Nepper

A soccer field might seem like a good mowing gig for a landscape contractor. It's a pretty basic job with few obstacles and even fewer trimming and edging opportunities. It's a lazy day of minimal steering and lots of tanning potential. Even with a speedy zero-turning radius riding mower, a technician could have a nice afternoon of leisurely passes up and down and back again ... and again ... and again. But what else can he do? It takes a lot of passes to mow a soccer field. And sure, that's great for the man in field, but what about the contractor who needs that manpower on other jobs?

Enter the wide-area mower (WAM). These mowing monsters can take a large job – such as a soccer field – and turn it into nothing more than a quick pit stop on the way to another property. Wide-area mower manufacturers share details about these magical machines, what sets them apart from typical mowers and how a contractor can tell if it's a valid investment for his or her company.

BIGGER IS BETTER. How does the industry define wide-area mowers? Wes Freeman, brand manager, commercial mowing, John Deere, Cary, N.C., offers a simple definition: "A wide-area mower is typically one with more than one mower deck or any mower with a width of cut greater than 72 inches," he says, adding the majority of these machines have an 11-foot cutting width, but some can go as wide as 16 feet.

Wide-area mowers also come in as many different configurations as they do mowing widths, Freeman adds. "There are some mowers that have decks out in front of the mower rather than off to the side and some with rotary decks that are independent in that they float out in front of the machine. However, the majority of machines being used by landscape contractors are set up with mowing decks on the side in a wing-like configuration."

But a greater cutting width isn't all that separates a WAM from its narrower-bodied brethren. For one, the majority of wide-area mow-

(continued on page 98)

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Product Trends

(continued from page 96)

ers run on diesel fuel, giving the machines reputations for longevity, according to Ken Raney, advertising manager, Hustler Turf Equipment, Heston, Kan. "These mowers can cost quite a bit more than standard mowers so you want them to last as long as they can," he says. "Often municipalities use wide-area mowers for their properties and because much of their equipment already runs on diesel fuel, that makes filling up convenient."

Diesel is also known for power, Freeman points out. "You get more torque out of a diesel engine," he says. "And there is typically less maintenance with a diesel engine as well."

Beyond differences in size and fuel, wide-area mowers and standard mowers are essentially alike in terms of maintenance, according to Freeman.

Joe Zvanut, advertising and promotions specialist, Jacobson, Charlotte, N.C., says

(continued on page 100)

Maintenance on any high-priced piece of machinery is important. Naturally this applies to wide-area mowers (WAMs) as well, though contractors may find that WAMs require little more in the way of maintenance than their standard-sized counterparts. Wide-area mower manufacturers give us a run-down of maintenance musts that will ensure the long life of any wide-area mower.

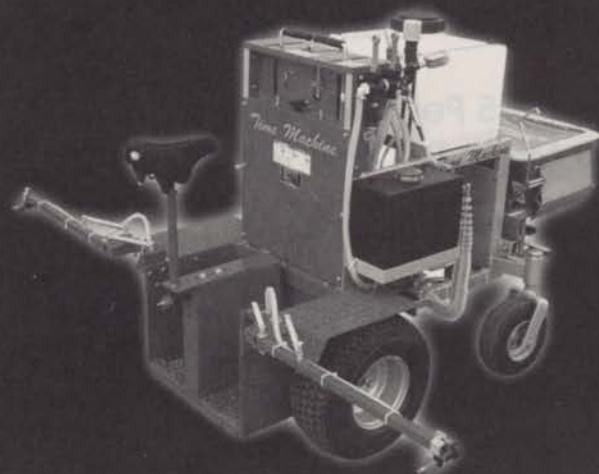
- Before using a wide-area mower, be sure to sharpen all the blades on all the decks. This will be considerably more time-consuming than with a standard 72-inch deck mower because of the significantly greater number of blades.
- Also be sure to remove the belt shields and be sure that all belts are free of debris.
- Low tires can have an adverse affect on any mower's cut. Gauge the pressure of the WAM's tires before taking it out in the field.
- Grease all applicable moving parts and be sure to check the oil level of a WAM before pulling out of the garage.
- Finally, cap off each WAM's day by cleaning the underside of its mowing decks to prevent large grass clumps from compromising the cut of its next job. — **Will Nepper**

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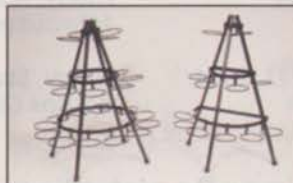
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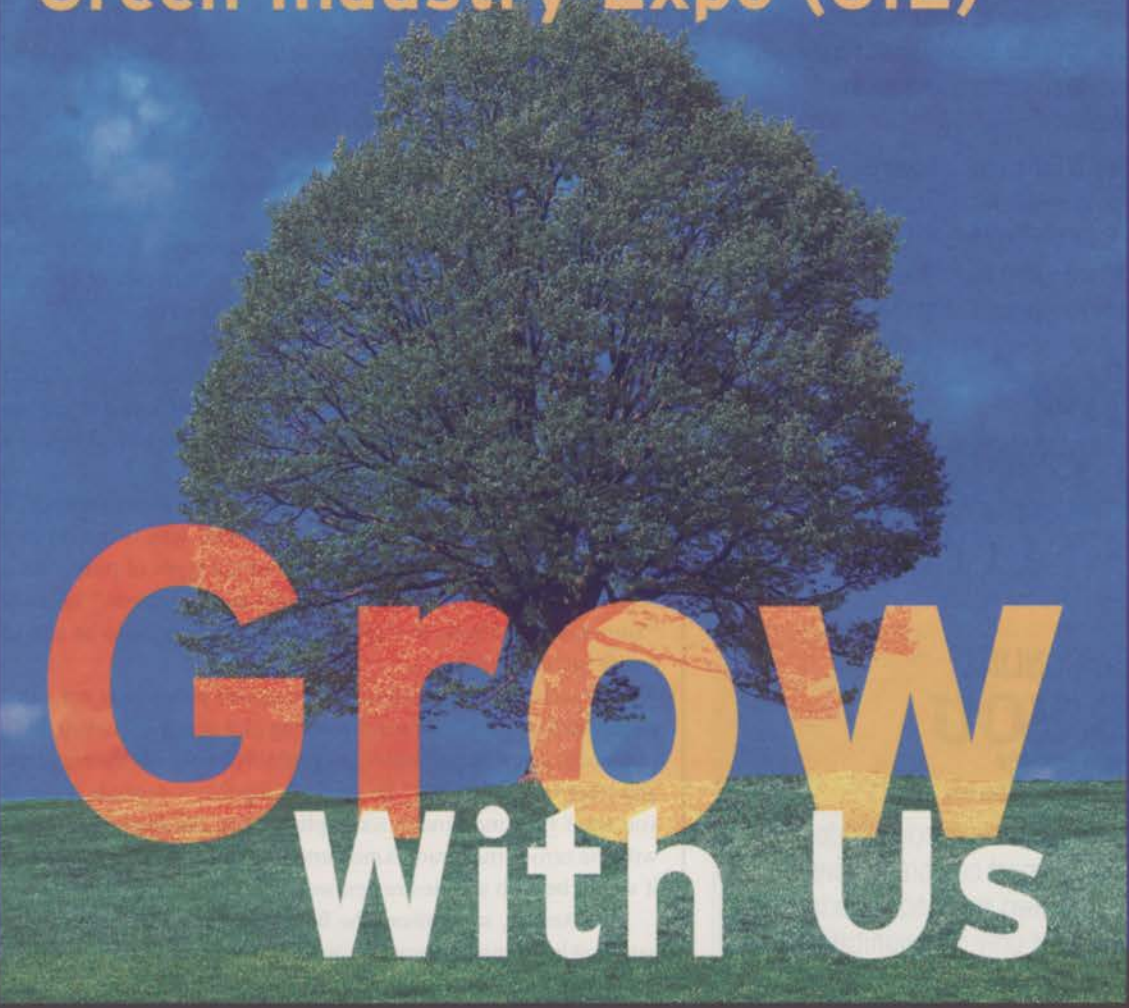
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Product Trends

(continued from page 98)

that a properly maintained WAM should be able to run all day long. "Typically these mowers receive four to seven hours of actual use a day," he says. "But in that workday you're going to be cutting a lot more grass than you're going to get with a regular mower over the same time. One model even claims to mow 60 acres in an eight-hour workday."

On that same note, some wide-area mowers can mow 8.5 acres an hour at 6 miles per hour, Freeman adds.

In terms of lifespan, Raney says: "We've always thought you could get about 500 hours a year of usage on these mowers. We figure that over five years that's about 2,500 hours. Many operators can get much more out of them though when they're properly cared for. For instance, I know we've got some wide-area mowers that have been going for 40 years and still mow. So if they're taken care of, I would think you should get at least up to 10 years out of one."

NOT FOR EVERYONE. All this extra horsepower and size should sound great to any contractor who has at least one gargantuan property to service. But there's quite a bit more to look at before a contractor falls too deeply in love.

Wide-area mowers are not for all applications. Zvanut notes that there are factors to consider that might reveal why investing in a WAM requires an accurate assessment of the types of properties a contractor services most. "It's definitely an investment," he says. "You really need to be in a specific mode of operation to be able to justify buying one."

And, according to Zvanut, one oversized property is not sufficient justification. "If you're not mowing a lot of acreage or you don't have room on many properties, it's probably best to use the zero-turn and front-mount models," he says, adding that it depends on what you want your machine to accomplish. "You can cut large acreage with the zero-turning radius mowers but it's not nearly as efficient as it would be with a wide-area mower."

Dan Andres, supervisor, The Brickman Group, Bethlehem, Pa., says that his company mows 90 acres of wide open terrain at a local university's athletic center and that this is a good example of the perfect job for a wide-area mower. "We do most of it with our 10-foot-wide-deck mower and then we use a standard 60-inch-deck mower and a trimmer to get around all of the obstacles." Andres adds that a contractor with five or six similarly sized properties of 50 to 90 acres or more - might consider investing in a wide-area mower.

"They're definitely not for properties where there is a lot of trim work to be done," Freeman says, explaining that lots of trees, hedges or other obstacles can automatically disqualify a property from the use of a wide-area mower. "So then consider how many properties you have that they'd be applicable for. If you have a lot of properties like that then maybe you can look at replacing people with a wide-area mower. If you've got three people who mow a property on three different machines, you could buy one wide-area mower and send the other two people to another job."

Zvanut also advises contractors to closely ex-

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Visit the July issue online to learn more about appropriate applications for wide-area mowers.

amine cost before purchasing a WAM. "Ask yourself, 'How much is it costing me now with zero-turn riding and walk-behind mowers vs. what it would cost me if I had one of these machines? Could I get by with fewer people and fewer small machines if I bought a wide-area mower and still make money with it?'"

PRICING PARTICULARS. Understanding the commitment you're making with a wide-area mower means understanding the equipment costs. While, like most power equipment, wide-area mowers offer a wide cost range between their high-end and low-end products, WAMs are still significantly more expensive than standard riding mowers. Andres says in his experience the average cost of a wide-area mower can be between \$25,000 and \$30,000, making them about 30 percent more expensive than a standard 72-inch deck mower that would cost between \$8,000 and \$10,000.

Zvanut says the range of cost within the WAM arena falls between \$48,000 at the low end and \$77,000 at the high end. Similarly, Raney says that some wide-area mowers may cost as much as \$60,000 for high-end machines. "A high-end vehicle usually has much more horsepower, and the more horsepower, the more the engine is going to cost."

Raney says that in most cases a contractor can expect to add \$200 to a mower's price for every incremental step up in horsepower.

Freeman explains that how the deck is driven also has an impact on price. "Hydraulically-driven decks are more expensive than mechanically-driven decks because they incorporate more expensive moving parts that require additional maintenance," he says.

Hydraulically-driven decks are about 50 percent more expensive, Zvanut says.

Different manufacturers and models of wide-area mowers come equipped with varying extras that can also kick up price. Freeman cites the example of a shock-absorbing breakaway deck design. "If the

operator is running the machine and hits a tree or some kind of obstacle with the side deck, a breakaway deck will give because it has a spring mechanism that allows it to slide past the object and then spring back into position vs. getting banged up by the object," he explains.

"Also, some of the wide-area mowers out on the market now are four-wheel drive, so hilly terrain is not a problem for them," Raney adds. "And there are others with zero-turn capabilities. This is an improvement because it takes a country mile to turn the non-zero-turning mowers around."

Zvanut mentions that many wide-area mowers are equipped with optional roll-



For tight areas, some wide-area mowers have spring-loaded side breakaway decks that will allow them to maneuver around trees or other obstacles and then spring back into place. Photo: John Deere

over protection for the very purpose of mowing on hilly terrain. "And because of the width, these machines have a lower center of gravity – so rolling them is pretty difficult to do."

Somesophisticated wide-area mowers also are equipped with two gears – "a road gear for going about 20 miles per hour and a lower gear for mowing," Raney explains, adding that one reason that makes a driving gear a commodity on a wide-area mower is that transportation of wide-area mowers is considered one of their greater disadvantages.

To transport these machines, flat trailers

are typically employed, Freeman says. "Obviously it would have to be wide enough that the wings aren't hanging off of the sides," he says. "Sometimes landscape contactors run into problems with trailers with rails on the sides to keep equipment from falling off."

But width isn't the only transportation problem, according to Freeman. "The real problem is the weight of the machine," he explains. "You have to have a trailer that's rated to carry the type of weight you'd expect from a wide-area mower, which is generally just under two tons or 4,000 pounds."

Considering price and liability, many contractors may be wondering if there is a way to modify a standard mower so that it can be an on-call, wide-area mower. Raney says no. "It used to be you could add a wing, but it's a huge hassle and a lot of labor so it isn't very time-efficient."

But, as Raney explains, efficiency is the whole point of wide-area mowers and if a contractor finds himself with enough suitable contracts to justify purchasing one, they may find that it has a significant impact on labor costs. "It can cut down on those labor costs which is the most expensive aspect of mowing," he says. "You'll be able to get more work done with the bigger equipment and that will put you ahead, provided you have enough work to pay for the equipment."

Andres says that his crew probably saves at least a day or two with their wide-area mower. "We have one guy that mows all week long on one 90-acre property with that mower and if we didn't have it, we would probably need three or four more guys to get it done in a week," he says. "And after six to eight jobs or about half a season, the machine has paid for itself."

"It used to be that when you built a highway there'd be 500 guys out there doing the job," Raney adds. "Now they have these huge machines and about 50 guys accomplishing the same thing, but better and faster because of the technology. That's what a wide-area mower can do for you." **LL**

The author is assistant editor of *Lawn & Landscape* magazine and can be reached at wnepper@gie.net.

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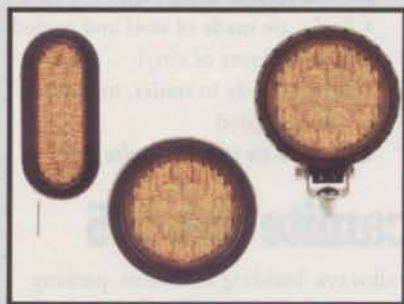
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(continued from page 65)

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THE PRICE OF WAR. Selling the service is one thing but knowing how to price it is something else.

Barr suggests pricing by property size within a range. "It's not going to take much longer to treat ¼-acre yard than it is an 1/8-acre yard, but when you get up into places that are an whole acre, you need to go up in price," he says, adding that the cost should incorporate the time it takes to get to the property, the product costs and on-site labor costs.

Mike Leto, lawn supervisor, McCall Services, Jacksonville, Fla., explains that his pricing is based on a per-thousand-square-foot charge combined with additional expenses, such as labor, pesticides and equipment costs. "I charge \$8 to \$10 per 1,000 square feet on a residential property," he says. "For anything up to 300 square feet

there's a minimum of about \$48 per service. After that, I charge the \$8 to \$10 per 1,000 square feet."

"If you're using one of the newer broadcast treatment applications, there will be a significant difference in price than if you're using baits – which usually run about \$10 an acre," Barr adds. "The broadcast treatments might go as high as about \$175 an acre."

Because of the price discrepancy, Barr advocates making sure the difference in product is clear to the client. "You should explain that in addition to providing fire ant control, the new broadcast treatments also provide a protective layer to the soil so that just about any other pest coming into the yard is going to get killed. Also, it has a very long residual that baits don't."

Jenkins says that his pricing is simple and based primarily on material and labor costs. "We're looking for a 50-percent profit on material and labor. I need to be in the 50-

percent direct material, direct labor range because we're pricing on square foot of treated area," he says, adding that treated area means more than just grass. "It's the entire landscaped area and the severity of the infestation. We do a physical count of mounds to see what areas need to be treated and then the size and severity dictates the pricing program we're going to put it under."

Fire ants also represent a great opportunity to solve a problem for the customer, according to Jenkins. "It can be a valuable addition to other services a businesses might perform, but it's not a cheap service to supply and it can't be treated as a thrown-in added value," he says. "Contractors must understand that they need to charge appropriately for it or they'll lose money." ■

The author is assistant editor of Lawn & Landscape magazine and can be reached at wnepper@gie.net.

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Bayer Environmental Science



(continued from page 36)

with our program and that they want to promote our company to their students by inviting us to come and talk with them," Marko says.

In addition to the internship program, the company sends recruiting team employees to school career days where they seek out schools that are turning out the type of students that Chalet wants, which are those who understand a team concept and like to get involved in all aspects of landscaping. Chalet picked two of these schools four years ago – the Universities of Illinois and Wisconsin – and started by offering four scholarships at these schools – two in landscape architecture, one in lawn care and one in horticulture. Scholarship winners receive \$500, a plaque and are recognized at their senior awards dinner by The Chalet.

The horticulture scholarship is given to a student who shows excellence in his or her woody ornamentals course. For the turf scholarship, professors help Lawn Care Division Manager Bill Leuenberger choose a winner based on a combination of need and a demonstration of good work in lawn care-related courses. The landscape architecture scholarships are awarded as a part of a senior's design class, which is a graduation requirement. The students visit Chalet in January or February of the last semester of their senior year. They are sent out with Chalet's landscape architects to tour a project and conduct site surveys, property analyses, etc. Then they take that information back to their school studios and have to design, estimate and sell the project to Chalet, which acts as the client. Three times during the semester, Chalet's architects go to the school and critique the students' work and ask them questions about their design plans. "It's a great role reversal," Marko says. "The students become the designers and our landscape architects become the customers. We especially like to involve new designers in this process so they get a chance to see what it feels like to be the client and, in turn, perfect their selling skills."

At the end of the year when the projects are due, two Chalet employees go to the University of Illinois and choose three or four student's designs they feel stand out and are deserving of the scholarship. From there, the course professor makes the final decision.

Though the prizes and the time away from the office cost money, Marko says it's all worth the effort in achieving the

company's long-term goal of being able to fill open positions with people met during the scholarship and internship processes or other students recommended from these colleges by their professors. "We started this in 1994 and it's still a work in progress, but we're getting there," Thalmann says. "The good news is that we haven't had to run an advertisement to fill an open position since 1996."

SUBSTITUTING SUBS. Chalet's No. 1 future goal is to start incorporating more of the work it subcontracts in-house. One example of such a service is masonry work, Thalmann says. "Our of our 45 crews, we have five or six crews accomplished in masonry and they can do flat work and mortar work," he explains. "If we could broaden that, we wouldn't have to subcontract it and we could be more profitable."

For subcontracted work, The Chalet shoots for a markup of 17 percent. At the end of last year, the company was only at approximately 12.7 percent profit margin on subcontracted work (\$1,670,000 sales on subcontracted work from \$13,106,000 in landscape sales) but in-house work was much more profitable at 20 percent.

"We work hard on our subcontractor relationships – we sub out irrigation, fencing and deck work," Thalmann says, explaining that the company invites subcontractors to attend sales meetings on a periodic basis to keep good open lines of communication.

"Our biggest challenge is being able to control quality – obviously we could control it better if we were responsible for it," Thalmann adds. "We've tried to forge close relationships with subcontractors so quality would improve naturally since they know our expectations better, but there are still elements that will always be beyond our control, so our best bet is to move away from this as much as we can and offer these services in house."

Another challenge for the company has been the interdepartmental harmony between the very different and equally sizeable retail and landscape divisions, which inspired an eight-member employee-run committee focused on this concept.

"One distinct benefit of the retail store is that it provides us with a great public presence – people see the store and it gives us

the reputation of a well-established company," Thalmann says, adding that the key is for these two distinct companies to act as one. "My biggest concern, however, is that these two departments are thinking as two companies instead of one where the customer is concerned. When the customer calls, he or she doesn't want to be told, 'I don't do that.'" Each division must think with one company philosophy so that doesn't happen."

To smooth division relations, the interdepartmental harmony committee's first task was to identify areas that needed attention and set up a code of ethics for interdepartmental interaction.

Constant communication also helps. For instance, every year before the landscape season starts, Marko meets with the retail nursery employees and explains to them what the landscape division does – for example, landscape design/build, maintenance and lawn care – and what the division doesn't do, such as seeding or sodding as separate services. "This way, when clients come in to talk to the retail store about a project and maybe decide they want to hire someone to do it instead of do it themselves, then they can be referred to the landscape division for follow-up discussions to see if there's a match," Marko says.

Additionally, the creation of the material handling division in 1998 helped keep plant material purchasing and selecting on a neutral ground. However, if a landscape designer wants to broaden their pallet and use something that's not on the bread-and-butter list for the landscape division, he can select plants from the retail nursery's materials as well as his own area. A purchase order computer system keeps the inventory up to date.

Each and every one of these concepts is something the company does today to better its tomorrows, and this is what Thalmann credits as the reason for its growth over the years. "I'm not concerned about being bigger – I only want to be better," he says. "If we wanted to increase sales today, we could add more sales people and do it. But what control over quality would I have? I would rather become better and more profitable and then, in turn, sell more and grow – that's a concept with a little more quality guarantee." ■

The author is managing editor of Lawn & Landscape magazine and can be reached at nwisniewski@gie.net.

(continued from page 54)

full-time and 75 are part-time," says Ed Reier, vice president of the company's maintenance operations. "The retention rate among our returning workforce is very high and I think one real reason for that is because we treat our seasonal and returning employees as a team and as members of a team that's here to accomplish a goal, as opposed to just perform a few tasks."

In addition to a seasonal workforce with a retention rate around 90 percent, Reier comments that most of the company's full-time employees have been with Tecza for eight to 12 years, creating a core of experienced employees throughout all levels of the company. Reier credits this success to the company's efforts to take an interest in and be sensitive to employees' personal and professional goals. "We ask employees to sit down and jot down some short and long term goals twice a year and talk about their personal and professional goals," he explains. "We like to help them reach those goals either by allowing them to do something they have a passion for or by being sensitive to a schedule of some sort."

For example, family is an important focus at Tecza, and Reier recalls one employee's personal goal of taking part in his children's sporting and scouting events. "We were very much aware of his inclination to be involved with his kids," Reier explains. "He didn't try to hide that goal and we didn't want him to hide it, so we knew that every weekend at a certain time he took the

scout troop on a camp out. By knowing that up front, we were sensitive to that."

Reier explains that employees review and revise their goals in the winter and again in the heat of the summer, noting if they were able to achieve what they set out to do six months earlier, how they did it, and how they might modify their goals from their experience. Each employee tracks their short- and long-term goals in a workbook that Reier developed containing inspirational phrases. "The exercise regarding goals goes a long way toward motivation, even if there aren't any dollars attached to it," he says. "There's a sense of accomplishment and a sense of feeling that there's more to this job than just day-to-day tasks."

Because of their personal nature, reviews of employees' aspirations are kept separate from annual employee reviews, which deal more with professional goals and employees' upward mobility within the company. "For the labor force, which includes laborers and foremen, we have multileveled job descriptions and these are what we use in performance reviews every year," Reier says. "For instance, a foreman position may have levels of foreman apprentice, and foreman levels 1, 2 and 3. Each level has additional responsibilities or levels of performance that we measure our employees against, but we also talk about how they can move to the next level."

Reier explains that the multileveled job descriptions promote attitudes of growth,

learning and quality within the company, which gives employees an incentive to strive for hard work and quality within their current positions. Also, each new level comes with new rewards and compensation. "Each level has additional benefits, such as an additional \$50 or \$100 toward uniform allowance," Reier says. "We also have looked into health insurance for some seasonal workers and we found that as long as we're classifying our employees in these different levels, we can make insurance available to them."

Moreover, employees' positions and levels of experience tie into the company's profit-sharing program, which has replaced departmentalized reward systems. "We always thought that departmentalized bonuses put into question the effectiveness of our team approach," Reier comments. "We see that the primary pitfall there is that you can end up dividing the company by offering different bonuses that aren't compatible across departments. Most landscape contractors do have multiple departments and a maintenance incentive plan would be different than construction, but because the departments can overlap and depend on each other, you can create tension there."

Instead of risking conflict, Reier explains that Tecza implemented a company-wide bonus plan more than 15 years ago whereby employees receive a certain percentage of profit, though that percentage can change from year to year. "We try to shoot for sharing between 10 and 15 percent of net profit and the amount you earn is dependent upon your tenure and level of pay," Reier explains. He adds that there is a minimum \$100 payout, so that lower-level employees don't get the short end of the stick in a low-profit year. "Someone could come into the company as an account manager, but get a much lower payout because they only have one year of experience, where as a low-level laborer who's been with the company for 12 years could net anywhere from \$500 to \$700," he notes.

Altogether, the company-wide bonus plan and goal workbooks give Tecza employees both personal and professional motivation throughout the work season. ■

The author is associate editor of Lawn & Landscape magazine and can be reached at lspiers@gie.net.

Egin, Ill.-based Tecza Environmental Group has a high percentage of Hispanic employees. "I could safely say that the actual labor force is 100-percent Hispanic, though we have bilingual and non-Hispanic individuals in foreman and supervisory levels," comments Ed Reier, vice president of maintenance operations for the company. Moreover, Reier notes that many of these employees are related – cousins, brothers, uncles, etc.

As such, Tecza works hard to be sensitive to its Hispanic employees' interests and their relationships – both familial and professional. For example, to boost morale and a sense of community one year, the company hosted a "futbol fiesta," of sorts.

"A couple of years ago, the championship match of the soccer World Cup was televised during the workday," Reier remembers. "It was a Wednesday morning from 6 to 9 a.m. and as a treat for our Hispanic employees and our whole staff, we shut down the company, rented a couple of big screen televisions and watched the game together." – **Lauren Spiers**

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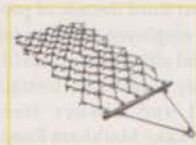
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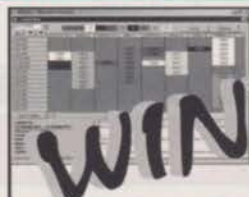
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How We Do It

Digital Communication at Gardeners' Guild

Gardeners' Guild is an employee-owned, full-service landscape contractor in Northern California. Though the company started 30 years ago – before the technology boom – our Silicon Valley-area location has helped our company grow into the digital age.

Five years ago, we began using digital cameras and have since incorporated CD burners and handheld computers. Because many of our customers' offices are not located near the properties they own or manage, or near our office, we find that these forms of technology allow us to keep in touch with clients more easily. By e-mailing images or burning them onto CDs to send to our clients, we can easily and quickly document existing site conditions and areas for improvement.

We initially purchased two digital cameras and have added five more. Our staff members share the cameras, though the maintenance, construction and sales divisions have dedicated cameras. Primarily, we use digital images for sales presentations to propose alternative color rotations or display examples of installations we have performed for other customers.

In other areas, our maintenance division uses the cameras to document existing conditions and communicate unusual events, such as storm damage, to the property owners and managers. Digital technology also lets us readily solicit a third-party opinion on site conditions. For example, to consult with an arborist regarding an unusual circumstance, we can e-mail a photo and discuss the situation via telephone to determine the next steps. Also, our construction division uses the cameras to chronicle unusual site access conditions and variations on on-site material, such as types of stone or paving materials.

Internally, one of our best uses of digital photos is in crew communication. Supervisors can visit sites, photograph specific areas that need attention, and then provide captions for the photos noting the necessary work. This greatly improves communication, and because many of our crew leaders are Spanish-speaking, the digital images are terrific aids in crossing the communication barrier.

We also have begun using handheld computers to speed up data collection and proposal preparation for irrigation work. From the field, technicians can enter existing site data into an Excel spreadsheet that has many pre-entered unit repair costs. At the office, the technician can download the information and create a proposal for the customer regarding necessary repairs and possible upgrades. This process can take just 30 minutes or so – which includes writing an explanatory cover letter – as opposed to the four to six hours that were required in the past.

We have purchased cameras at different levels of quality, primarily noted by the resolution available. Initially, we spent about \$500 per unit, though more recently we have spent only \$300 and we've found that cameras with at least 128 megabytes of memory are ideal. Also, our handheld computers cost about \$350 each, and CD burners are only \$60 to \$80 per unit. Because most of the equipment is user friendly, training has been on an informal, as-needed basis.

One technology challenge we ran into was creating a place to easily store all of our digital images. To handle this, we store the image files on a shared server that all administrative and management personnel can access through our local area network. The server has 34 gigabytes of storage and as we get low on server space, we burn related images, such as those belonging to a single client or site, onto a CD and file the disk away for future use.

For our company, digital technology has been a fantastic aid in serving our customers efficiently and allowing us to be more productive. Still, there is no substitute for physically sitting down with a client and discussing their needs. As such, we still find that more complex site issues or larger proposals are best delivered to the client by hand rather than digitally. Then, as our relationships with clients progress, digital communication helps us develop complete and timely solutions for our customers on an ongoing basis. – *John Ossa* ■

The author is president of Gardeners' Guild, San Rafael, Calif., and can be reached at 415/457-0400.

5 KEYS TO Digital Client Communication

1. Purchase equipment that is cost effective for your company and uses software that will communicate with existing computer operating systems.
2. Assign the equipment to specific company departments (maintenance, irrigation, sales, etc.) and have employees share and sign out equipment when it is in use.
3. Familiarize employees with new equipment on an as-needed basis, or develop a formal training program.
4. Use digital images to highlight problems or potential upgrades on job sites. E-mail photos to the client or burn the image onto CDs for the clients' use. Remember to regularly communicate with clients face-to-face, as well.
5. Develop a storage system for images and other forms of digital communication and be prepared to handle an increase in the necessary amount of storage space.

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 7. Hardscape Installation
 8. Water Features

9. Landscape Maintenance

9. Landscape Renovation
 10. Turf Fertilization
 11. Turf Aeration
 12. Tree & Ornamental Care
 13. Tree & Stump Removal
 14. Irrigation Maintenance
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16. Turf Disease Control
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 19. Tree & Ornamental Pesticide Application

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3. How many full-time (year-round) employees do you employ?

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