

Lawn & Landscape

07 06

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Stand-on Riders –
a New Way to Mow

Creative and Functional
Retaining Walls

THE *good* FIGHT

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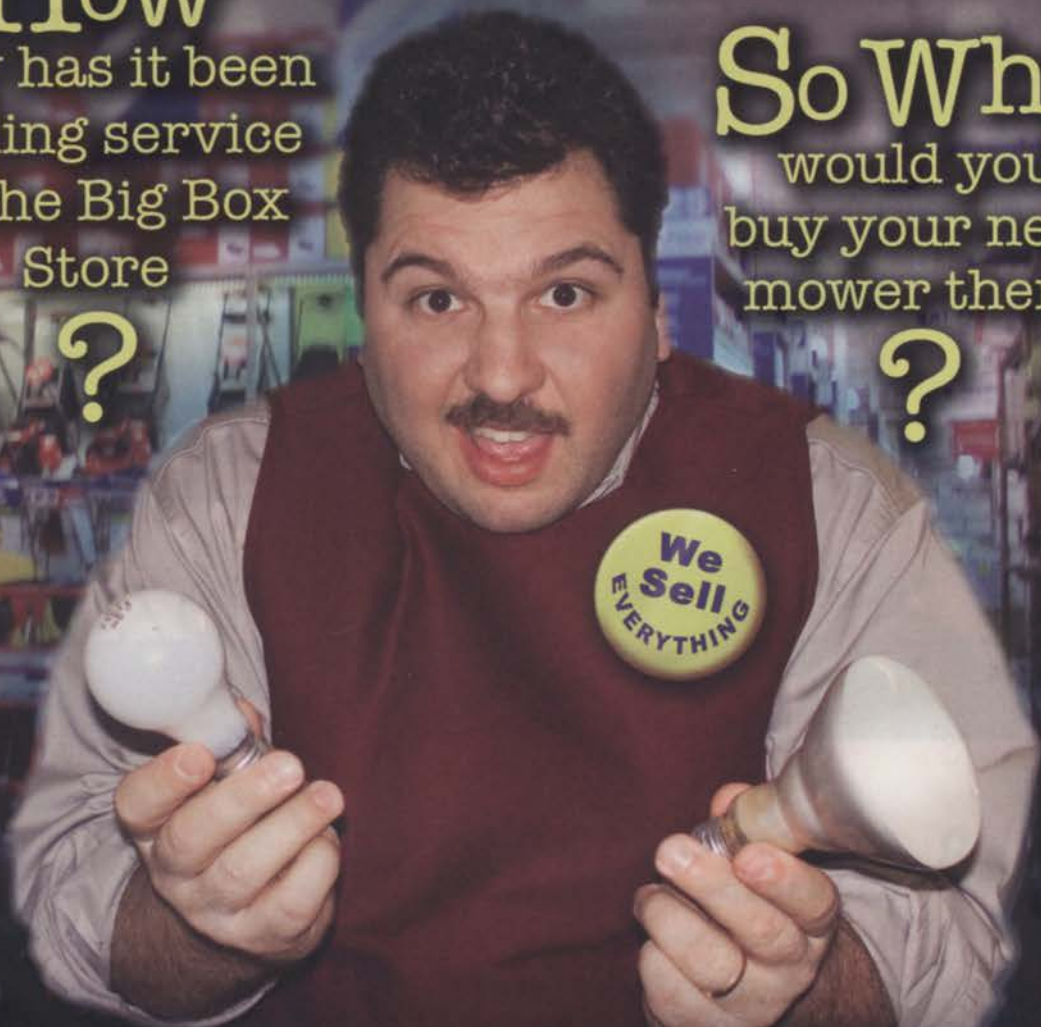
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Alan White battles pesticide bans while keeping business in the black.

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07.06

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rain delay

Recent downpours in the New England states had *Lawn & Landscape* Message Board users asking, "To mow or not to mow?" The traditional school of thought tells contractors not to mow lawns in the rain, but when the weather brings the threat of jobs left undone, should contractors just mow on?

Turn to page 60 to read advice Message Board users offer in this month's Best of the Web feature, "Rain Delay." Some lawn care operators advise their colleagues to monitor local weather forecasts and get some jobs done a day ahead of time to beat the rain. Others tell their crews to work even after the rain starts so they don't get behind on their work.

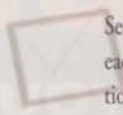
Shed light on this cloudy situation by posting your own thoughts on the Message Board at www.lawnandlandscape.com/messageboard.



online poll

Lawn & Landscape's online poll is in touch with the pulse of the green industry, introducing a new topic each week. When you log on to the Web site the week of July 10, answer the question, "Are you experiencing growth in your irrigation business?"

See the latest results on the spot or check each Monday's E-newsletter for information on more hot topics in the industry!



Smart Irrigation Month Online

The long-anticipated Smart Irrigation Month is here! As water restrictions continue to pop up across the country, the topic of irrigation is increasingly significant. *Lawn & Landscape* addresses how irrigation is part of the solution as municipalities are required to conserve this natural resource.



Check out our comprehensive supplement on page 85, and then go straight to www.lawnandlandscape.com for the up-to-the-minute irrigation news and notes. Our online coverage will be updated throughout the month of July. And don't forget to share your thoughts on our Message Board!

Seminar Information Central

A *Lawn & Landscape* Lawn Care seminar may be coming to your town soon! The seminars provide the latest information about turf and ornamental care methods, including tips on using herbicides, fungicides and insecticides and best practices for treating diseases.

Our special Web site can answer your questions about the must-attend events. Visit www.lawncareseminars.com for updates and registration details. Don't miss out on the opportunity to learn from some of the top industry professionals.

Have you tried the *Lawn & Landscape* digital edition yet? If not, this satisfied reader clues you in to what you're missing: ▼

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Market Will Dictate Merger

Recent news out of Washington D.C. revealed that the Professional Landcare Network and the American Nursery & Landscape Association would not merge as had been anticipated by many throughout the landscape industry.

Merger talks between the two national associations surfaced six months after the union of the Associated Landscape Contractors of America and the Professional Lawn Care Association of America became official last year.

If an association of design/build, maintenance, interior and lawn care professionals can make a difference in Washington – where pesticide, noise, emission and water issues are routinely deliberated – then why not embrace nursery, distribution and retail groups as well?

After all, the desired goal of becoming a national voice for the service segment of the green industry would gain momentum if all facets of this incredibly large yet exceptionally fragmented industry were housed under one establishment.

What's good for the grower, for the landscape contractor, the maintenance professional, the interior specialist and the lawn care operator is good for the entire professional service industry.

Legislation, health care, insurance, labor challenges, small business issues and understanding the ins and outs of a profit/loss statement are concerns for growers and contractors alike.


From an association vantage point providing certification, ongoing education and a vibrant trade show can be tricky to navigate. So why not eliminate a seemingly duplicative association structure and go with one, superior brain trust?

Now, if we had all the answers, we'd be vying for the CEO opportunity at PLANET. But alas, that's not in the cards, just as my predication for one national umbrella organization was ahead of its time back in 1990 when the Green Industry Expo made its debut.

At that time, three careful years of planning set the stage for the GIE show to become the one and only national conference and trade show for landscape professionals. This advancement became possible only after three associations (ALCA, PLCAA and the Professional Grounds Management Society) decided to set their autonomous views aside and craft a superior expo that replaced smaller, struggling shows.

While the individual associations did not merge at the time, the trade show move was at the forefront of preliminary beliefs that one strong national entity could raise the visibility and promote the strengths of the landscape industry.

We still believe a well-organized, forward thinking association can benefit professional service firms big and small. While the merger between PLANET and ANLA did not go through, I'm sure both organizations learned a lot about each others' strengths and weaknesses as well as what can be accomplished should they choose to follow that course sometime in the future.

In the meantime, we hope that each association will work diligently to fortify the goals and objectives for each market segment they represent, and reaffirm their commitment to expanding their membership reach. 

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USE READER SERVICE # 14

 **NEW HOLLAND**



5 Things to Think About

Now that we're in the thick of our busy season, I thought sharing some words of wisdom might inspire you to achieve your best year yet.

1. "Different isn't always better, but better is always different." – Dale Dauten.

Successful companies earn their success by distinguishing themselves in ways that matter. Take, for example, eBay, an Internet company that emerged out of nowhere and, without selling a single product, revolutionized the marketplace. How? They had an original idea and executed it brilliantly. Or take Starbucks, which transformed itself from a Seattle coffeehouse into a global player by turning our caffeine habit into a cultural event.

Learn from these examples. For starters, keep your trucks clean, make sure your crews treat your customers professionally and deliver what you promise.

2. "The only thing more powerful than knowing what to do is doing it." – Mark Sanborn. In his book, *The Fred Factor*, Sanborn makes a great point: "How many people tell you what they're going to do but rarely do anything?"

Show me a company that stands out in the marketplace and I'll show you a business that gets things done. We are entrepreneurs because we want to run our own shows. But with freedom comes responsibility – no one else is going to follow up on your plans and promises.

If you find yourself always putting tasks off or if you feel as if you've fallen into a rut, you might consider hiring a professional coach. Do what you have to do.

3. "It ain't bragging if you done did it!" – Dizzy Dean. This former Major League Baseball pitcher makes an astute point: "How do you expect people to

know about your company if you don't tell them?" The more people you tell of your accomplishments, the better your chances become of getting more work. Of course, there's a fine line between bragging and skillful promotion. No one needs to know how much money you make, but they do want to see photos of completed jobs, read client testimonials and learn about the awards your work has earned. Accomplished entrepreneurs tell their success stories in succinct, memorable ways.

4. "Knowledge is confidence." – Ron Rado. I will always remember my Uncle Ron's words of wisdom: "Your team and your clients can tell whether you know what you're talking about or are making it up as you go along."

Make a promise to read a book, attend a seminar or meet with a mentor in the next month. Many contractors will readily invest in trucks and equipment, but few see the advantage in investing in themselves. You are always your best investment. No tool can replace the potential you possess in your mind and in your outlook.

5. "The problem with American business is not a lack of ideas but a lack of follow-through." – Mary Kay Ash. Ash, founder of Mary Kay Cosmetics, made a fortune by following through with her ideas. She got things done. Those times when we haven't succeeded in my own company is when we failed to follow-through – we didn't call a client back, we didn't replace a dead plant or we didn't have a good year because we didn't sell what we probably could have sold had we followed through.

You don't need an MBA from Harvard to make it in our industry, but what you do need is a positive attitude, a great work ethic and a commitment to be the best you can be. ☺

marty grunder

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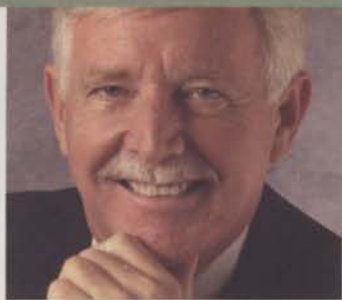
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Secrets to Success

As I end my column and begin to slow down my career in the landscape industry by traveling more, playing more golf and increasing my fly fishing expeditions, I would like to reiterate a few thoughts that, hopefully, will assist you in the success of your landscape business:

- **Quality builds a business.** Be the best and monitor quality frequently.
- **People are your biggest assets.** Treat your people with respect and cull the non-performers from your workforce.
- **Man-hours make you money.** Never delegate a job to someone without giving them the budgeted man-hours.
- **Provide score cards.** Inform all employees of the budgeted and actual man-hours, per crew per job and per week. Post this on a wall for all to see.
- **Hold everyone accountable.** Be sure they understand their expected job performance, preferably in writing and mentor them when they get off track.
- **Create a financial budget.** Budget all expenses by month and compare. Share as much of the budget results with others as you feel comfortable.
- **Chart accounts.** Items should reflect our landscape industry functions. Educate your accountant as to our business.
- **Accounts receivable is critical.** Monitor and hold someone accountable for the collections. Be firm with your clients and accept no excuses. Act quickly.
- **Ask clients for referrals.** It is an easy way to grow your business. Consider a reward if the referral is successful.
- **Monitor sales activity.** Set goals for number of proposals submitted per month and then track those closely. Number of proposals is more important than sales dollars. Zero proposals equals zero sales.
- **Grow or die.** Always seek new clients. Life is too short to be small.
- **Overtime is a killer.** Monitor this closely per employee, per week. Yes, we do have overtime, but it must be management's decision – not the hourly employee's.
- **Strategic planning is good business.** Develop a plan with your key employees annually. Set goals, assign responsibilities and hold each other accountable.
- **Never decide to buy something while listening to a salesman.** Rent your equipment first until it gets to be a hassle. Then determine if it is going to be sitting in your yard the majority of the time. Be careful. What you don't owe won't hurt you.
- **Everyone needs a raise.** But only when performance is acceptable and only per the company's policy. Establish and distribute the policy for all to understand. Set hourly pay scale ranges for each position and share them with all employees.
- **Preventive equipment maintenance is essential.** Establish and keep schedules.
- **Have a party.** Monthly or quarterly cookouts, etc. are great for morale.

It has been my pleasure sharing my thoughts with you these last few years and hopefully I was able to guide you to further success.

My best to all of you and please stay in touch via e-mail. May you always be happy, healthy and wealthy. Take care. ☺

jack mattingly

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USE READER SERVICE # 16



My Hero, The Entrepreneur

There's something about the period between Independence Day and Labor Day that always causes me to reflect on the things for which we should all be thankful. My thoughts were crystallized this year by comments a green industry business associate of mine made recently. We were talking about small businesses in particular. In the course of the discussion, she said, "You know, the real heroes in this country are small business owners." The more I thought about that comment, the more I agreed.

People become business owners for a variety of reasons and circumstances. Some inherit the family business while others take a great idea and make it happen. These days many victims of corporate cutbacks are finding alternative careers starting and managing their own businesses, many of which are landscape-related. Regardless, nothing prepares you for the reality of owning, managing and growing your own business.

There's a romantic notion about owning your own business. Words and phrases like "independence," "doing things my way" and "being my own boss" all come to mind when we identify reasons why business ownership appears so desirable. But these romantic notions quickly disappear and reality takes charge once the loan is approved, the equipment is purchased and you must generate sales and pay bills.

Remember how you felt the first morning you woke up fully in charge of your destiny? If for some reason you decided not to go to work that morning, nothing would have happened. It was then that the magnitude of your decision really hit home — it was all up to you now.

Remember how hard it was to generate enough business so that after the bills were paid there was a little left over for you? Remember how you felt when you were

finally able to write a paycheck to yourself? It wasn't much, but it was all yours and you had earned it.


People who own businesses are a special breed. Words like "confidence," "ambition," "willingness to take risks" and "driven" all define these folks. But they are not the sole determinants of whether or not their companies will survive. Long-term survivability depends on how well owners handle success and plan for succession.

Handling success is like bench pressing weights. Everyone has a limit and sooner or later needs help. Handling success means you now have an expanding base of both customers and employees who depend upon you. Seat-of-your-pants management is not going to cut it any more.

For many small business owners, success is measured in small improvements. It's that piece of equipment you could finally afford to buy. It's your name stenciled on a vehicle. It's having letterhead stationary with your logo on it. It's being able to hire one more person to help you out. It's getting that first referral from a satisfied customer.

But there's a downside, too. It's about cash flow worries, competition and whether you will ever be able to find and keep people who care as much about your business as you do. It's coming to grips with your own shortcomings as a businessperson. It's the fear of failure.

The ownership of a small business has taken its toll on many the entrepreneur who has tried it. On the other hand, every large company in existence at one time was a small business. For many businesses, the difference between success and failure is a combination of timing, money, market conditions, planning, ability and luck.

But the most important and often overlooked is heart. And heart is what makes heroes. 

larry fish

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USE READER SERVICE # 17



Summer Time = Grub Time

With the heat and intensity of summer stress, the last thing your customers' lawns want to deal with is an insect infestation. But this is exactly the time for Midwest and Northeast lawn care companies to be concerned.

If you can survive the initial diagnosis and resolve the problem successfully, then the good news is you have a tremendous opportunity to sell a preventive grub application for the following year.

Ultimately, as with any turf pest, the key to success and customer satisfaction is understanding the pest you're battling and how to best control it.

BEETLEMANIA. Grubs are infant beetles. More technically speaking, grubs are beetle larvae, most commonly Japanese beetle larvae. If left unchecked, these small, white, turf-chewing insects will grow into different types of beetles.

Most importantly, their feeding habits make them the most destructive pest of cool-season and transition turf. Grub-infested lawns show patches of wilted, dead or dying turf during spring and fall as the grubs feed on the turf roots. But the telltale sign of a grub population is often the presence of various birds and mammals feeding on these pests below the soil's surface.

Grubs are best controlled preventively since a curative plan often includes turf replacement or renovation work as well.

There are a few preventive grub control products on the market. Be sure to understand the product you choose to use. Some insecticides require a little extra time to get set up in the soil, while others come with certain irrigation recommendations.

Regardless of the product, preventive applications should be made anywhere from late May or early June through early July. Many lawn companies target July 4

as their deadline for having all preventive grub control products applied.

Grubs that have overwintered from the previous year are generally too large to control in the early spring, so they will pupate into beetles in June. The females will then lay their eggs back in the soil in early to mid-July. Those beetles are not your control target – the first instar (smallest) grubs that hatch from the eggs and soon begin feeding on turf roots are your focus. Control becomes more challenging as the grubs feed and grow, hence the importance of a well-timed preventive application.

PROBLEMS PERSIST? If you make a preventive application and still experience grub problems, the problem most likely comes from the following:

- The application was made too early or too late. Apply too early and risk breakdown before the first instar grubs begin feeding. Apply too late, and the grubs have grown too large to control with the preventive products.
- Lack of irrigation. Again, grubs feed just below the surface, so any product applied for preventive control must be watered into the soil to ensure the grubs contact it.
- Excessive thatch levels. Even with sufficient irrigation, too much thatch will tie up the insecticide, keeping it from the soil. If you uncover this problem when a breakthrough occurs, look at aeration as another upsell opportunity.

Again, finding grubs on a customer's property isn't cause for gloom and doom. If a preventive application was not made, then obviously successful curative control is the key to protect the turf from damage. And while grubs used to be such hard-to-control pests, this is no longer the case. The preventive products on the market today will get the job done. ☺

j.b. toorish and brian kelley

are part of LESCO's Tech Services Department. They can be reached at techguys@lesco.com or at 800/321-5325 ext. 3150 to answer technical questions.

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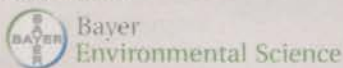
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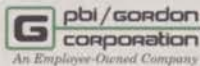
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midseason price check

Contractors Weigh In On Fuel Costs

In 2005, retail gasoline prices in the United States fluctuated radically, with the average price of regular gasoline rising from \$1.78 per gallon on Jan. 3 to as high as \$3.07 per gallon on Sept. 5 in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, according to the Energy Information Administration (EIA).

Those unpredictable prices left landscape contractors with headaches, lower profit margins and a tough decision: absorb costs or pass them along to customers?

If one good thing came from last year's erratic fuel prices, it's the fact that landscape contractors weren't blindsided by skyrocketing prices coming into the 2006 busy season. In fact, contractors surveyed for *Lawn & Landscape's* 2005 State of the Industry Report said their No. 1

expected success-limiting factor for 2006 was the rising price of fuel. Contractors ranked it an 8.2 (up from 7.7 the previous year) on a scale of one to 10 with 10 being the greatest point of concern.

At press time, the average price for regular gasoline is \$2.91 per gallon – up nearly 80 cents from a year ago, according to the EIA. Diesel fuel checks in at \$2.92 per gallon, up almost 64 cents from this time last year.

To combat costs this year, contractors are scrutinizing business processes and consumption levels, and they're implementing various methods for passing the costs along to their customers, like increasing prices overall or tacking on fuel surcharges.

NOT COMING DOWN. Daniel Hanson of SCLM Co. in La Verne, Calif., shares the sentiments of many con-

tractors – and U.S. citizens in general – when he implies that what goes up does not always come down.

"I feel that fuel will not be going down any time soon, if ever," he says. "One of the things that a lot of contractors, especially landscape, are going to have to face is that sooner or later they are going to have to raise their rates by a few percentage points to account for the increased fuel costs."



That's exactly what B. Rushing Lawn and Landscaping, Alexandria, Va., did. For the first time in 11 years, the company instituted an across-the-board surcharge that's 5 percent of the total job cost, says President Brandon Rushing.

Although Rushing calls his company's increase a surcharge, he notes that it's not only related to the price at the pump. "To me it was more of a cost of

doing business increase," he says. "Fuel is a big part of it, but with every supplier and every product we use prices have gone up because of fuel. It's a trickle-down effect on all levels."

Hanson's firm takes a hard look at target profit margins for each maintenance account. "Clients with contracts that are or were under our target profit margin by even a few percentage points immediately receive letters requesting a price increase citing rising fuel costs as one of the main reasons," Hanson explains, adding SCLM makes up for losses elsewhere. "We are able to absorb some of the fuel cost increases through our construction division and irrigation repair crews. Since we bid construction jobs on a continual basis, and since irrigation repair is time and material plus overhead, we can always include the increase in overhead quite easily."

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USE READER SERVICE # 19

For Blade Runners, Fairfax, Va., fuel has traditionally been 2.5 percent of gross costs, says President Eric Storck. Now, with gas prices hovering around \$3 in the Washington, D.C., area, fuel eats up 4.5 percent of the company's costs. "We would love to recover all of that," Storck says, explaining that Blade Runners doesn't add a blanket surcharge onto all accounts. "We measure how many hours the equipment runs on the site, and adjust the fuel cost accordingly," he says.

During the month of April, fueling one truck (gas for the vehicle plus mowers and equipment) cost Atlanta-based Tohill Landscape Management \$850, says owner Kelly Tohill. He recalls it cost about the same during an average month in 2005.

Thankfully, before the 2005 season of fluctuating fuel costs, Tohill knew he needed to make some changes. "Last year I pretty much upped people by \$5 a visit and then I did it again this year."

CUSTOMERS' CONCERNS.

Tohill explains that potentially upsetting customers must take a backseat to profitability. Prior to 2005 he had never increased prices – that's going back to 2000 when a gallon of gas in Atlanta was clocking in at 99 cents to \$1.05. An increase was inevitable for Tohill, who says he needs to make \$30 per man per hour.

In addition to notifying customers with a simple note explaining the increase, Tohill adjusted some routes and dropped customers that live on the other side of Atlanta.

"This year I've got it right," he says. "I know I've covered my gas prices and I'm making money."

So far no customers have complained. "Like I say, I hadn't raised prices in over four years," Tohill says. "So I guess everybody thought that was fair."

Fairway Landscape, which services Long Island (Nassau County), N.Y., wasn't as fortunate passing an increase through, says CEO Greg

Bashaw. After a slew of complaints that followed a \$2 per month fuel surcharge last summer, the company opted to raise prices for 2006.

"We lost some customers, 37 percent to be exact, as they just couldn't understand that fuel prices have raised dump charges, insurance costs and wages for that matter, and not just gasoline prices," Bashaw says. "I know that some of the turnover was only price driven, because none



of those people have had a problem with service in the past."

Some of Rushing's business also has been a casualty of increasing prices. "We lost a handful of customers, but I'm not worried about it because I had never increased my prices across the board like this," he says.

Storck says that fuel surcharges and price increases often incite the bidding process – driving some customers to national landscape firms that he calls "price oriented." However, he says that customers usually understand increases related to fuel. "I've found that fuel prices are something that's tangible to your clients," Storck says. "They're spending more on fuel, so they understand increases with fuel."

FOCUS ON EFFICIENCY. Instead of panicking, Rushing, like other contractors, is reviewing internal policies that can create more fuel

efficiencies.

"We've definitely looked harder at routing equipment and the way we provide our services, not affecting quality, but we have to be more innovative on how we deliver our services, like bundling – when we make one stop we do multiple things."

As another cost controlling measure, Hanson's company is taking the fuel purchasing process to the next level. SCLM canceled its commercial accounts with

major fuel vendors and started an account with Wright Express, a service that allows companies to closely track vehicle fuel and service expenses.

"One of the first things that we became aware of after we made the switch was that we had a couple of employees who were basically stealing fuel," Hanson says, explaining that the Wright Express system assigns a card to every truck and a personal identification number to every driver. When the driver fuels up, he

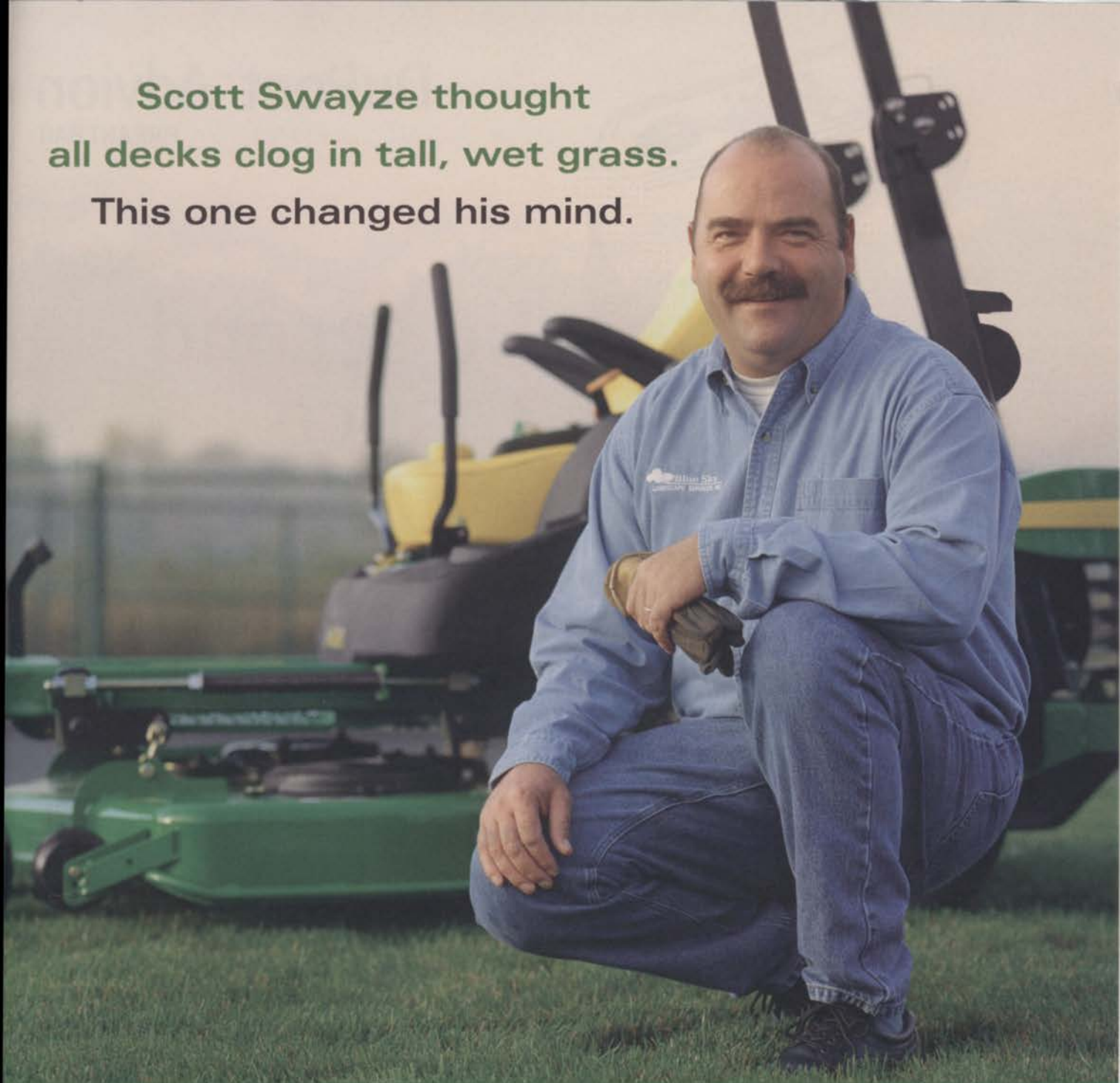
must enter his PIN and the vehicle's odometer reading. At the end of the month, management receives a series of reports, including a summary that outlines fuel purchase details (date, time, location, etc.) for every driver, as well as a summary of gas mileage and fuel consumed by the entire fleet.

"The best report that we get is a listing of which stations we have purchased at, listed by cost per gallon," Hanson says. "We can look at that report and see which station is consistently lower than the others and direct our drivers to those stations." – Marisa Palmieri

www.lawnandlandscape.com

Visit the *Lawn & Landscape* Web site to find more information on this and other industry topics. While you're there, log on and share your experiences, views and opinions on dealing with skyrocketing fuel prices with other contractors on the online message board.

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industry news

RESEARCH REPORT

Irrigation: A 10-Year Outlook

For landscape contractors looking to offer irrigation services or expand their existing irrigation businesses, Jeff Carowitz says they should set their sights on growth.

Carowitz, senior consultant with Strategic Force Marketing, San Marcos, Calif., outlined his "Strategic Overview of the Irrigation Industry" April 24-26 at the Hunter Irrigation Industry Forum in San Marcos, Calif. He talked about what fueled irrigation service growth the past 10 years and offered an outlook for the next decade.

Over the past 10 years, the irrigation industry has grown on average at twice the rate of the annual GDP at 6 to 7 percent a year (the GDP has only grown 2 to 3 percent a year), Carowitz says. "The number of contractors offering irrigation services has outpaced industry growth," he adds. "And the installed base of irrigation systems on residential and commercial properties has dramatically increased during the past decade."

The factors that affect irrigation industry growth, including new construction, home improvement, demographic and geographic changes, and hobby and leisure pursuits, have remained strong, Carowitz shares, adding that these factors also show long-term growth potential.



Photo: Hunter Industries

First, Carowitz points out housing statistics – a market that moves in cycles based on job growth, interest rates and consumer confidence. According to Carowitz's research from Economy.com, 1.8 million new jobs on average will be added over the next 10 years. He also outlined Harvard University's Joint Center for Housing Studies' September 2005 Report, noting that income growth and unemployment rate declines can more than offset the rising interest rates the industry is currently experiencing.

"The bottom line on housing is that the long-term trend is positive and housing is moving ahead of the rate of the general economy despite short-term ups and downs," Carowitz says, adding that according to The Brookings Institution, in 2030 about half of the buildings in which Americans live, work and shop will have been built after the year 2000 – most of the space being residential – showing the

continued increase in home building. "When housing construction is strong, the demand for irrigation services increases."

Carowitz continued to cite The Brookings Institution, pointing out that states with the largest projected number of housing units will include California, Florida and Texas. In Arizona and Nevada, more units will be built in the next 30 years than existed in 2000. According to Carowitz, the study says that "the volume of development to be seen during the next generation will be nothing short of staggering."

In some instances, housing customer changes are fueling this growth. For instance, Carowitz says that, according to the Intergenerational Wealth Transfer, more parents are providing the down payment to permit their children to buy new homes earlier in their lives. Additionally, U.S. immigrants are becoming increasingly

important to the housing industry. In fact, second generation immigrants in the zero to 20 age group will become the prime home buyers and builders of the next decade, according to the Joint Center for Housing Studies Report.

To obtain these homes with larger properties as a bonus, more home buyers also are commuting further for greener spaces. The Harvard Study mentions that in 1970 only 16 metropolitan areas had at least one to five households living more than 20 miles from the central business district. In 2000, that number jumped to 45 metropolitan areas.

In addition to home building and buying, remodeling is also a factor that will continue to fuel irrigation industry growth, says Carowitz, citing that according to a 1995 American Housing Survey, nearly half the homes in the United States are more than 35 years old. In 2006, Barron's predicts a 5 to

continued on page 28



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USE READER SERVICE # 22

industry news

continued from page 25

7 percent increase in the growth of remodeling. "There is a cocooning trend that is driving consumers to spend more time and money on the home," he explains. "This is driving home entertainment, home shopping and home remodeling."

The baby boomer generation moving into retirement should also boost landscape and irrigation sales into the future, Carowitz says. This is mainly because their No. 1 request for an active adult community amenity is full maintenance and lawn care (80 percent reporting), followed by walking areas (79 percent), according to the Harris Interactive 2005 "Baby Boomers Housing Study."

The study also reported that more than 50 percent of respondents under age 60 said they will buy a new home for retirement, and roughly 45 percent said they would move out of state for retirement. "When asked what state they would move to for retirement, the baby boomers listed their top six as Florida, Arizona, North Carolina, California, Texas and Nevada," Carowitz says.

On the commercial side of the industry, Carowitz says corporate balance sheets are strong and that is allowing businesses to construct new plants and office spaces. "The national office vacancy rate is now below 5 percent, so there is a rebound ahead," he explains.

Finally, because gardening continues to lead the list of American hobbies, the irrigation industry will benefit, Carowitz remarks. He points to a Harris Interactive 2004 National Gardening Survey, that reports three out of four (82 million households) Americans currently participate in gardening activities, and that gardening is considered the most popular outdoor activity/hobby above amateur sports. "The relatively low cost of a home irrigation system – \$3,000 for a system on a \$350,000 home," Carowitz adds, "will also drive this growth."

In addition to his 10-year outlook, Carowitz suggests 2006 could be a robust growth year for irrigation professionals.

Initially, continued strong demand from new construction and remodeling will fuel growth, he says. And irrigation manufacturers are reporting that their early shipment indicators of irrigation products are strong in all sectors of the landscape market.

Also, this winter contributed to a longer and stronger year for irrigation contractors. The National Climatic Data Center has called the 2005/2006 winter the "fifth warmest winter on record," which has added two to three additional months to the construction season in many parts of the United States. As a result, national heating use was down 11 percent, Carowitz says. "This is a dramatic increase in work days for contractors," he points out. – Nicole Wisniewski

JULY
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Photo: Hunter Industries

July is Smart Irrigation Month. For an in-depth look at the industry's water management advancements, see the Special Section on Smart Irrigation starting on page 85.

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ASSOCIATION NEWS

Spend a Few Days on the Hill

Once every year, PLANET and ANLA members converge on Capitol Hill to connect directly with members of the U.S. House and Senate. This year, held in association with the Tree Care Industry of America, Legislative Day on the Hill (July 23-25) is an opportunity to bring attention to issues that impact the industry, such as H-2B and pesticide regulation.

Also, the event offers attendees a chance to reaffirm their sense of patriotism and pride during the Renewal and Remembrance at Arlington National Cemetery and Historic Congressional Cemetery, where from 7 a.m. to 1 p.m. on July 24 industry volunteers will dedicate manpower and equipment to enhance the beauty and environment of the grounds at Arlington National Cemetery. This gift is valued at more than \$250,000 in services and work.

Both cemeteries have notable histories. More than 300,000 people are buried at Arlington National Cemetery, including veterans from all of the nation's wars, from the American Revolution through the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Historic Congressional Cemetery is a private cemetery founded in 1807. Owned by Christ Church, it is managed by the Association



for the Preservation of Historic Congressional Cemetery. The grounds occupy 32.5 acres in southeast Washington, D.C., overlooking the Anacostia River. An estimated 60,000 interments have occurred there. Among the graves are privates and generals of the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, the Mexican War, Union and Confederate soldiers, craftsmen and architects of the Capitol, Indian chiefs, foreign diplomats, victims of tragedies and crime, prominent businessmen and ordinary citizens.

The day will begin at Arlington with a ceremony featuring a joint color guard and speaker presentations to dedicate the day of work to those who gave the ultimate sacrifice. "The natural beauty and quiet grace of Arlington National Cemetery will make it a place that we feel compelled to protect and take care of," says PLANET member Phil Fogarty, who has helped to organize the event. To register for the event, call PLANET at 800/395-2522 or visit www.landcarenetwork.org.

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USE READER SERVICE # 24

Green Industry Looking for Answers About Catalytic Converter Report



Photo: John Deere

The EPA told attendees at a recent public meeting in Ann Arbor, Mich. that the agency, based on snowmobile, automobile and motor scooter technology testing, has concluded that catalytic converters would be safe on outdoor power equipment.

One of the purposes of the May 15 Ann Arbor meeting was to explain how the agency concluded its March 16 report that catalytic converters would not cause serious burns to equipment users or spark dangerous ground fires.

The agency reviewed technical data and reviewed the test procedures and equipment used in the lab and field work. The safety argument has garnered recognition in the green industry because of knowledge about automobiles. Drivers have long been warned against parking automobiles on or near tall weeds and grass, especially in the hot summer months when the dry plant matter could ignite like kindling. Catalytic converters generate a lot of heat because of the chemical process that makes engines pollute less.

"We have many questions," says Bill Harley, president

for Virginia-based Outdoor Power Equipment Institute, the green industry trade group. "There is a lot of data that requires explanation."

The EPA states engines under 50 horsepower will account for 18 percent of smog-making emissions by 2020. Proposed rules in California that would further tighten emissions would likely lead to the use of catalytic converters on outdoor power equipment, much like those already installed on cars and trucks. This proposed legislation would include handheld equipment and mowers.

Industry leaders say their concern is about safety. "You've got grass and debris swirling and circulating over vegetation," Harley says. "Obviously, with lawn and garden equipment, it's made to be used atop vegetation. With a catalytic converter, the potential for heat rising raises a lot of concerns."

To mitigate safety concerns, it will take some time to re-design the equipment, Harley says. — Mark Phillips

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USE READER SERVICE # 25



SPANISH LESSONS

Considering that more and more landscape contractors are employing Hispanic or H-2B workers, improving communication is becoming more crucial to ensure quality work done right the first time.

In an effort to aid landscape professionals in their communication efforts, *Lawn & Landscape* will be running a few phrases each month in English and Spanish, including a pronunciation guide, courtesy of the book *Spanish Phrases for Landscape Professionals* by Jason Holben and Dominic Arbini. To inquire about ordering the book, which costs \$24, visit www.lawnandlandscape.com/store or contact the *Lawn & Landscape* Book Department at 800/456-0707.

1. ENGLISH: Start with the trees.
SPANISH: Comienza con los arboles. (Co-me-n-sah cone lohs ahr-bow-lehs.)
2. ENGLISH: Shrubs are planted second.
SPANISH: Los arbustos de segundo. (Lohs ahr-boo-stohs day she-goona-doh.)
3. ENGLISH: Dig that hole a little deeper.
SPANISH: Escava ese hoyo mas profundo. (S-cah-bah s-a oy-yo mahs pro-food-d-doh.)
4. ENGLISH: That hole is too deep.
SPANISH: Ese hoyo es muy profundo. (S-a oy-yo s moo-e pro-foona-d-doh.)
5. ENGLISH: Backfill with soil and fertilizer.
SPANISH: Rellenalo con tierra y fertilizante. (Ray-ehn-ah loh cone t-air-ah E fehr-til-ih-sahn-tay.)
6. ENGLISH: Beware of utility lines. Beware of sprinkler lines.
SPANISH: Cuidada con las lineas de electricidad. Cuidado con las lineas de riego. (Kwee-dahd-oh cone las lihn-e-ahs day eh-lekt-riss-e-dahd. Kwee-dahd-oh cone las lihn-e-ahs day ree-eh-hoe.)

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USE READER SERVICE # 27

CALENDAR

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Calendar Note

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.

JULY 12 – 16 American Nursery & Landscape Association Legislative Conference & Annual Meeting, Vail, Colo. Contact: www.anla.org, 202/789-2900

JULY 16 – 22 Association of Professional Landscape Designers Annual Conference, Philadelphia, PA. Contact: www.apld.org, 717/238-9780

JULY 16 – 22 Perennial Plant Symposium & Trade Show, Montreal, Quebec. Contact: www.perennialplant.org, 416/231-2495

JULY 17 – 20 Turfgrass Producers International 2006 Summer Convention & Field Days, Memphis, Tenn. Contact: www.turfgrasssod.org, 800/405-8873

JULY 18 – 20 Pennsylvania Green Expo, Harrisburg, Pa. Contact: sales@pagreenexpo.com, www.pagreenexpo.com, 800-789-5068

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USE READER SERVICE # 28



Don't Hold Back

by kathleen franzinger | contributing editor

Retaining walls may be functional, but that doesn't mean contractors have to restrain their creativity.

Retaining walls serve a necessary function. They hold back soil for something as simple as a landscape bed to something as substantial as a home. But just because retaining walls are utilitarian doesn't mean they have to look that way. Along with providing structural integrity, retaining walls can serve as an attractive design element in any landscape.

Thanks to a wide range of materials and a little creativity, contractors can design unique retaining walls that look as good as they perform. "From a design standpoint, contractors are taking that extra step," says Nancy Johnson, landscape product manager, Anchor Wall Systems, Minnetonka, Minn. "They're making retaining walls not just functional, but beautiful."

NEW FACES. As much as customers want a retaining wall that works properly, they also want it to enhance the appearance of their properties. For many clients, this means retaining walls that look as natural as possible – a look usually achieved by building with stones. But manufacturers of concrete segmental retaining walls are meeting this growing demand by offering products that look less manufactured and more like natural stone.

The blocks feature a tumbled, also called antique or weathered, appearance, created by rounding the edges and blending multiple colors. "A few years ago, segmental retaining wall products were available only in gray and tan," Nancy Johnson says. "Now we can offer at least three different blends, sometimes more than that, to meet local demand."



Photos: Lied's Nursery Co.

In addition, the blocks come in multiple shapes and sizes that can interlock to provide a more random, and hence more natural-looking, pattern. "Rather than working with one product that is the same size, contractors can incorporate anywhere from three to six different sized blocks," says Blaine French, sales manager, Minneapolis-based Keystone Retaining Wall Systems. "The tumbled look in segmental retaining walls is the closest thing you can get to natural stone, but it gives contractors all the advantages of segmental wall technology."

Because of these products, Robb Lied, president of Lied's Nursery Co., Sussex, Wis., installs more segmen-

tal retaining walls than in the past. "They used to look really cold when they were the typical concrete block color," he says. "Now you can mix the shapes, sizes and colors for a more aesthetically pleasing look."

The tumbled blocks are especially popular in the residential market, says Chad Johnson, national sales representative, Versa-Lok Retaining Wall Systems, Oakdale, Minn. "You see it more in the residential market because those clients are willing to pay more," he says. "With retail stores wanting 50,000 square feet of wall, they don't want to add a few more dollars per block. But homeowners may have a 2,000-square-foot wall, so

a few more dollars per block isn't as significant."

The natural appearance and easy interlocking installation of these segmental wall products has ushered in another trend of building freestanding walls for aesthetic purposes. "The tumbled products offer a lot of design flexibility," says French. "They can be used not only as retaining walls, but to create an aesthetic look with columns and seat walls."

Freestanding sitting walls are a growing trend, especially with residential clients. The walls can be used as a border around a patio, as well as function as additional seating. "Sitting walls made from the prefabricated

concrete are very popular right now," says Chris Thompson, vice president of landscape design at Eastside Nursery, Groveport, Ohio. "People like that extra patio space. Instead of increasing the size of the patio to create more seating, you can build a wall to divide the patio and lawn areas, which also gives people a place to sit."

Nancy Johnson credits the popularity of the front yard courtyard as another reason for the increase in freestanding walls. These courtyards serve as homeowners' "windows to the world" and are often designed using freestanding walls that incorporate columns and steps.

Columns are a great way to make

freestanding walls even more attractive. Thompson ties columns into sitting walls for a more formal design. "The columns aren't functional, but they add character to the patio," he says. "Depending on the design, sometimes when the wall stops it can look unfinished. The column gives it a nice ending."

Columns, or pillars, can also add a decorative element to other areas of the landscape, such as the end of a driveway – a request Leid often hears from customers. "In the past, those would have to be footed and done in masonry, which made them extremely expensive," he says. "With some of the segmental units, you can build a freestanding pillar like that for a fraction of the cost."

And when trying to achieve a natural look in a wall, forget about straight lines and angles. "Curves are a big design trend," Nancy Johnson says, adding contractors include curves on two-thirds or more of their projects, especially when it comes to freestanding walls.

"More formal designs use angles and straight lines, but customers like curves because they give a more natural look," Thompson says. "In my opinion, it also makes the wall a little more inviting."

OTHER BUILDING BLOCKS. When it comes to construction materials, contractors have several options beyond concrete segmental retaining walls. When selecting materials, contractors should stick to what they're comfortable with, and then use what best matches customer preferences and retinage requirements, as well as what fits the landscape.

It's difficult to argue the popularity of segmental retaining walls, especially the tumbled products. But despite the stone-like appearance the stressed concrete products offer, some customers still want the real thing.

Thompson builds retaining walls made of landscape timbers, natural stone and segmental block units. He estimates about 50 percent of the retaining walls he builds are natural stone, 40 percent are concrete and 10 percent are timber. He says natural stone is most popular with residential customers. "A lot of homeowners have stone on their houses and they want something that reflects it in their landscapes," he says.

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Although a large portion of Leid's builds retaining walls with segmental blocks, he also still sees a strong desire for walls made of natural stone such as lannonstone and fieldstone. This is especially true for lannonstone. "We work in an area with a lot of lannonstone, so there is still a lot of that stone used for walls," he says.

Yet some customers still prefer the look of timber retaining walls. Although he does build some timber walls, Thompson says the material isn't as popular as it was in the past. This is partially due to timber's shorter life span compared with other materials. "Timbers rot after 10 to 15 years and are going to need to be replaced, whereas the concrete manufactured blocks are pretty much permanent," he says.

In addition to customer preferences, sometimes the choice of material depends on what the wall will be retaining. "When we have minimal retainage, or a wall less than 3 feet high, we can go with natural stone," Thompson says. But if the retaining wall is higher than 3 feet, he will push more of the concrete segmental units to customers. Because the product is interlocking, he says it offers more security. "The liability on natural walls is a little higher," he explains.

Sometimes the material choice is dictated by the natural surroundings. Working in the mountains of North Carolina, retaining walls are an integral part of any landscape for John Thelen, vice president, Landmark Landscapes, Arden, N.C. "Here in the mountains, there is a much higher need for retaining walls," he says.

Thelen designs his retaining walls to match the beauty of the natural landscape, which is why he uses boulders from his area. "We have a tremendous amount of landscape boulders available to us so we use them for our retaining walls," he says, adding the boulders range in size from that of a watermelon to that of a car. "You get the structure with the gravity wall and the face is all stone. Using the boulders speaks of the mountains. We use elements from the native landscape, so it evokes a sense of place and fits in with the natural surroundings."

COST CONSIDERATIONS. Retaining wall installation can be a profitable service for any landscape contractor, with most contractors striving for

about a 35 to 40 percent gross profit margin, according to Chad Johnson.

Even better news is retaining wall installation shows no signs of a slowing down. "A majority of the contractors we talk to forecast that their business in retaining walls will keep increasing, rather than stay the same or decrease," Nancy Johnson says.

But to make money on retaining wall installation, contractors must price the job properly. This means correctly estimating labor and material costs, which can be tricky.

One of the biggest factors when estimating how long an installation will take is site accessibility. It's also something contractors new to retain-

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ing walls overlook. For example, say a homeowner wants a 100-foot linear wall with no special design elements. "That might typically cost \$16 to \$20 per square feet to install, so that's what contractors will quote," Chad Johnson says. "But they don't consider if the site is accessible to their machinery. Will the crew have to carry blocks

to the wall site? If so, that will make the job longer, which adds cost."

Many concrete segmental retaining walls are installed for \$20 to \$30 per square foot, he says. But this pricing varies on local competition and what part of the country a contractor is located. "I've seen commercial contractors in Texas install walls for \$13

to \$15 per square foot," he says. "I've seen contractors dealing in high-end residential on the East Coast charge \$25 to \$40 per square foot."

When pricing segmental retaining walls and estimating material costs, contractors should remember to include all the blocks in segmental retaining walls. "Many times, contractors will forget about block below grade, or buried block," says French.

Thompson charges from \$15 to \$45 per square foot, depending on whether the wall is timber, concrete or natural stone. "If you're doing a large retaining wall, natural stone is usually a little more expensive," he says. "If you're just doing a small wall to accent a landscape bed, natural stone is usually less expensive."

Thelen prices his boulder retaining walls on tonnage, rather than square footage. He charges about \$190 to \$250 per ton, depending on the wall's size. His crew typically consists of two members – one person operating an excavator with a claw while another stays on the ground. "Generally, they can do about 1 ton per hour per man," he says.

When selling retaining walls, contractors should be aware of upgrading opportunities – such as curves, steps, lights and columns. These creative touches add profit to jobs, as well as help clients achieve the intended look. Keep in mind clients only buy one to two retaining walls in their lives, so it's likely they are unaware of the available new products.

The increased trend in freestanding walls also offers an opportunity for contractors to add profit on patio installations.

"When homeowners are breaking up their concrete patios and putting in pavers, contractors can offer to add a freestanding wall," Nancy Johnson says. "It's a great opportunity for contractors because they're already there putting in the base. Edging the patio with a freestanding wall makes a nice package for the homeowner and it's profitable for the contractor." □

For information about the newest retaining wall and hardscape products, see "Don't Hold Back" on page 106.

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Visit the July Online Extras section for more photos of retaining wall designs.



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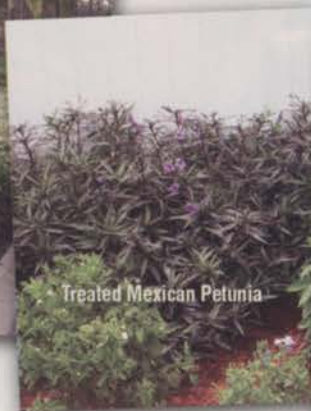
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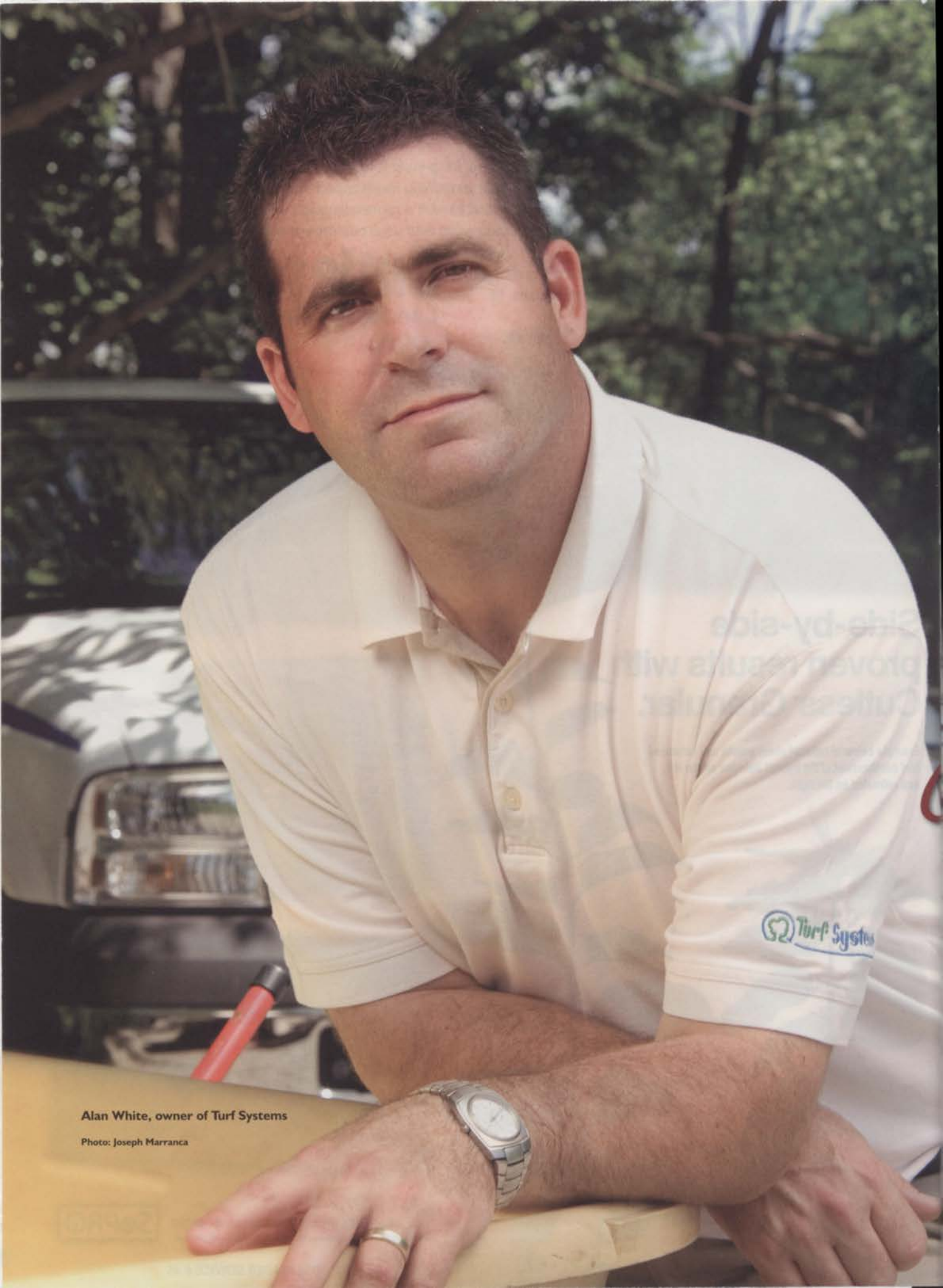


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Alan White, owner of Turf Systems

Photo: Joseph Marranca



Alan White battles pesticide bans while keeping business in the black. Plus, an update on the Canadian lawn care struggle and how it affects U.S. LCOs on page 48.

the

good

FIGHT

M

any customers today ask Alan White a different question when he sells them lawn care services: "Can the products you use on my lawn hurt my children?"

Though this type of query is occasionally posed by U.S. consumers as well, the environmental climate in Canada has pushed this inquiry to the forefront. "It's the first thing they ask me," says White, owner, Turf Systems, Burlington, Ontario. "When I tell them I have a 3-year-old and a 4-year-old myself, and that I wouldn't be doing my job if I didn't think it was safe, suddenly they look at me as a human again vs. just a business owner out to hurt their families to make money."

In Canada, although new product releases are controlled through Health Canada's Pest Management Regulatory Agency (similar to the U.S. EPA), lawn care operators (LCOs) deal with consumer doubt about pesticides created by activists regularly. When LCOs obtain customers, they must adapt their programs based on each municipality's specific pesticide bylaws, more than 100 of which have popped up since a 2001 Supreme Court of Canada decision gave cities the right to manage product use over the provinces or federal government.

by nicole wisniewski | deputy editor



turf systems

OWNER: Alan White **FOUNDED:** 1991 **EMPLOYEES:** 8**GREATEST LABOR CHALLENGE:** Finding individuals who choose lawn care as a career.**SERVICE MIX:** 60% chemical lawn care (70% turf nutrient management and 30% pest control), 35% snow and ice removal services and 5% irrigation.**CLIENT MIX:** 75% residential, 25% commercial
REVENUE BREAKOUT:

2006/2007 Expected:\$850,000 to \$1 million

2005 Revenue:\$750,000

2004 Revenue:\$600,000

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While some companies eliminate lawn care from their service menus to avoid these conflicts and others sit back waiting to see how far the regulations will go before reacting, White refined his niche as a lawn care specialist and became an active industry advocate. Six years ago, when other local LCOs grumbled over how they could possibly offer anything but a traditional five-step lawn care program that included fertilization, and weed and insect control, White challenged them. "I offer an Integrated Pest Management (IPM) program where fertilization is the main ingredient and insecticides and herbicides are used responsibly when problems are found. And I'm profitable at it. It's a solution that can work."

The result is a \$750,000 business that is successfully adapting to the changing political climate, and is teaching others how to do the same.

HAVING A PLAN. Since he was 12 years old, White spent his free time

working outdoors on farms and then with a grounds crew on a local golf course during the summers.

ChemLawn lured him into the lawn care industry in 1988, "opening me up to a new business model," White says. "On the 150 acres of golf course we managed, most people didn't want to see the grounds crew. But in the urban market, each customer wanted me to help them with their little patch of parkland."

After two years with ChemLawn, White saw an opportunity to merge his technical golf course and residential lawn care background with his risk-taking entrepreneurial spirit and started Turf Systems in 1991. He spent six months analyzing other companies to uncover their secrets and drafting his business plan. "Most of my time was spent evaluating how I was going to market my company and present it to the public," White explains, defining his idea of a successful company as one with longevity and consistency



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that is a market leader. "I spent a lot of time worrying about how my decisions would affect me 10 years from now vs. just 10 days from now."

Many young business professionals thought White was "crazy for worrying so much about the future," he says. When he started Turf Systems, like many other LCOs he was a small business owner who answered phones and worked in the field during the day, managing paperwork and invoices at night. Despite his size, White insisted on creating a business with a blend of large company corporate structure and small company attention to detail.

He provides the big business feel by distributing a consistent image to customers in his marketing materials, advertising and uniform and truck signage, and by not attaching himself to the business. "It's not my name or my picture or what I do that I advertise – it's our team concepts that I promote," White says. "That's how companies like Scotts and ChemLawn

position themselves, and that's the structure I followed. I presented myself as a business with staying power."

To bring local flair to his business, White established a partnering concept with customers. "We place a lot of emphasis on regular communication, teaching customers about their role in proper mowing and watering to enhance their lawn care program," he says, boasting a consistent 90-percent annual client renewal rate as a result.

Keeping an eye on the future and smartly positioning his company paid off as the pesticide battle heated up across Canada.

A TURNING POINT. When White started his business, Hudson, Montreal was just passing their bylaw, banning the cosmetic use of pesticides, but it was wrapped up in the legal system for Turf Systems' first 10 years. The final, unfavorable ruling kicked in just as White was "approaching my sweet spot of growth" at \$300,000.

"Every business gets to a point where they go from a one-man to a two-man operation where systems are starting to fall into place and the owner knows he needs to grow and look at his next set of challenges," White says. "This 10-year mark was one of my first big transitions and, unfortunately, it coordinated with the time when the pesticide bylaws were heating up."

Instead of ignoring the issue or saying "it'll never happen to me," which is what a lot of LCOs in larger cities thought, White made a choice. "We were stereotyped in a corner and there were two options we could take – follow the status quo or participate, get our peers involved and identify solutions to the problems we were facing," he says. "I chose the latter."

In the meantime, IPM was being identified as a resolution to the pesticide controversy. Compared to a traditional lawn care program, IPM is a service where technicians – or spe-

continued on page 45, sidebar on page 44

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irrigation: expanding the IPM concept

The three components of integrated pest management (IPM) are proper fertilization, water management and pesticide use as necessary.

Alan White, owner, Turf Systems, Burlington, Ontario, had systemized IPM on the lawn care side of the business, providing his clients' turf with adequate feeding, pest monitoring and treatment. He also educates them on proper mowing, and they seem to understand this well. But when it comes to the irrigation component, his customers don't always comprehend how much water their turf really needs despite regular education from White.

This year, White implemented an IPM-based irrigation maintenance service as a means to help clients who don't grasp turf watering practices, and enable them to protect their investment in IPM-focused lawn care.

With this four-step irrigation maintenance program, which can cost clients between \$250 and \$300 a year based on the size of the irrigation system, a Turf System's technician looks at the system mechanically (starting the system up in the spring, blowing it out and shutting it down in the fall and checking for broken heads) and from a horticulture perspective (inspecting and adjusting the system as the season and plant material requires).

Turf Systems has acquired roughly 100 irrigation maintenance customers so far this year, bringing in an irrigation specialist with golf course experience to assist in this division.

The company also started offering irrigation installation as part of its desire to diversify and add value to its existing client base this spring, adding that the company has sold half a dozen jobs so far.



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Application Dates: 3 Jun, 15 Jun, 29 Jun
Spray Interval: 14 or 28
Spray Volume (gal/1000 sq ft): 1.1

Partial data shown.

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continued from page 43

cialists, as White calls them – have to scout for the cause first and spot treat after making a diagnosis instead of broadcast spreading various products to prevent or fix a variety of problems.

White, who is a big skeptic when it comes to the word “can’t,” had been using this concept since his business’ inception after learning it in the golf market and via turf courses. So when the industry expressed doubt about its permanence, he felt compelled to respond. “Some lawn care operators were saying, ‘I can’t do IPM. It’ll be more expensive to operate and customers won’t get it,’” White says. “I said, ‘I’ve been doing it for 10 years and I am making money.’”

But convincing the industry and homeowners that IPM was viable wasn’t easy. White realized that even after a decade of business, activists and consumers grouped him with the competition despite the fact that he offered a different end product. “I recognized that with my experience

I could help steer the IPM concept or be grouped into another solution – maybe even the wrong solution – with everyone else,” he says.

After Landscape Ontario Executive Director Tony DiGiovanni asked him to present his IPM approach to the lawn care arm of the association, White agreed and has since been leading the charge, chairing this division for the past three years, helping structure the IPM Council of Canada (of which he is currently director and treasurer) four years ago and assisting in the council’s creation of the IPM Accreditation Program in 2002 (For more information, see *Canada’s Changing Landscape* on page 48).

THE DIFFERENCE. The reason IPM is working for Turf Systems is because revenue is attached to services – not products, White says. “Customers hire us as a service company,” he explains, adding that the company is 70-percent fertility and 30 percent pest con-

trol. “There are no guarantees on how much product we will use or what we will do when we get there except that the end result will be a healthy lawn.”

White compares his IPM service pricing to that of cleaning a house. “In house cleaning, they charge a flat fee based on the size of your home,” he says. “They don’t charge you more because they used more Mr. Clean or Pledge or Windex this time vs. last time. Similarly, with IPM we analyze every lawn we do and each one gets a different level of pest control. I charge a flat fee to come to your home and take care of your lawn. It doesn’t matter if you need weed control and your neighbor doesn’t.”

Turf Systems has four specialists in the field tending to 2,000 customers (75 percent of which are residential and 25 percent of which are commercial). These specialists are also trained in irrigation services so they can contribute to both divisions when necessary.

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up to 3,000 square feet is \$200 to \$250, representing half of Turf Systems' client base. But the company does have clients with estate properties ranging from a 1/2 acre up to 30 acres, and those clients pay anywhere from \$500 to \$8,000 a year. White has increased prices only 3 percent in the last six years and 5 percent in the last 10 years.

AN OWNER'S WORTH. When White started getting more active in the Canadian lawn care industry battle six years ago, he spent less time on his business and more time on the industry (from 30 up to 80 percent on the industry during the most urgent times of trying to make a difference on bylaw outcomes). Today, White spends a more balanced 85 percent of his time on Turf Systems and 15 percent of his time on the industry.

This time away forced White to let his business run on its own. "I had to implement systems to enable it to function without me," he says. Today,

White's main goal as an owner is to take the systems he's developed and put them into a procedures manual so existing and senior employees have a reference and new hires can more easily replicate them. "Stepping back to let the company move on its own built my team's confidence. Without knowing it at the time I was building a business that didn't stop when I left.

"Today, a lot of clients don't know who I am anymore," White continues, "and that's a good thing."

White intentionally pushes the image of his company as Turf Systems vs. White's Lawn Care. "Many of our customers think that the specialist who tends to their lawns is the owner, and that enables me to continue working on the business and the industry to ensure we're prepared for more changes in the future," he says.

With a structured business plan in place, working on the industry's improvement is actually more challenging, White admits, adding what he thinks

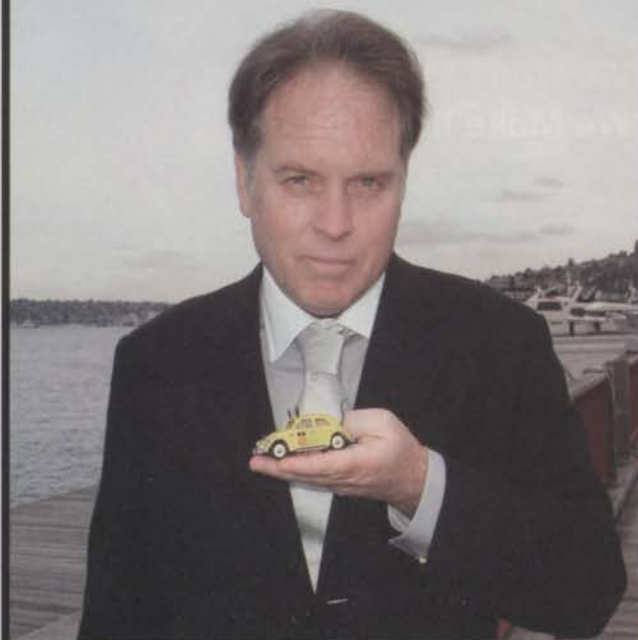
drives an activist is their fervor for the message they deliver. "Some activists truly speak passionately about what they believe – even if we know it's not true or they are not basing their theories on scientific fact," he says. "And this empowers them to spread their message. It frustrated me that our industry wasn't standing up with the same passionate message for green spaces. I couldn't *not* do anything about it."

"We all have a choice – we can choose to be leaders or followers," he adds. "The risk of being a follower is we don't know who's leading us, and this could very well put us out of business. But if we are the leaders, we dictate our own paths and our businesses can move forward. Then we become what we already are – the true environmentalists." ^{LL}

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Find more information on Turf Systems' snow division, technician hiring practices and business philosophies in the July Online Extras section.

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CANADA'S *changing* LANDSCAPE

What do you say when you are defending your services to a doctor who says he's treating patients who have cancer as a result of pesticides? What about a mother who lost her child to leukemia and blames the lawn care industry? Or a nature-lover who claims chemical use over the years is causing a toxic build-up that is contributing to environmental depletion?

The answers to these questions do not come easy. Forget what the Environmental Protection Agency and numerous other research tells you about pesticide safety with proper use. Forget that gallons of a pesticide product typically contain 99 percent water and only 1 percent of the active ingredient. Forget that each turf and ornamental active ingredient brought to market today requires 10 to 12 years of research, \$150 million and more than 200 tests to meet federal and state regulatory requirements. Forget about science.

by nicole wisniewski | deputy editor





U.S. LCOs: what can you do to prevent pesticide bans?

After battling the pesticide issue for nearly 15 years (and intensely for five) Canadian lawn care operators (LCOs) have a long list of advice for U.S. LCOs.

First, realize that "the conflict is a "ground game," says Jill Fairbrother of Fairbrother & Partners Incorporated, a public affairs company that is working with Scotts and Monsanto. "Challenges are overcome locally by addressing concerns and helping shape opinions."

Burlington, Ontario-based LCO Alan White offers some suggestions. "Phone up the mayor's office and ask to meet with him," says the owner of Turf Systems. "Participate in community events that your local government finds important. It might not help you today, but it will definitely help you tomorrow."

In addition to local politicians, bond with celebrity lawn and garden experts, health and environment scientists and doctors, as well as members from other related industries, Fairbrother suggests.

Foster good relationships with the media, as well, Fairbrother recommends. "By acting now, U.S. LCOs

can prevent precedents," she says. "Every bad piece of local regulation prevented is a positive precedent for good legislation."

Once these relationships are formed, however, LCOs have to know how to respond to questions and concerns. Frank Gasperini, director of state affairs for RISE (Responsible Industry for a Sound Environment), a national trade association representing specialty pesticide and fertilizer product manufacturers, suggests some key rules U.S. LCOs should follow.

- Respond positively to every question.
- Take pride in what you do and share the benefits of your service.
- Train and prepare everyone in your company to carry positive images to the public.
- Don't retreat from a challenge and always correct false or negative statements about our industry and your business.
- Don't pass the buck when called upon to defend your business and its practices.

Instead, think about motherhood and apple pie. Think about the sweet sound of birds chirping in the trees and children laughing and playing in the back yard. Think about the fear that results when seemingly credible people voice their concerns. Think about the doubt that is drummed up when misinformation is left unchallenged and becomes conventional wisdom.

Fighting romantic notions about family, nature and the outdoors that have been ingrained in most people since birth doesn't work. "When people are having a hard time understanding an issue, they can't comprehend the information being thrown at them from both sides so they go with their gut – and their gut usually tells them to stick to sentimental comforts," explains Alan White, owner, Turf Systems, Burlington, Ontario.

Welcome to Canada.

Since the activists' anti-pesticide campaign escalated as a result of a 2001 Supreme Court of Canada decision that granted municipalities the right to manage pesticide use over the provincial or federal governments, unprepared lawn care operators felt the sting and took the defensive approach.

For years they fought to stop municipalities from passing anti-pesticide bylaws and lost. Today, more than 35

can better broadcast their message. Improved communication and increased industry participation is enabling them to better control bylaw outcomes.

This is what you're up against, U.S. lawn care operators (LCOs). Though all may seem quiet on the home front, "activists are engaged in U.S. politics as well as in Canada, and they talk to each other – there are no borders when it comes to activists," explains Tony DiGiovanni, executive director, Landscape Ontario, a Canadian green industry association. "The Internet has enabled their communication to become rapid and effective. I have no doubt that the fight will come to the U.S. – it's only a matter of time."

TOO FAST, TOO FURIOUS. In Canada, activists have been pushing an anti-pesticide message for years – DiGiovanni takes it all the way back to the 1960s release of Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* that examined pesticides and their assumed effects on declining songbird populations in the United States. "It's a powerful book, and it inspired some activists groups, particularly coalitions against pesticides, to get started," he says.

Chris Lemcke blames unprofessional LCOs for the increased sensitivity to the issue. The techni-

director, CropLife Canada and executive director, Urban Pest Management Council of Canada, which represents the manufacturers, formulators and distributors of specialty pest management products. "The general population was asking legislators to do more concerning the pesticide issue, so we became the poster child for municipal power in an accidental way," she says.

Once the Supreme Court of Canada made its unfavorable verdict in 2001, "any doubt municipalities had about regulating pesticide use disappeared," DiGiovanni says.

And according to Jill Fairbrother of Fairbrother & Partners Incorporated, a public affairs company that is working with Scotts and Monsanto (both industry pesticide suppliers), "precedent matters, no matter how small." So the Hudson bylaw, affecting a population of only 5,000, inspired a series of other pesticide-restricting regulations almost immediately, each one different from the next. Some permitted only less-effective "natural" products, such as beet juice and corn gluten, while others allowed some pesticide use but to limited locations and at limited times of the year or day.

Lawn care operators afraid of accruing fines (which are roughly \$255 for each offense and can rise

"When an activist stands up and says to a lawmaker, 'You can't choose the aesthetics of your lawn over our country's children,' how do you think he's going to respond? How do you respond as a lawn care operator?" – Tony DiGiovanni

percent of the population lives under regulations restricting pesticide use, including all of Quebec.

But like two grade school-aged children who get in a fight on the playground, one of them must walk away or the fight escalates. "Fighting just creates polarization and alienates the consumer," White says. "When we are fighting against a wholesome message our industry starts to look like the bully even though we didn't start the fight."

Believing in the principle "the one who walks away from the fight is usually the most successful," Canadian LCOs have stepped back to reconsider what they truly stand for – well-maintained green spaces – and how they

cal coordinator for turf operations, Weed-Man, Scarborough, Toronto, remembers hearing about a Montreal-based homeowner who started an anti-pesticide campaign after an LCO sprayed pesticides on a windy day, supposedly hitting her child with the drift. "She was concerned and no one was able to ease her worries or give her any answers so she became a crusader against pesticides, saying she would do whatever she could to get rid of them in Quebec, if not the world," he says.

These matters combined with Canadian municipalities' quest for local power over the federal and provincial governments escalated the issue, according to Deb Conlon, managing



up to \$5,000 for multiple offenses if the company is taken to court by the municipality, Lemcke says) tried to grasp all the various nuances in each municipality's bylaw while still operating their businesses efficiently.

Threatened by the attack on their companies, LCOs became increasingly discouraged. As each new municipality considered drafting a bylaw, they desperately attempted to change lawmakers' minds, urging their customers to call and express their concerns as well. Coalitions were quickly formed – some sustaining and others falling apart. Thousands of dollars were spent by pesticide manufacturers, LCOs and industry organizations. But nothing



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cover story

was strong enough to prevent the city of Toronto, with a population of 2.48 million, to become the largest to pass one of the most aggressive bylaws, forbidding weed control entirely and limiting insect control only when "the presence of pests are in numbers or under conditions that involve an immediate or potential risk of substantial loss or damage" in 2003.

Today, 113 bylaws are in place across Canada and 12 more are at draft stages, pending adoption. More than 11 million Canadians, approximately 35 percent of the country's population, are under pesticide restrictions.

TWISTING WORDS. In addition to creating confusion about lawn care products in general, activists are attaching terms like "nonessential" to pesticides to "trivialize what LCOs do" in Canada, and make lawn care services vulnerable to bylaw regulation, DiGiovanni says. "Lawns have become the target, being positioned as only 'cosmetic,'" Fairbrother adds.

With these words activists have managed to engage human and animal health and environmental allies, such as the Sierra Club, the World Wildlife Fund and the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment. By attaching health issues to the terms "cosmetic" and "nonessential" and pressuring government officials, activists have been able to "win the media war with junk science reports, lawn care 'mishaps' and an 'it's for the kids' message," Fairbrother explains.

This is where many LCOs were left nearly speechless in front of lawmakers. "When an activist stands up and says to a lawmaker, 'You can't choose the aesthetics of your lawn over our country's children,' how do you think he's going to respond? How do you respond as a lawn care operator?" DiGiovanni questions.

In addition to lacking the fund-raising needed to spread a positive industry message, Canadian LCOs were continually challenged because "they could not achieve a consensus; public opinion was not in their favor; the media was non-responsive to the 'sound science' story; legal options failed; and animal, human health and child welfare concerns trumped 'big business,'" Fairbrother says.

One of the things the Canadian lawn care industry was doing wrong, according to Ken Pavely, Landscape Ontario's Integrated Pest Management

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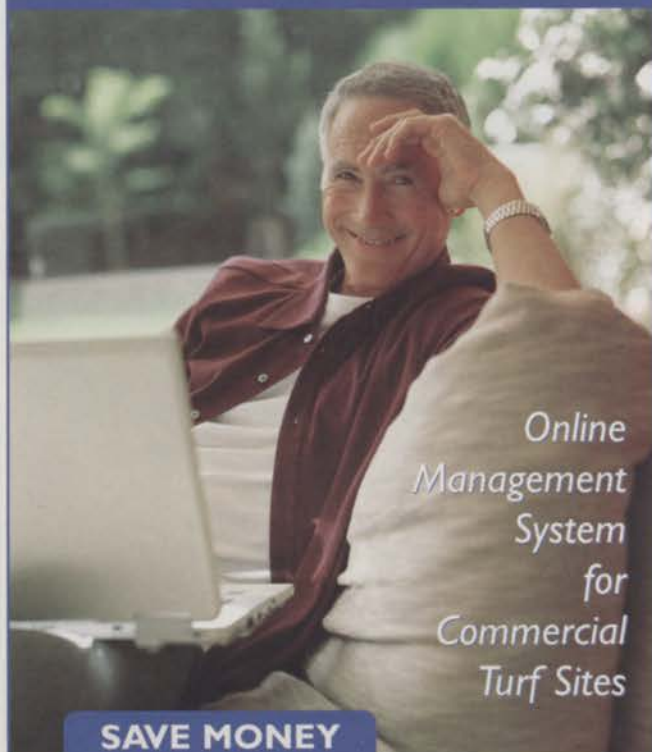
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(IPM) and turf specialist, was defending products instead of responsible pesticide use.

The industry took a step back and looked at the messages they were spreading compared to what the activists were saying. "Ninety to 99 percent of the communication from both groups is the same," DiGiovanni says, pointing to promoting green spaces as the common thread. "It only breaks down when the industry believes it can still use pesticide products safely, judiciously and responsibly and the activists want zero use."

Because healthy environment messages were coming more from the activists than the industry, consumers' trust in LCOs plunged. "It was time for us to embrace our jobs as true environmentalists within a structure that promoted green spaces, cultural practices, stewardship and responsible use of pesticides as a required part of that," DiGiovanni says, pointing to the practice of IPM as a solution that incorporates all of these points.

As a result, LCOs united with representatives from the golf course, municipal park, structural pest control and agriculture industries to form the IPM Council of Canada four years ago. In many of the early bylaws, lawn care was the industry most affected, but municipalities are continuing the anti-pesticide push into other markets as well. For this reason, for an IPM Council to be successful it had to have a voting member from each industry on board in order to create one consistent IPM message and grow consumer recognition of the concept, White says. The same year the council was formed, it established an IPM Accreditation Program. The volunteer program, which now has approximately 150 engaged and 60 accredited lawn care companies (which represents 70 percent of the lawn care industry in southern Ontario), collects businesses' IPM program details and statistics annually and then physically audits them on their IPM implementation every three years. "The program has teeth – if you want to be accredited you have to go through the same process everyone else goes through," DiGiovanni says.

The intention is to have accreditation in each industry. The golf course market is on board and the municipal parks IPM accreditation initiative is almost complete, White says, adding that the next phase is to incorporate the arboriculture, structural pest control and agriculture markets. "Ideally, at the end of the day, IPM accreditation will not be unique to our sector."

In addition to branching the program out into other markets, the industry is also pushing to make it mandatory by provincial governments as a part of the licensing system so all Canadian companies follow the same rules. British Columbia has become one of the first provinces to accept it, White says, adding that he is disappointed that the Ontario government has so far rejected it. "We want to raise the bar of professionalism in the industry and bring trust back," he explains. "This is one way to do it. Unfortunately, we are not as close as we'd like to be to getting this issue looked at provincially."

While "IPM accreditation is definitely a good idea because it helps us talk about managing risk, which is one of the hot button issues," Conlon adds, "at the end of the day, it's how involved we are at the local government level that matters because that LCO is seen as a vote to that counselor. If we aren't there, someone else is – and they are spreading an anti-pesticide message."

That's why more Canadian LCOs are reaching decision makers at a local level. "In the towns where local LCOs are regularly engaged in their communities, we have a much



better success rate of drafting a bylaw that includes IPM and responsible pesticide use," DiGiovanni says.

More Canadian LCOs realize their municipal counselors want the area to look good, so they are pushing "activism from an industry point of view," DiGiovanni explains. "They are saying, 'We want to educate you on the value of the industry from an economic, environmental and lifestyle benefit. We are the true environmentalists – we plant trees and gardens and tend to them and here's the reality of how we do it. We are stepping up to plate and dealing with issues of trust. We want you to know we care about the environment and are here to work with you to create and maintain green spaces in the safest way possible.'"

These messages also need to be spread to the consumer, which is why Canadian LCOs are increasing public education. Landscape Ontario, for instance, is using popular local garden communicators, such as Charlie Dobbin and Denis Flanagan of Home & Garden Television's *One Garden, Two Looks*, to help conduct free seminars on "Healthy Lawns, Healthy Gardens." "They are fronting our message about the value of green spaces to the public to grab people's attention and share a positive viewpoint," DiGiovanni says.

THE AFTERMATH. Has the anti-pesticide issue affected the Canadian lawn care industry? The answer to this question is not a straight forward one.

First, while the U.S. green industry is valued economically at nearly \$40 billion, according to the 2005 report *Economic Impacts on the Green Industry in the United States*, the Canadian green industry is valued at only \$10 billion, DiGiovanni says. Within Canada, the province of Ontario makes up 50 percent of the country. So, there are approximately 2,600 lawn care companies and 26,000 licensed operators in Canada, 1,300 and 13,000 of which, respectively, are in Ontario. These numbers do not include the park systems or golf courses, DiGiovanni points out.

DiGiovanni measures industry success by sales of nursery materials to landscape contractors, and the numbers have been consistently positive. In 2002, nursery sales to landscape

contractors were \$101,064,000, rising to 110,160,000 in 2003 and 131,011,000 in 2004, according to the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs. "Economically, we've consistently grown for the last 10 years – from 5 to 14 percent a year," he says.

So, from the numbers side of the equation, the anti-pesticide issue has not negatively affected the industry.

When it comes to individual successes or failures, LCOs who rely on pest control for most of their business model have the most at stake, DiGiovanni says.

But except for the one or two businesses who decide that lawn care as a service is becoming too much for them to handle, "the industry isn't going out of business – there is still opportunity here," Lemcke says. "You just have to find feasible solutions."

For instance, since playable sports fields are still important to Canadian school systems, some LCOs are targeting schools with a niche service of soil improvement, overseeding, aerating and irrigation to improve playability



The average Canadian residence today is now cluttered with weeds. Photo: Alan White

without pesticides. "Schools receive a great deal of pressure from activists because their environment involves children and some LCOs are offering them solutions they can live with," DiGiovanni explains.

Even with new service offerings, Canadian LCOs' profit margins are decreasing because the costs to operate a business have gone up, Pavely says. "If you are hand pulling weeds vs. spraying for them, your labor costs go way up," he explains, adding that clients have been accepting price increases in the 10 to 15 percent range before balking at the rise.

continued on page 58

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continued from page 55

Though business growth appears stable, aesthetically, there have been some dramatic changes.

Toronto and Montreal used to be well known for their garden paradises, lush lawns and clean streets. They used to rival U.S. nature spots like Chicago's Millennium Park and New York's Central Park.

"Now you don't see flower-lined boulevards or finely landscaped city gates — you barely see the grass cut anymore in some public areas," White says, describing a roadway median where he recently saw a shopping cart filled with trash disguised in grass that was nearly 4 feet high.

"Recently, I had a friend tell me that 10 or 15 years ago, Toronto was the cleanest city he had ever seen," Lemcke says. "I'm ashamed of it now."

Pesticide limitations have forced parks and city workers to eliminate pesticides completely or use alternative methods, such as organics.

As a result, the weeds are taking

over. "There are some curbs and roadway medians where the weeds are 10 inches to 1 foot high, and people are dumping stuff in those areas," Lemcke shares. "The employees can't keep up with mowing down the growth because they don't have enough manpower or money."


The city of Toronto recently spent an additional \$1 million on new mowers to try and tidy its green areas, but "a parks employee I spoke with recently said it hasn't helped much at all," Pavely says.

Schools are also in "terrible shape," Lemcke points out. "We rarely find schools doing anything to control the weeds. If they do, they are using organic programs and that requires a lot more input and time. Some schools don't have the money for that."

Pavely has been looking into property values in Montreal to see if the lack of aesthetics has caused any negative effects on housing. "Since Montreal is a hot market right now,

I can't tell if there is a direct effect yet but I'm keeping my eye on it," he says. "The neighborhoods I've been driving through look awful."

Whether or not consumers are concerned by the changes in their surroundings is a question that has not been answered yet, DiGiovanni reports.

The ideal future of this issue in Canada is that the provinces or federal government will take back control and create one rule for all to reduce confusion and the amount of money being spent on bylaw creation, debate, implementation and management, DiGiovanni says. But when or if this will happen is unknown, and because the municipalities desire power and the provinces are so willing to give it up, Conlon is unsure this is a viable possibility for the future. "The society's fear of pesticides will not go away," DiGiovanni says. "We have to continue to embrace the IPM philosophy and responsible and professional pesticide use." 

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Rain Delay

When the skies darken and the clouds break should a landscape contractor pack it up for the day or resign to the fact that he's going to get a little wet? *Lawn & Landscape Message Board* users share their tips and insights for how they manage grass cutting duties when it rains.

"Rain, rain, go away," or so the popular children's rhyme begins. Some landscape contractors may finish that refrain with, "I'll mow the lawn another day," while others may add, "I'll cut the grass anyway."

So what school of thought is correct? And does it really matter whether crews cut in the rain or wait for blue skies?

Lawn & Landscape Message Board participants recently debated whether or not to continue grass cutting duties in the rain and what the pros and cons are to that decision. It was top of mind for many contractors in light of the mid to late May rains that caused the worst flooding in New England since the 1930s, dumping more than a foot of precipitation on the region over a five-day period.

KEEP THE BLADES SPINNING First and foremost, many contractors recommended that everyone in the lawn care and maintenance business should be vigilant about observing local weather forecasts because these predictions – for clear skies or gray – provide a starting point. "If a competent weather forecast says it's going to rain on Wednesday, then common sense will tell you, 'Hey, we need to mow some of Wednesday's lawns on Tuesday and the ones we don't get to we do on Thursday,'" says Andrew Aksar, president of Outdoor Finishes in Walkersville, Md.

But many contractors say they still send crews out when it's raining,

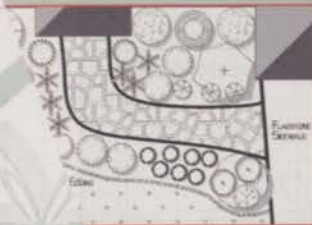
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especially if they are already out in the field. "I don't run inside at the first raindrop," posts Michigan-based landscape contractor Jeff Patterson. "If it rains all day and it's steady, then I don't cut. But if I'm 10 to 15 miles from the shop, it's a big waste to run in because of a little rain."

Some contractors say the bigger a contractor's operations, the less flex-

ible they are when it comes to rain delays. "After your company grows larger, you'll soon find it's necessary to mow in the rain or when it is wet," posts Chuck Twist, president of TNT Landscaping and H.O.L.A. Labor Consultants in Stillwater, Okla.

Most contractors, in fact, post they instruct workers to mow in the rain in order to finish that day's route.

However, most say they draw the line during torrential downpours and lightening, of course.

"If it's coming down hard at first light and shows no signs of letting up, then we don't do work," says Rick Brauneis, owner of Vision Designs in Orlando, Fla. "If we're already going at it, we don't stop unless there is lightning in the area."

In addition, some other contractors post to the message board that they don't typically work in the rain because the wet work often results in sick laborers. Patterson, for example, writes into his contracts that he doesn't cut during the rain or when it's wet. Likewise, he makes sure clients understand his policy and that

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"If a competent weather forecast says it's going to rain on Wednesday, then common sense will tell you, 'Hey, we need to mow some of Wednesday's lawns on Tuesday and the ones we don't get to we do on Thursday.'"

- Andrew Aksar

they will eventually get their lawns mowed. "I tell everyone I will fit them in as soon after it rains as possible," Patterson says. "In the past, when my operation was smaller, I had open days that I could just move these missed accounts into. But now that I am running full tilt it's much harder to catch up."

Will Sharp, president of Lawn Dawg Services in Matthews, N.C., disagrees, mentioning he would not recommend a "will not mow in the rain" provision in a contract. "When the guys call and say it is raining I suggest they sit in the truck and eat their lunch," he says. "We mow as

USE READER SERVICE # 51

long as we can and when it's not muddy. When it rains for several days, we will weed or skip the wet spots. Skipping a week due to rain is not an option when the grass is growing."

While he knows cutting in the rain is a necessity, Patterson says it's not always the best practice to follow. First of all, Patterson tells clients he doesn't cut during the rain because the wet clippings make a mess. "Clients are very impressed with this so I don't want to lose the goodwill I get from this," he says.

Secondly, grass clippings on wet pavement surfaces clump up and just don't want to move, so being unable to get an area clean slows the contractor down considerably, Patterson adds. Also, soil compaction is at its highest when the ground is wet.

In addition, cutting during rain is bad for the grass because the water reduces the ability of the mower to cut the grass and increases tearing, which is bad for the plants, Patterson says. Likewise, he says mowing in the rain is bad for the mower blade bearings

and other exposed metal mower parts.

The buildup of wet grass beneath the mower deck means contractors will have additional cleanup duties in order to maintain proper airflow and ensure that the mower baffles are directing air as the manufacturer intended, Patterson says. "As long as I have coverage in my contracts to not cut when it's raining, I'd like to avoid it as long as I have a viable plan to catch up," he shares.

Landscape contractors need to keep their blades spinning, posts Chad Stern, owner of Mowing & More based in Chevy Chase, Md. "Unless the ground is so saturated you can hear the water sloshing under your feet when you walk, you should be able to mow safely," he posts.

Many other contractors worry that, operating in highly competitive markets, delaying mowing because of rain makes them vulnerable to having their business stolen away by more eager competitors. "If you can't get to your clients, they will find someone else and you're stuck trying to find new clients,"

posts Todd Patton, president of Patton Property Maintenance in Haymarket, Va. "The mess and damage is temporary, and the people that worry about it, I've found, are not worth having as clients."

In addition, Stern supplies each employee with a three-piece rain suit, which has proven a worthwhile investment. "They say they work wonderfully when it's raining and really do keep them dry," he says. "The suits costs about \$9 for the set and are worth every penny."

CLIENT APPRECIATION. Do clients care or appreciate whether a landscape contractor cuts in the rain?

Jamie Bush, president of Jamie's Lawn Service in Plano, Texas, fields more hotheaded client complaints for not showing up then for mowing in wet conditions. "So I take the lesser of two evils," he says. "Then I also have a 'Do Not Mow In Wet Conditions' list of people who have complained and we just skip those and hit them the next day." □



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Photos: Toro (left), Bobcat (page 66)

In the Market for a Mini?

Optimize your investment by selecting the right financing options and features for your business.

It's not uncommon for a landscape contractor to be working at a site and look across the street to see his competitor using a compact utility loader to do the same job with fewer employees in less time, says Greg Lawrence, marketing product manager for Toro's Dingo compact utility loader line, Bloomington, Minn.

That scenario would get any contractor asking questions about the equipment's capabilities and cost.

Mini skid-steers and compact utility loaders, which originated in Australia in the 1980s, began popping up in the United States during the 1990s. They've caught on thanks to versatility across various market segments (construction, landscaping, irrigation and others), a greater

presence at rental houses and increased exposure in the field, as illustrated in the scenario above.

At surface level, buying a mini skid-steer is like buying a new car. Choose a brand, select the features and decide whether you're going to lease or own.

But because this purchase can affect your bottom line, you probably won't be as quick to leave the dealership sold on a test drive and free key chain alone.

Fortunately, manufacturers and dealers offer a host of financing options for contractors in the market for minis.

by marisa palmieri | associate editor

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construction equipment

COST CONCERNS. Landscape contractor Jon Andre first became interested in compact utility loaders when he saw one at a trade show. After researching the machines for two years, the president and sole employee of Good Earth Landscaping, Tacoma, Wash., finally purchased one in April 2006.

"I'm a small company, which is why this is a very attractive piece of equipment for me," Andre says of his one-man operation that does less than \$150,000 in annual revenue. "What I lack in employees, I gain in equipment."

One of Andre's concerns, and a concern of many contractors, is how quickly they will see a return on investment for these machines, which range in price from \$12,000 to \$22,000, according to manufacturers. Standard size skid-steers costs anywhere from \$25,000 to \$50,000.

Andre, who estimates a mini skid-steer replaces as many as three employees when it's running, expects it will take five years for his machine to pay for itself. Andre uses the machine for very specific tasks, so he thinks other business owners who use their minis more regularly may recover the cost more quickly.

hands-on research



Renting before buying – whether from a rental house or equipment dealer – is one plus for a contractor considering purchasing a compact utility loader and its attachments, says Greg Lawrence, marketing product manager for Toro's Dingo compact utility loader line, Bloomington, Minn.

Renting was one step in contractor Jon Andre's two-year-long decision-making process.

Andre, the president of Good Earth Landscaping, Tacoma, Wash., tested one compact utility loader brand three times before buying from a different manufacturer.

Jim Olson, president of James Olson Landscaping, Northbrook, Ill., embraces the rent-before-you-buy mentality. "I'm very cautious," he says. "I research what I buy, even with the attachments. Like with the auger I own – I rented it from the dealer first, and realized it could save a lot of time and a lot of employees' backs."

Lawrence offers this renting rule of thumb: "If a contractor is renting a machine three times a month, he's probably better off buying it in the end."

Experts also recommend contractors visit their dealers or attend trade shows for hands-on time with the equipment and to participate in demonstrations.

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Manufacturers say this product line's broad price range is a result of the various options these machines present, namely track or tires, engine type (gas or diesel) and attachment selection. The size of the model also comes into play.

Tracked machines are more expensive than their counterparts on wheels. They're also more popular for landscaping because of superior weight distribution, which is important for driving on turf and soggy areas.

Like with trucks, the gas-vs.-diesel debate depends primarily on personal preference. A diesel engine can add about \$2,000 to a unit's price tag, but manufacturers say diesel engines last longer and are more energy efficient.

"It used to be that the cost of fuel was significantly less with diesel, but it's not necessarily that way any more," says Don Reed, rental division manager for Ramrod Equip-

ment, a division of Leon's Manufacturing Co., Yorkton, Saskatchewan. He estimates about 70 percent of Ramrod's units are sold with gas engines.

Selecting attachments is another crucial step in the purchasing process that affects total cost as well as productivity. "Mini skid-steers are defined by the attachments you put on them," Reed says.

Initially, contractors should choose loader attachments that can be used to complete as many on-site jobs as possible, says Aaron Kleingartner, loader product specialist for Bobcat Co., West Fargo, N.D.

"For example, almost every contractor can use a combination bucket and pallet forks on landscape construction jobs," he says. "They also might find several uses for a soil conditioner, which can be used to clear rock, unwanted weeds, existing turf and create a final grade in preparation for landscaping, planting

seed or laying sod."

Other attachments manufacturers identified as popular with landscape contractors include a leveler for spreading materials and backfilling trenches; a trencher for creating irrigation trenches and drain tiles; and an auger for digging holes for trees, shrubs or fence posts. Attachments range from several hundred to several thousand dollars, manufacturers say (for more information on attachment price points, see "Getting Attached" on page 70).

Most compact utility loaders are sold with a bucket, manufacturers say, adding that it's common for contractors to start out basic and purchase more attachments over time or rent them on an as-needed basis.

"This provides contractors the option of exploring new services, determining whether they fit their businesses with only a minor investment," Kleingartner says (for continued on page 72, sidebar on page 70

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getting attached

The capability of a compact utility loader is defined by its owner's imagination. The variety of attachments available allows contractors to haul, dig, lift and construct their way to new revenue streams and increased productivity. Rental houses and dealers offer dozens of attachments for rent on an as-needed basis, but when it's time to buy, refer to the guideline below for some of the most popular attachments purchased by contractors.

\$ Less than \$1,000 \$\$ \$1,000-\$2,999 \$\$\$ \$3,000+

- \$ Adjustable forks** – Used for carrying materials like pallets, plants, bags of potting soil, peat moss, fertilizer and other bulk items.
- \$ Bucket** – Used for handling and moving materials and for removing soil, leveling and backfilling.
- \$ Leveler** – Grading/land rake used for finishing and spreading topsoil and other landscape materials. Also used for backfilling trenches and carrying jobsite materials.
- \$\$ Auger** – Used for digging when planting trees and shrubs or creating holes for irrigation valve boxes and fence posts. Various bit sizes are available.
- \$\$\$ Soil conditioner** – Several types exist (soil cultivator, power box rake or tiller). They are used to prepare soil for laying sod, seeding, gardening, etc.
- \$\$\$ Trencher** – Used for digging trenches for landscape creation and irrigation and drain tile installation.

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continued from page 68

more information on renting mini skid-steer loaders, see "Hands-On Research" on page 66).

FINANCE RIGHT. Just as contractors have a menu of attachment options to choose from, their financing options run the gamut, as well.

One possibility is customer-sourced financing, where the contractor lines up financing on his own through a local or national bank, financing company or credit union. Financing sources say this method is not the most popular because it can be difficult for a small business to obtain a loan. Also, dealers and manufacturers typically tout more attractive promotional financing deals with low APRs or "no payments for one year."

Andre can attest to difficulty with customer-sourced financing. "Being a small businessman, even though I've been in business for 25 years and even though I have platinum credit,

it's difficult for me to secure a loan on something," he says.

The second option is financing through a dealer, which may be supported by the dealer, manufacturer or local or national bank. "The specific options vary from dealer to dealer, but they may include a conditional

the equipment, it's generally financed in the form of an installment loan with a fixed monthly payment at a fixed rate for a specific number of months. "From an accounting standpoint, this means the buyer can realize full depreciation and interest on the equipment," Adams says.

"I'm a small company, which is why a mini skid-steer is a very attractive piece of equipment for me. What I lack in employees, I gain in equipment." - Jon Andre

sale or finance contract where the contractor owns the equipment or a true or capital lease where the leasing company owns the equipment," says David Adams, manager of retail finance for Toro's Landscape Contractor Business.

When a contractor opts to own

Many manufacturers and their financing partners offer flexible seasonal payment plans designed for contractors who may only be able to make payments during their high-volume months. "Many landscape businesses have seasonal revenue, and the benefit of structuring payment

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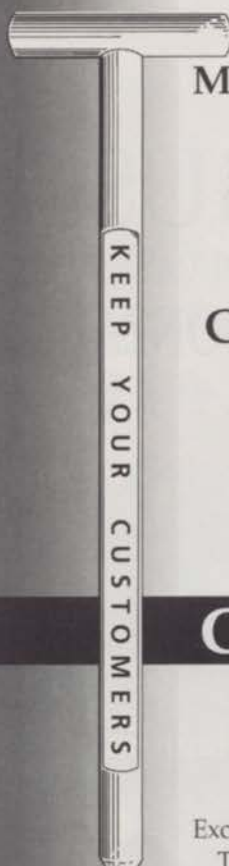
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obligations to correspond with the business revenue stream provides the opportunity to better manage their cash flow needs," says Mark Almeter, vice president of CitiCapital's Bobcat Division, Fargo, N.D.

Despite the many buying options available, leasing has become more popular over the last several years, Reed says, estimating it's a 50/50 split between contractors who choose to lease vs. those who opt to finance. Due in part to the automotive industry's recent push toward leasing, contractors are familiar with the mentality that affordability isn't based on total cost, but what the monthly payments are. "As long as you're bringing in more than you're putting out, you're ahead of the game," Reed says.

In addition to a lower fixed monthly payment, a lease typically offers the benefit of upgrading to a new piece of equipment every few years (which, in theory, creates less main-

tenance-related downtime) and the option to buy at the end of the term for a pre-determined price or return it to the dealer with no obligation.

Also, Toro's Adams adds, "With a true lease, debt is not shown on the contractor's balance sheet and there is no concern about owning equipment they may not permanently need."


However, similar to leasing a vehicle, the lessee can be penalized for returning equipment that's damaged beyond normal wear and tear.

Typically, but not always, equipment leases constrain buyers to specific usage limits that, if exceeded, can rack up penalty payments. Contractors can expect a standard lease agreement to limit usage to 800 to 1,000 hours per year, Almeter says.

Lease agreements usually include a policy that states all of the equipment's normal functions must be in working order upon return. To remedy any damage, lessees pay for the fair market value of repairs.

"The return policy is designed to encourage contractors to maintain the equipment in safe working condition and to prevent the equipment from being abused," Almeter says.

Like with buying a car, there's no catch-all. Jim Olson, president of James Olson Landscaping, Northbrook, Ill., has both leased and bought compact utility loaders. He leased his first compact utility loader eight years ago and then purchased it when the term was up for a \$1 buy-out. This year, Olson financed his second mini through the manufacturer who offered an attractive deal.

As Olson suggests, "Each contractor must decide what's best for their particular situation." 

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Check out a lease-vs.-buy comparison sheet for compact utility loader and mini skid-steer equipment purchasing in the July Online Extras section.

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A Stand-up Favorite

A stand-on mower combines the speed of a riding mower with the agility and maneuverability of a walk-behind and at a fraction of the cost of a zero-turn.

Landscape contractor Daryl Zeka has three 48-inch walk-behind mowers in pristine condition, each with less than 10 hours of use and flawless paint jobs. What's the problem? They're 2 years old and his workers won't touch them since the stand-ons arrived. "We can't get our employees to use the walk-behind mowers now that we have stand-on units," says Zeka, a partner with Boynton Beach, Fla.-based Palm Beach-Broward Landscaping. "The only time they'll use them is when something is absolutely broken."

Since Zeka's firm bought the stand-on mowers eight years ago, they've become indispensable tools. Today, stand-on mowers comprise about 20 percent of Palm Beach-Broward Landscaping's fleet. "I just know the guys are happier using them," he says. "We went to the field

managers and asked them what equipment they needed – all the crews wanted at least one stand-on machine."

Most landscape contractors using stand-on mowers will readily testify to the reliability and functionality of this particular piece of lawn care equipment. From the bigger outfits to the small-sized firms, contractors like the all-in-one machines because they are fast enough to mow big areas quickly and maneuverable enough to get in and cut tight areas.

"The stand-on mower is a very versatile machine, even though your employees may think they're strange if they've never used them before," says

by mark phillips | associate editor



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Steve Pearce, maintenance operations manager for Sebert Landscaping in Bartlett, Ill., which has 90 stand-ons in its fleet. "If you think they would fit in your operation, your employees will get used to using them. After a couple of days, those same guys will never want to cut with anything else."

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Contractors utilize stand-ons for a variety of reasons.

Maneuverability is a major factor, Zeka says. His South Florida firm, on average, mows 20-by-20-foot properties. "You go in there and you cut 1,000 homes and all the front yards are little bitty things," Zeka says. "We don't need

the speed, we need maneuverability. That's the reason we picked the stand-ons. We keep the larger mowers for the backyards, but for the fronts and sides, the stand-on is the way to do it.

your weight from side to side. On an incline, you can stand on one side to keep the machine stable."

The mower's low center of gravity gives the user the ability to lean, says Hal White, vice president of sales and

"The stand-on mower is a very versatile machine, even though your employees may think they're strange if they've never used them before. If you think they would fit in your operation, your employees will get used to using them. After a couple of days, those same guys will never want to cut with anything else." - Steve Pearce

"The stand-on mower is great for the tight areas and in between the homes that are only 10 feet apart," Zeka adds. "It definitely cuts hills much better because you can move

marketing for Wright Manufacturing, Frederick, Md. Because the user of a stand-on is essentially positioned on the zero-turn point, the mower can change directions rapidly, he says.

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USE READER SERVICE # 67

Besides maneuverability, stand-on mowers reduce user fatigue, says Gilbert Pena, segment strategy manager for commercial at John Deere, Moline, Ill. "One of the first questions people have is why would they want to stand when they can sit all day?" he asks. "The answer seems totally contradictory to what you would think.

People who use these will tell you they are less fatigued at the end of the day than they were with sit-downs, believe it or not."

On seated riding mowers, Pena says the backbone takes a beating every time the machine moves over uneven terrain. However, when standing, the operator's legs act as shock

absorbers. "When you watch someone using these, you'll notice the legs are flexing continuously and the body is shifting in accordance with the terrain," he explains. "People who use them will tell you that not only did they become more productive, they are less fatigued as a result."

In addition to their speed, maneuverability and fatigue-reducing aspects, Pearce says price is another attractive benefit to stand-on mowers. Pearce estimates a contractor can pick up a quality stand-on mower for between \$5,700 and \$6,000, which is a savings when compared to the average zero-turn mower, which can start at \$10,000 and go up from there.

However, Pearce sees stand-ons' one drawback: they perform very similar to zero-turn mowers and may make the user overconfident.

"Some guys, because of all the time they spend using the stand-on, begin to master its operation and they feel they can take them into smaller and more challenging areas when they shouldn't," he says. "That takes a toll on the client's turf, often gauging the ground. Those instances are when they should really be using walk-behinds."

Dale Denison, owner of a U.S. Lawns franchise in Overland Park, Kan., started including stand-on mowers in his fleet in March after a crew leader who had used them before suggested it.

"Quite frankly, those two stand-on mowers replaced three walk-behind mowers," he says. "I just think stand-on mowers are quicker and more nimble. Compared to a riding mower, they are easier to work with - it's night and day, and they weigh half as much."

Denison's employees took to them quickly. He scheduled a training session before taking delivery of the machines. He then structured the mowing schedule to allow for on-the-job training. The firm handles about 40 commercial properties a week in an area saturated with retail, light industry, banks and restaurants.

"They were comfortable using them very quickly," he says. "We took our normal one week's mowing schedule and we let them complete it in whatever time it took. We told them to take it slow."

At the time, the grass was growing slowly so it allowed time for training. "They were slower for the first

continued on page 84, sidebar on page 82

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before you buy...

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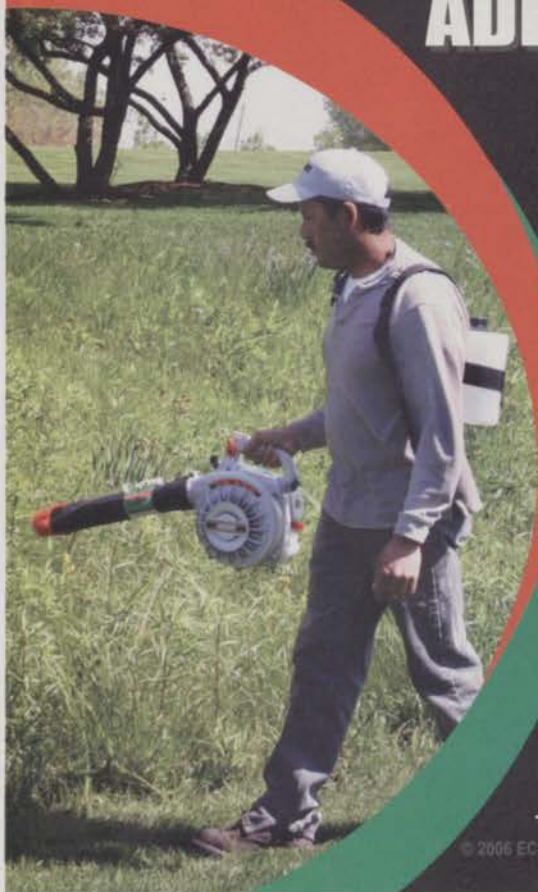
Stand-on mowers may not be for every landscape contractor. Steve Pearce, maintenance operations manager for Sebert Landscaping, Bartlett, Ill., suggests a few points to review to ensure landscape contractors make smart equipment purchases.

CUT. Make sure the machine makes a quality cut, Pearce says. While most stand-on mowers do cut cleanly, Pearce warns that a poor cutting machine cancels out the advantages it brings in efficiency.

QUALITY. A quality machine is worth a higher price because it will go the distance and not ring up excessive repair costs in the long run, Pearce says. Examine how the stand-on mower is made, if there are any downtime issues and the cost for replacement parts.

DEMO. Run a trial stand-on mower through the paces, Pearce advises. "Use it for as long as possible to make sure it's the right fit for your business," he says. "A good demo will allow you to examine issues like comfort, quality-of-cut and usability."

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USE READER SERVICE # 71

continued from page 80

few days," he says, "but within a few days they were right on schedule."

Stand-ons can increase productivity by as much as 20 percent, Denison says. For example, getting off and on the mower to remove debris has become less time-consuming, he says, as well as loading and unloading the machines on the trailer.

"We can turn them around easily inside the trailer," he shares, adding that walk-behinds take longer to maneuver because the bars make them more unwieldy.

And with riding mowers, the controls users have to retract before getting off are the same that have to be moved before loading onto a trailer, Pena says.



Photo: John Deere

"Over a days' time, you've gained 20, 30 or 40 minutes doing several activities and one of those is loading and unloading," he says.

A crew mowing mostly residential accounts typically tends a number of smaller properties, Pena says.

"In one day's time, they will be loading and unloading that trailer easily a dozens times," he says. "Every time you must get off a sit-down unit, it takes multiple steps that aren't there in a stand-on unit."

Stand-ons also can save money in maintenance and fuel costs, Denison says. For example, their greater visibility helps workers avoid hitting objects and damaging the mower.

In addition, by nearly halving the weight of the mowers Denison carries on his trailer, he has saved on gas in his truck.

"I wondered why we were hauling around twice as much weight at \$3 a gallon for gas," Denison says.

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For more information on the added safety benefits of stand-on mowers, as well as making smart purchasing decisions, visit the July Online Extra section.



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USE READER SERVICE # 72

smart irrigation

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Lawn & Landscape



Photos: Rain Bird (left and cover); Toro Irrigation (special section headers)

celebrate

smart irrigation month

Contractors are charged to promote efficient watering practices and create awareness about the growing demands on water resources.

Water conservation is front of mind in arid states in the West where water shortages and irrigation restrictions are a way of life. But smart water application is important nationwide, explains Andy Smith, the Irrigation Association's state and affiliate relations director. "Water, by definition, is a finite resource," Smith says, explaining that only 1 percent of the world's water is available for human use (97 percent is saltwater, 2 percent is locked up in icebergs).

To educate contractors, legislators and end users alike, the Irrigation Association (IA) named July Smart Irrigation Month. In May, an IA delegation took the message to the Capitol to officially declare July as Smart Irrigation Month and raise awareness of efficient practices and technology.

As demand increases and dollars add up, conserving water becomes more than just a blip on policymakers' radar screens. Some municipalities fight over consumption

by enacting irrigation restrictions, such as shutting off the taps or every-other-day watering programs. Experts say both can backfire and spur increased consumption.

Using available technology to police consumption from within the industry is preferable to facing irrigation restrictions designed and imposed by state or local government, experts says.

Preventive water-saving measures, the industry's preferred method, have taken hold in some municipalities. Cases in point: the Santa Barbara Water District (Calif.) program that distributes free weather-based controllers to high-demand households and Florida's rain sensor mandate, which has saved at least 4 billion gallons of water since 1991, according to green industry consultant Jeff Carowitz. Government-sponsored programs like these and Smart Irrigation Month only will boost the public's knowledge of water-wise technology and practices.

Says Smith: "The more we can automate these routines for the consumer, the less we have to rely on human intervention to conserve water."





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Photo: Rain Bird

trickle-down effect

Selling smart irrigation can create water and cost savings, prevent regulation, beautify landscapes and bolster a contractor's bottom line.

There's smart irrigation, and then there's *smart* irrigation.

First, there's the general practice of responsible, efficient, cost-effective water application. The second "smart" refers to the products: the technology-enabled irrigation components that help conserve water without user intervention.

These systems use environmental information – soil moisture, rain, wind, the plants' evapotranspiration (ET) rates, etc. – about a site's microclimate to decide for themselves when to irrigate and when not to, all the time providing the proper amount of water to maintain healthy growing conditions.

Such precise irrigation cultivates lush landscapes and, in turn, satisfied customers. Just ask Lalo Mora, president of Enviroscaping in Santa Barbara, Calif.

Mora "got smart" five years ago when he began installing ET-based irrigation controllers as part of a study conducted by the Santa Barbara Water District to collect hard data about the budding technology. Mora started selling these

units on the open market two years ago, and he hasn't sold one "dumb" system since.

He estimates self-adjusting controller sales added 10 percent to his \$1.2 million in revenue last year – that's not including the savings he incurred by reducing the labor and fuel necessary to adjust timers and service accounts.

"It's saved me a lot of time in my business – I probably save more than the homeowner," Mora says, explaining that the self-adjusting systems allow him to save 3 percent per year in labor, liability, wear and tear on trucks and fuel costs because he and his employees do not have to make repeat trips to and from job sites. He estimates the ET controllers allow his customers to accrue water bill savings of about 25 percent.

"If everybody had a smart timer and saved 25 percent – that's an incredible amount of savings," Mora says. "Not just in terms of money, but in terms of water for the future."

Water conservation has been a hot topic for years, but as the population rises and the demand for natural resources increases, experts say policymakers will do more to regulate

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all water consumption, which could create obstacles for the green industry.

"If contractors can be more proactive in installing smart products and smarter systems and educate their customers and employees about smart practices, that is a much better alternative to facing legislation that regulates irrigation," says Jeff Carowitz, chairman of the IA's communications committee and a green industry consultant with Strategic Force Marketing, San Diego, Calif.

"The quote-unquote 'stupid' controller is on its way out," adds Steve Springer vice president of business development for Rainmaster, Simi Valley, Calif. "Landscape contractors should increase their knowledge of smart controllers as soon as possible and position their businesses as water-management smart, not just landscape smart."

CONTRACTORS ADAPT. The label of "smart irrigation," typically refers to controller technology, like the kind that boosted Mora's business.

"If everybody had a smart timer and saved 25 percent - that's an incredible amount of savings. Not just in terms of money, but in terms of water for the future."

- Lalo Mora

"People try to pigeonhole smart irrigation in terms of a self-adjusting controller or the electronics of it, but it's really more than that," says Dave Johnson, director of corporate marketing for Glendora, Calif.-based Rain Bird. "You don't necessarily need an ET controller to enjoy the benefits of smart irrigation."

Other "smart" items have been on the market for decades. "Everyone's looking to the new technology on controllers as the solution," says Kevin Gordon, senior product development manager for Hunter Industries, San Marcos, Calif. "That's very intimidating." He suggests contractors turned off by technology enter the "smart" market with lower priced items like rain shut-off devices, pressure-regulating sprinkler heads and check valves (for more information on the pricing of these options, see "Efficient Equipment" on page 96).

"Little things like rain sensors are less intrusive to the contractor, the cost difference is minimal on a per-job basis, and they can get a lot of water savings benefits without a lot of the fear of the technology," Gordon says.

Many contractors are catching on. One popular policy is to include rain shut-off devices as a standard on all installation packages. "There's nothing worse than driving down the street and seeing other people's sprinkler systems



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going in the rain," says John Newlin of Quality Sprinkling Systems, North Ridgeville, Ohio. "Ours don't do that."

For contractors who are interested in high-tech options, ET controllers, which can be retrofitted to older irrigation systems, create an opportunity for contractors to revisit existing customers with an upgrade.

"The neat thing about smart irrigation products is that they're ahead of the curve," Carowitz says, noting that this is especially true in areas that haven't yet seen regulation. "Now is the time to educate yourself about these products and tips," he says. It's important to do so before your competitors do or before customer requests start rolling in, experts say.

Smart irrigation experts suggest contractors visit trade shows, research products and quiz the manufacturers about ET technology to get a better understanding of how it works and what products to choose. Carowitz says one important question to ask them is, "How

"Landscape contractors should increase their knowledge of smart controllers as soon as possible and position their businesses as water-management smart, not just landscape smart."

- Steve Springer

do I see this through to my customer and convince him that it will be valuable?" A manufacturer should have the answer as well as provide specific data about cost recovery and water savings expectancies.

When it comes to controller selection, Eric Anderson, president of ValleySoil, a Temecula, Calif.-based water

conservation, erosion control and landscape consulting firm, says contractors should be choosy. ValleySoil has been testing, experimenting with and installing ET-based irrigation controllers for more than four years. One important point to consider is how a controller receives its information, Anderson says. Some systems have soil sensors, some require mounting, some operate with external wires or by way of radio systems, phone or cable lines, which Anderson says can be susceptible to erosion, weathering and vandalism. He prefers controllers that receive information directly from weather stations via satellite transmission.

Anderson also suggests a contractor ask if the manufacturer is ISO-9000 certified, which ensures the controller is manufactured under rigid standards. Why is this important? "Because the contractor's name is going to be on the line if the controller fails for any type of product malfunction," he says.

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upgrade is auditing, experts agree. If a problem arises, customers always blame the controller, although it's likely system design contributed to the problem. "You have to be able to audit the system first to get the best results," says Newlin, who is IA-certified in installation and auditing.

"All of the wonderful controller technology in the world cannot fix a bad system," Gordon agrees.

Also, pricing can be a challenge for contractors touting new technology. Rain Bird's Johnson says smart systems may cost more than standard ones, but a contractor shouldn't feel pressure to offer the lowest quote. He says contractors should emphasize long-term savings and remember, "A lot of the population understands the age-old saying, 'You get what you pay for.'"

Mora instituted an unusual pricing

model for ET controllers: He installs them for free. They save him so much time as a landscape and irrigation contractor that he's willing to eat the standard \$150 installation fee if a customer with a maintenance account opts for an ET unit instead of a timer-based controller.

"If you price any of the dumb timers, they're very close in price, the only difference with the smart timer is customers pay a \$4 per month fee for the signal," Mora says, noting the hardware for his company's smart systems starts at \$379. That \$4 signal fee (billed directly to the customer by the controller manufacturer) is pocket change to homeowners who realize they can save up to 25 percent a month on their water bills.

Is absorbing installation costs worth it? Mora estimates this policy has helped create an estimated \$40,000 per year in savings from reduced labor, liability, equipment and fuel costs.

BOTTOM LINE. So far, systems with advanced ET controllers have permeated the markets that are bombarded with water conservation messages and will see the quickest return on investment, namely commercial accounts nationwide and high-end residences in the South and West.

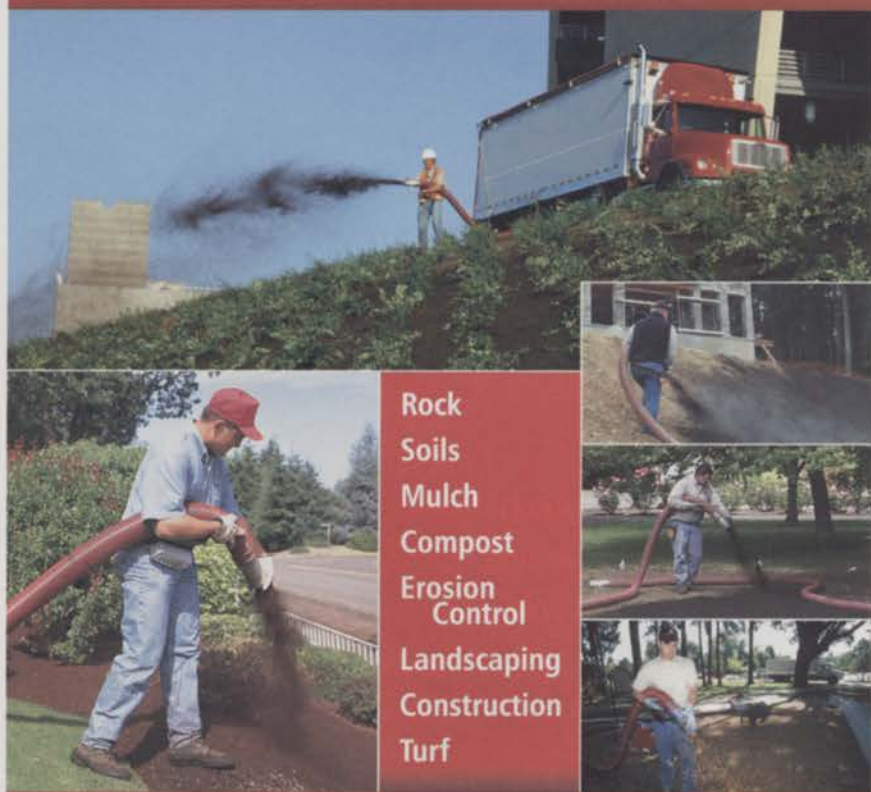
In conservation-savvy California, for example, ET-based systems are becoming the standard. "It really doesn't make sense for a contractor nowadays to allow a non-ET-based controller to be installed, because he's not really benefiting his clients," Anderson says. "It's not beneficial for contractors, designers or anyone else to consider installing anything else, because there will be a time they have to replace that system with a smart one, so they might as well do it now," he says, referring to a bill that's in the works in the California legislature that would mandate all irrigation systems to be "smart" by 2010 or sooner.

In other parts of the country, smart systems haven't been as quick to catch on. Jerry Goodwin, president of SSI Sprinklers in Wichita, Kan., is testing an ET-based unit before he promotes it to customers, but anticipates these sophisticated systems to be easy sells. "I see an opportunity to sell up and show them the cost savings," he says.

Rainmaster's Springer says that's the right idea. "That's the way to present these control systems," he says. "Not as, 'Here, just buy another controller,' but that water savings alone could pay for the smart controller in less than a year."

Newlin knows the importance of
continued on page 98, sidebar on page 96

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efficient equipment

Although ET-based controllers are the superstars of the "smart" irrigation category – they're not the sole solution for water and cost savings.

"There are a lot of components out there that have a lot of potential to create substantial water savings," says Andy Smith, the Irrigation Association's state and affiliate relations director.

Jeff Carowitz, senior consultant with Strategic Force Marketing, San Marcos, Calif., says contractors should push new systems to their customers that integrate the latest in water conserving technology, including pressure regulation, low precipitation sprinklers (rotary type), flow sensors that turn off systems if there are broken sprinklers or pipes, as well as smart weather-based controls. Efficient equipment includes:

- ET-based controllers monitor on-site weather conditions to apply the appropriate amount of water, limiting waste. They are an alternative to timed controllers.



Photo: Toro Irrigation

- Advanced controllers feature flow sensors that can determine a high-flow or leak condition and disable the system. Many systems can even page the operator if there is a problem.

- Rain shut-off sensors were some of the first products to come out under the smart umbrella, manufacturers say. These devices detect when it's raining and automatically turn off the irrigation system,

saving water. Entry-level rain sensors retail for about \$30.

- Soil moisture sensors maintain adequate growing conditions via soil moisture measurement, rather than a timing mechanism.

- Sprayheads/rotors/nozzles with pressure regulators help ensure the correct amount of water is being applied to a landscape by minimizing waste caused by drift and overspray. The cost to add the pressure regulation feature to a sprinkler varies widely by the type of sprinkler, but typically averages between 25 and 30 percent more.

- Check valves prevent irrigation pipes from draining excess water collected at the system's lowest sprinkler head. Instead of wasting this water, it's held and used for the next irrigation cycle. Adding a check valve typically costs between \$2 to \$3 per head.

- Drip irrigation, also known as a micro irrigation (because it's low-pressure and low-volume) applies water to the soil surface as drops or small streams through emitters. It's ideal for applications like trees, shrubs and ornamentals, and conserves water by reducing run-off.

- Reclaimed water, or the use of lightly treated recycled water, is an option. This method takes water used in households or commercial facilities and collected from rain and recycles it for reuse in landscape irrigation. It reduces discharge of wastewater into streams and oceans and is less costly and uses less energy than potable water, Carowitz points out.

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USE READER SERVICE # 83



One market that's warming to smart irrigation is high-end residential accounts in the West and South. Photo: Hunter Industries

translating water conservation into cost savings for his customers. He began selling ET-based systems on commercial accounts in April and his company already is seeing a growing demand for them.


For residential accounts outside of California and arid states, selling ET-based systems can be more challenging because homeowners don't recoup installation costs as quickly as commercial property owners do because of economies of scale. Water bill savings will take longer to offset the initial cost of equipment and installation for a residential account than it will with a commercial account.

Newlin, who has success selling to commercial accounts, added an ET controller option to his residential packages as an upgrade. He's had some interest, but has not yet sold one to this market.

"For the small to medium-sized residential customer, the economics of their water bills are just not that big in most parts of the country—they may not recognize the payback for several years,"

Gordon says. "But in commercial, the return on invest is really quick—so much so that it's a no-brainer.

"A contractor selling residential probably needs other arguments than ROI," Gordon suggests. "The one thing that I like to tell contractors is you can sell the beauty of the landscape—the health of the plant material."


Mora can attest to this tactic. His customers like the water and cost savings, but are most delighted in the increased plant health. "Money is important, but most of my clients are concerned about how their plants look," he says. "Because of the way the smart system waters, it tends to increase deep root growth instead of shallow root growth, so the plants look better than ever." 


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Visit the July Online Extras section for more tips on selling smarter irrigation systems and products, and visit the news section for additional Smart Irrigation Month updates.

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


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Photo: Hunter Industries

case study #1:

irrigating in irvine ranch

Landscape and irrigation contractors can encourage their customers to adopt low- and high-tech solutions to combat water waste.

Home landscape water use can consume up to 59 to 67 percent of total home water demand, according to the American Water Works Association Research Foundation report "Residential End Uses of Water." What is the value of a home's landscape and how much water should it use? While there is no precise answer, attractive landscapes have been shown to increase property values from 7.28 to 15 percent. How much water a home landscape needs depends on its soil, sun and shade exposure, plant types, irrigation system and local climate.

Landscape and irrigation contractors can help their clients save water with a combination of low-tech and high-tech solutions. The two techniques described here helped reduce home and commercial landscape water use in Irvine, Calif., by 50 percent from 1991 to 1999, saving consumers \$28 million.

LOW-TECH SOLUTION: SOIL PROBES. Landscape and irrigation contractors and university researchers use soil probes to determine soil-moisture levels. Using a soil probe is as

easy as inserting it into the ground, pulling it out and then feeling and seeing the soil in it. To test the water-saving potential of this simple device, the Irvine Ranch Water District conducted a voluntary test of 90 homes. Residents were instructed to use the probes as follows:

1. Turn irrigation systems off.
2. Push the probe into the ground (where turf, shrubs, trees and groundcovers are planted).
3. Pull out the probe and observe and feel the soil.
4. If the soil is wet or moist, do not water.
5. If the soil is dry, turn water on (using the probe to determine that water is applied only within the turf root zone).
6. Repeat the process before the next watering.

The first test group of 30 homes was monitored in the summer of 1997 (July through September). The second test group of 30 homes was monitored in the spring of 1998 (April through June) and the third in the fall of 1999 (October through December). The test homes were compared with neighboring non-test homes (the control group) on the same streets. The water savings were measured against

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the previous year's water use for all test and control homes. The water savings for the test homes over control-group homes were beyond agency expectations – 69 percent in the spring, 24 percent in the summer and 16 percent in the fall.

The \$12 probe cost was recovered in average home water savings within each three-month test period regardless of the season. The probe's cost-effectiveness combined with positive customer response makes it a simple and effective water conservation tool that landscape and irrigation professionals can encourage their customers to use. Many contractors have given probes away as promotions to customers who purchase irrigation systems or sign up for irrigation maintenance programs.

HIGH-TECH SOLUTION: ET IRRIGATION CONTROLLERS. How much water plants require depends on the type of plant and its evapotranspiration (ET) rate. ET is the total amount of water lost from the soil through evaporation or used by plants to take in nutrients and control temperature. For healthy growth a plant needs only the amount of water the ET rate provides. Most plants suffer when they receive more water. Applying the right amount of water, based on the local weather and the plant's actual need, is the key to using water efficiently.

Computing and setting landscape irrigation time based on weather changes is a complicated, time-consuming and never-ending task. However, new irrigation scheduling technology can change how contractors install systems so their customers can save water.

A wireless technology transmits local weather-station data each week directly to homes equipped with ET-receiving irrigation controllers, setting new and efficient irrigation schedules. The technology was tested in a one-year study of 120 homes in Orange County, Calif., that was sponsored by the Metropolitan Water District, the Municipal Water District of Orange County and the Irvine Ranch Water District. The study evaluated the controllers' ability to perform three functions – set efficient irrigation schedules based on local weather, soil type, plant type, irrigation system output and plant root depth; change irrigation schedules as the weather changes via a broadcast received by the controller; and eliminate the need

for users to set, change or try to reprogram the controllers to meet plant requirements as the weather changes.

The study showed that the ET irrigation control technology resulted in home landscape water savings of 17 to 25 percent and indicated that water savings increased dramatically as the size of the landscape increased.

The study indicated that homes using moderate amounts of water for landscapes could save 57 gallons of water per day. This translates into an average annual savings of at least 20,000 gallons of water saved per home.

The study found these additional benefits of ET irrigation control technology:

- All test-home residents found the controller to be convenient because they did not have to manually set, change or reprogram irrigation times.
- The average annual water cost savings, at \$114, was greater than the yearly ET weather data broadcast signal fee of \$48.
- Homeowners reported their landscapes looked as good as or better than they did prior to the use of the ET irrigation control technology.
- The capability of the controller to be set for the soil-infiltration rate, slope and sprinkler output greatly reduces the potential for water runoff.
- The technology can be set to specific or staggered times to assist with local supply shortages and/or occasions when local water use peaks.
- The technology can send a reduced percentage signal prescribed during drought periods. (For instance, if an area needs to reduce water use by 20 percent, the broadcast system can send an ET signal that is 20 percent lower across that part of the customer base outfitted with the technology.)

The author has more than 20 years of experience in water management. He is director of conservation alliances, HydroPoint Data Systems, and previously was the Irvine Ranch Water District conservation coordinator and a University of California cooperative extension specialist. This case study was reprinted from the book Water Right by the International Turf Producers Foundation.

case study #2

savings in santa barbara



Photo: HydroPoint Data Systems

In 2002, Lalo Mora, president of Santa Barbara, Calif.-based Enviroscaping, received a letter from the water agency in Santa Barbara County seeking contractors to partner for research on the savings potential of ET controllers. He signed up, completed training, and soon was installing smart irrigation systems as part of a study that extended a deal to homeowners who were identified as the area's heaviest water users.

Grant money allowed the county and its partners to offer these homeowners free ET controllers and free installation if they agreed to pay \$144 (three years worth of the controller's \$4 monthly service fee).

Mora and 19 other contractors began installing the systems in mid-2002. Over the last four years the study has discovered that, depending on property size, homeowners see an return on investment in one to five years, and have reduced overall water usage by an average of 26 percent in normal weather year conditions and 16 percent in extremely dry weather year conditions, according to Alison Jordan, water conservation coordinator for the City of Santa Barbara Public Works Department. – Marisa Palmieri



July is Smart Irrigation Month

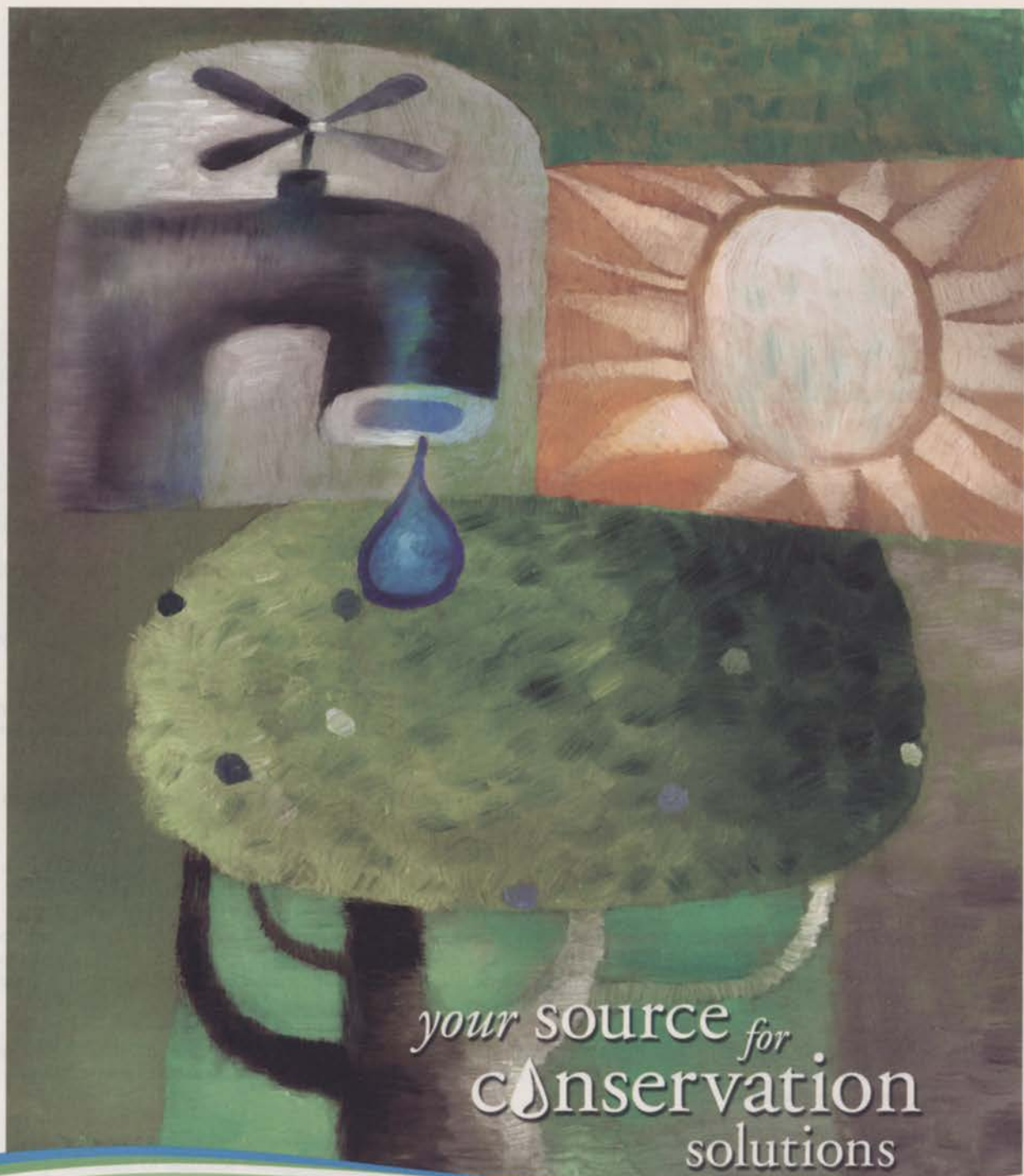
– what better time to install or fine tune your irrigation system?

The key to a healthier landscape is applying just enough water and only when necessary.

However, most homeowners tend to overwater their lawns or waste water through inefficient habits. Adopt the following water-wise practices to save money, conserve water and see results.

- **Adapt your watering schedule to the weather and the season.** Familiarize yourself with the settings on your irrigation controller. Adjust the watering schedule regularly to conform with current weather conditions.
- **Schedule each individual zone in your irrigation system.** “Scheduling” accounts for the type of sprinkler, sun or shade exposure and the soil type for the specific area. The same watering schedule should almost never apply to all zones in the system.
- **Adjust sprinkler heads.** Correct obstructions that prevent sprinklers from distributing water evenly. Keep water off pavement and structures.
- **Inspect your system monthly.** Check for leaks, broken or clogged heads, and other problems, or enlist an irrigation professional to check your system regularly. Clean micro-irrigation filters as needed.
- **Get a professional system audit.** Hire a professional to conduct an irrigation audit and uniformity test to make sure areas are being watered evenly. This can be especially helpful if you have areas being underwatered or brown spots. The Irrigation Association maintains an online list of certified landscape irrigation auditors. Find a link to one in your neighborhood at www.irrigation.org/swat/homeowners/.
- **Install a rain shutoff switch.** Required by law in many states, these money-saving sensors turn off your system in rainy weather and help to compensate for natural rainfall. The inexpensive devices can be retrofitted to almost any system.
- **Consider “smart” technology.** Climate- or soil moisture sensor-based controllers evaluate weather or soil moisture conditions and then calculate and automatically adjust the irrigation schedule to meet the specific needs of your landscape. Learn more at www.irrigation.org/swat/homeowners/.
- **Consider low-volume drip irrigation for plant beds.** Install micro-irrigation for gardens, trees and shrubs. Micro irrigation includes drip (also known as trickle), micro spray jets, micro-sprinklers or bubbler irrigation to irrigate slowly and minimize evaporation, runoff and overspray.
- **Water at the optimum time of day.** Water when the sun is low or down, winds are calm and temperatures are cool – between the evening and early morning – to reduce evaporation. You can lose as much as 30 percent of water to evaporation by watering mid-day.
- **Water only when needed.** Saturate root zones and let the soil dry. Watering too much and too frequently results in shallow roots, weed growth, disease and fungus.
- **When in doubt, call a professional.** Have more questions about irrigation and water savings? Find an irrigation professional in your area by visiting www.irrigation.org/swat/homeowners/.

– The Irrigation Association



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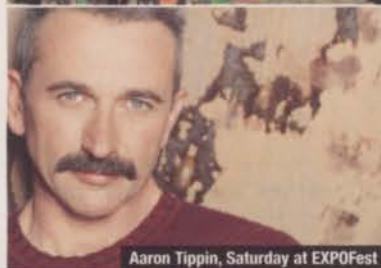
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Banishing Beetles with Biopesticides

In their native land, Japanese beetles are not serious pests because natural enemies keep populations down. Biocontrol research using a new nematode species has performed well in U.S. trials, but is seen as too expensive and unreliable.

"There are many natural enemies that can suppress the beetle larvae, but it's not practical to apply them on a small scale," explains Dave Cappaert, a Michigan State University research consultant.


And customers may not see fighting pests with pests as viable, which is why timely spray applications remain the backbone of many programs.

The first step in controlling Japanese beetles is to understand the pest. Females usually lay eggs several inches below ground. Eggs hatch in mid-summer, and grubs begin feeding on turf roots. Grubs overwinter below ground and pupate in the spring, then emerge as adult beetles. They move during the day, and then fly back to turfgrass in the evening to lay their eggs. This movement is one of several characteristics that make Japanese beetles difficult to control.

Azadirachtin is one naturally occurring option that controls pests through anti-feedant properties, growth regulation and anti-oviposi-

tory and repellent action.

Azatrol EC biopesticide is a good fit for Kurt Brace's pest management system. Brace is the sales manager of J. Mollema & Son, serving Michigan, Illinois, Indiana and Ohio. "When we started putting Azatrol out on a weekly basis, we reduced damage by close to 90 percent," he says. "I used the product weekly at .33 ounces per gallon of water. I figured my cost to be between 50 cents per week on vines and Harry Lauder walking stick and \$1 on small crabs."

Unlike other alternative insecticides, azadirachtin stops beetles before they can damage plants. For the most effective control, apply Azatrol when pests are expected to appear, and then spray at 10-day intervals depending on pest infestation, says John Spaulding, product manager for Azatrol at PBI/Gordon in Kansas City, Mo. 

The author is a senior writer with practice in azadirachtin-derived products. He is a partner with Kansas City, Mo.-based Blasdel Cleaver Schwalbe and can be reached at illinois@bestthinktank.com.

Circle 216 on reader service card

by illinois blasdel

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- Hydraulic-powered
- Capable of providing 1,500 blows per minute
- Ideal for driving road barrier tubes, profiles, signposts, fences and a wide variety of anchors
- Range of hydraulic power packs is available
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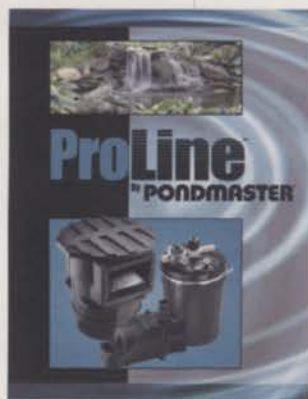
Circle 217 on reader service card



Billy Goat Force Walk-Behind Blower

- Available with 9-horsepower Subaru or 9- or 13-horsepower Honda engines
- Total unit ranges from 141 to 163 pounds
- Comes with optional parking brake and lock-down kit
- Machine was tested in extreme conditions including freezing temperatures
- Billy Goat – 816/524-9666, www.experiencetheforce.com

Circle 218 on reader service card



Danner Manufacturing ProLine series catalog

- Features the company's line of professional and water garden products
- Designed to give the installer a clear, concise listing of the current pumps, filters, filter-falls and accessories
- Offers five pre-packaged kits for smaller installations up to 5,000 gallons
- Danner Manufacturing – 631/234-5261, www.dannermfg.com

Circle 219 on reader service card

DIG UNIMAX DC Latching Solenoids

- Includes the S305, operating at 8 to 12 volts DC and the S310, operating at 6 to 9 volts DC
- Can operate most manufacturer's valves using DC power when used with one of DIG's four adaptors
- Features encapsulated plunger and spring
- Wire runs up to 200 feet with 14 AWG wire
- DIG – 760/727-0914, www.digcorp.com

Circle 220 on reader service card



Dixon Two- and Three-bag Grass Catching Attachments

- Free Flow hood design designed to direct clippings evenly to bags while allowing sufficient air flow for maximum vacuum power
- Hood is held open by a heavy-duty spring assist
- High density durable mesh fabric bags are tapered and have plastic bottoms with metal handles
- Blower is designed with a thick sand liner, long-life belts and a window to view the rotation of a fluorescent impeller indicator
- Dixon Industries – 800/264-6075, www.dixon-ztr.com



Circle 221 on reader service card

Durham Storack

- Easily expandable and contractible high capacity bulk storage rack
- Includes 15 three-shelf units and 15 four-shelf units
- All feature heavy-duty welded construction with 13-gauge upright beams and 14-gauge cross beams
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- Can be assembled without special tools
- Includes fully automatic safety locks
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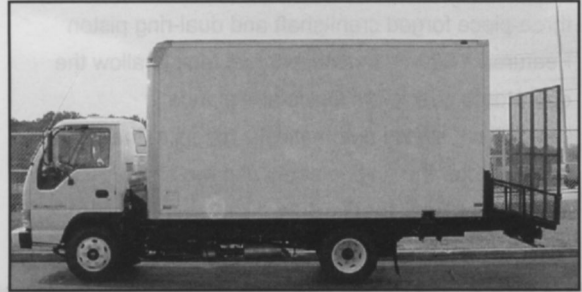
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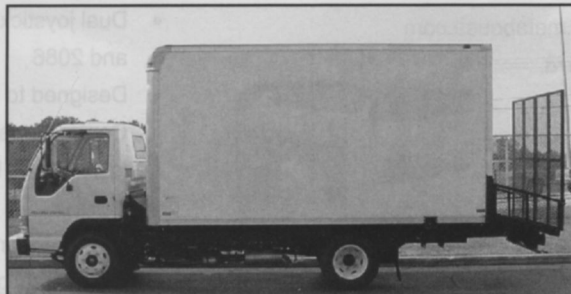
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- Operator must simultaneously depress dual safety switches to operate the trimmer
- "Instant stop" blades stop almost immediately after the user releases either switch
- Other safety features include a hand guard that protects the user from scratches and full insulation to safeguard the operator from electrical shocks
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Circle 227 on reader service card



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Circle 231 on reader service card

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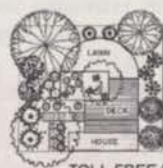
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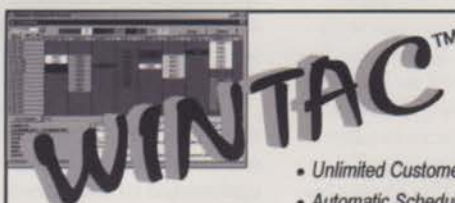
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The author is manager of the education and training department at The Davey Tree Expert Co., Kent, Ohio, and can be reached at 800/445-8733.

Training Experts at Davey Tree

In this industry, what we sell is our skill and our expertise. People depend on us to be the experts, particularly when it comes to tree care. Investing in the education and training of employees improves our ability to deliver expert care. By training experts, we give our customers someone that they can depend on and trust. The end result is stability and longevity for the entire company.

At The Davey Tree Expert Co., our commitment to employee education and training began 125 years ago with our founder John Davey. Since John, the company has continued to invest heavily in employee training. We have established training programs to offer employees a variety of educational opportunities, including The Davey Institute of Tree Sciences, which began in 1908. Since that time, the company has expanded training in all aspects of our business with programs like The Davey Institute of Lawn Sciences, The Davey Institute of Horticultural Sciences, the Advanced Arborist Training program and numerous online extension courses.

We have committed thousands of

dollars and man-hours to providing employees with the training they need to continue our tradition of excellent tree care. Smaller companies should spend a higher percentage of their revenue on training. In general, top companies spend 3 percent or more of their gross revenue on training, and Davey spends much more than that amount. As painful as this investment may seem for an emerging business, if you don't spend that money on training, you will end up spending it on insurance costs, damage claims, decreased production, workers' compensation, poor customer service and the potential loss of customers.

The investment in tree care education show numerous returns. First, our employees realize the company is committed to their development, which fosters company loyalty. Davey employees, in turn, receive the industry's best tree care training, which makes them desirable in the green industry. The time and effort they spend becoming experts enhances their professional lives.

Second, tree care education greatly affects our ability to do the job well. If we take the time to educate our staff,

5 Keys to Designing A Successful Training Program

1. **Develop the educational outcomes and the specific skills you want each student to learn, then build the time for each. In addition, consider the program's length and set a time line for any presentations.**
2. **Where you hold training will influence learning. The right environment motivates employees to learn. Your site or facility should be conducive to learning.**
3. **Instructors should be knowledgeable as well as effective communicators.**
4. **As the training event goes on, measure student progress. Additionally, evaluate the effectiveness of their training programs over the long term.**
5. **Make necessary changes. If the programs improve employee performance, then hone in on and improve techniques. If they do not, a redesign of parts or the whole program may be necessary.**



Photo: The Davey Tree Expert Co.

By training experts, The Davey Tree Expert Co. provides its customers with people they can trust. The end result is stability and longevity for the entire company.

then our customers receive the best possible service. Our customers know when a Davey crew comes onto their property that each member has a strong knowledge base.

At the core of every Davey training initiative is a focus on the fundamental practices of tree care. This is the foundation of our service. By committing to learning and teaching sound fundamental practices, every company, big or small, can improve and better serve customers.

For any tree care professional, a basic level of knowledge in plant health care and equipment use is essential.

Davey employees take time to learn about plant physiology, pest and disease management and best care practices for many types of trees. We also take the time to learn about the tools of our trade. We study how our equipment works and learn the safe way to operate it. Doing so has earned our company a reputation for safe working practices, which is something that we all take pride in.


As a whole, Davey's training budget has steadily increased. And we tend to shield training from budget cuts during lean periods, the type of training we do during those times is typically different. For instance, if sales are down, that might be a good time to conduct sales training. So the individual programs might have impacts, but the total amount spent on training remains approximately the same.

While we do invest in books, worksheets, classroom activities and other educational collateral, much of our tree care education is in the field. Our employees learn by doing. Hands-on experience is crucial in our industry. It is more effective to learn proper pruning techniques in the field than it is from a diagram. The diagram can supplement field learning, but does not replace it.

Likewise, senior level staff members show new employees the ropes. Our regional safety trainers help teach all field employees safe work practices.

Our technical staff advises the field in matters such as diagnosis and identification.

This method of passing along tree care knowledge is beneficial in two respects. First, new employees learn from those with relevant experience. As they apply the information in the field, they receive instant feedback from those who have been with the company for some time. Second, teaching new employees is a way for old employees to stay current with the best practices. And teaching reinforces their base knowledge.

Once the fundamental education program is in place and on-the-job training is underway, the development of continuing education and training programs is possible. Companies should consider how such a program will enhance job performance. Examine the specific skills employees will learn. Develop teaching tools, presentations and supporting materials with your workforce in mind. — Richard Jones 

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