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Best of the Web – Growing Pains

Success often comes with a price. As a landscape contractor's reputation grows so does demand and the need to increase laborers and equipment. *Lawn* & *Landscape* Message Board users weigh in with their philosophies for dealing with growing pains.

A Helping Hand

Manufacturers, dealers and contractors share their best tips for choosing the right pieces of handheld products to round out their equipment fleets.

Construction Equipment

No Strings Attached

Contractors are finding there are skid-steer loader attachments for almost every job.



Pesticides/Fertilizers > > >

Dollars From Diseases

Increased disease education and new lawn care-targeted products enable LCOs to shoot for higher profit margins in their fungicide treatment services.





lawn & landscape june 2006



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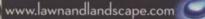
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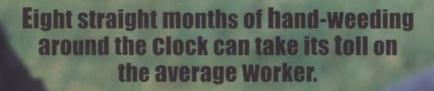
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It won't do your bottom line any good, either. Research shows that hand-weeding can knock your profits for a loop in no time. Maybe that's why so many nursery operators and landscapers are choosing the superior control of Snapshot* specialty herbicide. Snapshot can be used over-the-top of more than 413 field-grown and 235 container-grown ornamentals, for control of 111 broadleaf weeds and annual grasses – for up to eight months. That's more than any other preemergence product on the market. Plus, it's gentle on ornamentals. This year, knock out weeds and grasses – instead of your workers – with the proven performance of Snapshot.

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New to the Online Bookstore

Recently we introduced a section in Industry News where we share Spanish phrases that can help you to communicate with your Hispanic employees. The book that provides these phrases has been so popular, we added it to our online bookstore.

"Spanish Phrases For Landscaping Professionals" is a collection of user-friendly words and phrases to help English speaking managers and crew leaders communicate with their Hispanic

employees. This book is not a textbook, but rather a "point and shoot" phrase book for contractors who need to say it now, and who have not found time to learn Spanish while working 60-plus hour weeks.

From the Lawn & Landscape home page, click on "resources" and "store" to find this book and many other products to help your business flourish.

Get on the List!

Are you missing out on the latest information your fellow contractors are receiving weekly from *Lawn & Landscape*? If so, your business deserves the boost! To get on board, contact Heather Wood at 800/456-0707 or at hwood@gie.net, and give her your e-mail address. Then reap the benefits of our weekly product- and news-focused E-Newsletters, which include online-exclusive copy, such as our Industry Buzz column and our Quick Tips feature, as well as debuting the latest products!

HELP AHEAD

growing pains

andscape contractor Michael Deno always wanted to expand his workload, but now that he has, he doesn't know what to do. His presence at a recent home and garden show left him with so many requests

for work that he won't be able to get to them for five months.

Should Deno expand his workforce to keep up with the demand, buy more equipment or neither? Read about Deno's dilemma and other contractors' advice in this month's Best of the Web feature, "Growing Pains," on page 54.

After you've read the article, share your advice on the *Laum & Landscape* Message Board. Maybe you have your own dilemma to share. Post a thread on the Message Board and tap into the wealth of resources that awaits you.

online poll

When you log onto the Lawn & Landscape Web site between June 12 and June 18. take a moment to answer our online poll, where we ask, "What factor matters the most when you are buying handheld equipment?" The results are automatically updated, or you can wait for the weekly Lawn & Landscape e-newsletter to see how your answer compares with other professionals in the industry.

get quick tips every week

et great ideas from Quick Tips, a new weekly online feature that will offer bits of advice to help sell your services or improve your practices. Topics will range from business-related issues to technical issues, such as getting rid of crabgrass.

In a recent edition, landscape contractors were given eight useful facts about how homeowners benefit from lush, green lawns. These are proving to be powerful selling tools.

Look for Quick Tips at www.lawnandlandscape.com every Wednesday. To comment on these tips or to share your own, visit our Message Board at www.lawnandlandscape.com/messageboard or contact Heather Wood with your thoughts at hwood@gie.net or 800/456-0707.



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Stand Up For Your Landscape

'm sure readers of *Lawn & Landscape* are aware of the activist movement to severely restrict or eliminate the use of pesticides in and around landscapes.

Most recently, you've probably heard and read about the challenges our neighbors to the North have lived through. Many professionals there have sacrificed hours of both their personal and professional time to protect their right to conduct business, as well as their customers' right for a weed- and insect-free landscape.

Contractors readily offered up their time because of their passion to the green industry. Fully aware of the repercussions if these services were abolished, these environmental stewards didn't think twice about investing in their cause.

Not only will they suffer loss of business, but our environment will suffer. Studies have shown that well-maintained turf provides a poor habitat for health dangers such as rodents, snakes, ticks and bees. Safety benefits include firebreaks, glare reduction on highways and airport runways as well as cushioned play areas for children and athletes alike.

There's more. Research shows evidence that plants lower blood pressure, reduce muscle tension related to stress and reduce feelings of anger, fear and aggression. A well-maintained turf and landscape can boost a child's attention span and help to build more close-knit communities.

The situation isn't exclusive to Canada. A number of such hotspots are found here in the United States.

Fact is, about seven key target locales – including California, Connecticut, Iowa, Montana, New York, Rhode Island and Vermont – are in the sights of the activist community. Their sole mission is to eliminate pesticides. Not because they've done extensive research – or any research whatsoever with these products. Just because.

And, it's not just pesticides. Officials in Arizona are calling for irrigation within a certain daily timeframe. Bureaucrats in Nevada and California are paying its residents to not install turf and plants.

The days of brushing these threats aside and adroitly proclaiming that these are not our concerns are over. Not a single lawn and landscape professional will find him or herself beyond the reach of these adept, well-funded activists who have successfully moved their crusade from the federal and state level to the local stage.

Laws previously passed in Toronto but thought to be unenforceable are currently taking a bite out of the professional's pocketbook. A few convictions and fines have been levied against those who have elected to ignore the law and go about their business.

Repeat customers are canceling their services and some lawn care businesses are being forced to lay off employees. The irony of it all is that consumers are still able to purchase pesticides and apply them to their own lawns.

As environmental stewards and industry professionals, it's time that we all stand up and be counted. Don't let the uninformed pass unnecessary laws that hurt the environment rather than help it. Stand up for your landscape today.

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Way Over Layovers

I'm stranded in the Atlanta airport. Impatiently idling here in an airport chair with no promise of take-off anytime soon, I can't help but think about what I'd do if I were running the show.

1. Hire only those with good attitudes. I'd go to great lengths to hire people who thrive under pressure. I would improve my chances by administering personality tests and talking to previous employers perspective employees. I would also consider hiring for a one-week trial period. I have only run across a few contractors who do this and I don't think it's a coincidence that they do very well.

2. Focus on the little things. For example, if a customer misses a flight, I'd make certain my gate agents showed concern while helping him or her find another flight. Show your customers you understand and make them feel you're on their side. Think of the items or services specific to your company that you could offer your customers when things don't go as planned. Or just say, "You're sorry."

3. Keep planes spotless. Your image is crucial to success. Cleanliness and professionalism – always demonstrate these qualities to your customers. Along those lines, what does a dirty truck say about your company?

4. Tie compensation to profits and customer satisfaction. You can't create or maintain a stellar image without great customer service, and you can't deliver great customer service without a team that understands its importance. Team members who fail at customer service would be handed my competitor's card and encouraged to go work there.

5. Remind top clients they're valued. An airline executive told me 43 percent of his revenue comes from 13 percent of his clients. As a frequent flier, I have rarely felt appreciated. I would reward my top customers at different milestones. I would also place quarterly calls with the top 10 percent to make certain they remain happy with our service.

6. Lime green planes with hot pink lettering. Flashy? You bet. In a competitive industry you need to distinguish yourself any way you can, and it's hard not to be in a good mood when you're surrounded by vibrant colors. Think about how you've branded your company. Once you arrive at a look you like, ensure it appears on all your materials, from ads and invoices to letterhead to business cards.

7. Have one less row of seats and advertise that benefit. Think of a benefit you can offer to distinguish yourself from the competition. Maybe it's offering money-back guarantees or free annual follow-ups. What are the chief problems customers complain about when it comes to landscaping? Figure out what these are and then set about devising a solution.

8. Focus on three core goals. I'd get passengers to their destinations on time, offer them the lowest price in the industry and guarantee the safety of our flights. What are the three core goals specific to your company? Identify them and make certain your entire crew can recite and deliver them. You cannot succeed if you do not know what you're striving for.

Now while I'm still in Atlanta and eager to get to my destination, the experience has reminded me how frustrating and disappointing it is when a company fails to deliver on its promise. Those feelings are compounded when the company doesn't seem to care that it's failed you. Not only is this poor business, but it also erodes profits. An unhappy customer is just a step from signing with the competition.

I won't be flying this airline again anytime soon and I have to make sure I never get complacent with my business.

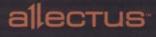
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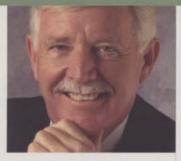
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The Quality Quotient

Quality transforms a good company into a great company. Accordingly, landscape contractors need to provide quality in every aspect of their businesses and to each customer to be successful.

For example, landscape contractors should only purchase the very best plant materials. Demand quality and don't shy away from rejecting subpar plant material when it arrives on site. First impressions of a finished project often are based on how the plants look. Of course, quality planting techniques will ensure the client enjoys the natural atmosphere you've created for a long time.

Furthermore, replacing too many materials under warranty promotes a poor image. I recommend guaranteeing plant material for 90 days and trees for one year. Too often contractors guarantee plant material for one year. I firmly believe if a plant is going to die due to poor installation, it will expire within 90 days. Generally, when a plant dies after that, the property owner's neglect and poor watering practices are the likely culprits. Changing this policy can save contractors a lot of summer agony.

Likewise, quality is very important in landscape maintenance. Clients lose faith in their contractors when they repeatedly see poor quality work. Most often, bad relationships stem from this ineptitude. If it gets to this point, it's only a matter of time before the contractor loses the business.

On the other hand, maintaining a great client relationship enables you to occasionally let a couple of quality issues slide, but that's a dangerous practice and one that should not be used as a crutch too often. Bottom line: You need both quality work and a solid relationship with your client to realize success. Remember, your competition is always knocking on your clients' door. So how do you make this happen for your organization? First, it must start at the top. The owner has to demand all employees produce the best product possible. Therefore, the owner needs to be in the field to observe, correct and complement employees when he sees great quality work. By being in the field and by spreading positive feedback, you will find it doesn't take long for employees to understand what constitutes acceptable and quality work.

You can take this momentum to the next level by actually judging quality. Create a checklist that enables you to apply a quantitative number (on a scale of 1 to 5, for example) to each category judged. This enables you to issue a total quality score per project.

Create one for installation and another for maintenance and so on. Keep it as simple as possible but write many notes. This enables the exercise to become a great training tool for quality. "Demand quality, give feedback, be fair and strive to become a quality, low cost provider. You can do this and still make a profit – a very good profit."

The main objective is to communicate to employees the level of quality in their work and to provide feedback on the deficiencies that lowered the final score.

Be sure to judge the same number of projects per crew each month or quarter. Then post the quality scores so all can see who is producing the top quality this month. This will help establish a healthy competitive atmosphere among your workers while encouraging others to work on their quality issues.

Demand quality, give feedback, be fair and strive to become a quality, low cost producer. You can do this and still make a profit – a very good profit. 12

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Does Your Business Still Fit?

I'm sure you've had this experience? One morning you wake up and put on that well-worn jacket only to find it feels tight around the shoulders. The first reaction is to call the cleaners and complain. But you soon realize the problem is a function of age and despite how much you love that jacket, it's time for a new one.

Let's face it. Each company, as it progresses through the stages of growth, wears its own jacket. Repeated wearing gives it a warm, personal, broken-in feel. People who helped start a company understand the "jacket," what it symbolizes and how it brings comfort. They overlook its frayed collar and that there are stains that can no longer be removed.

Companies can grow from a size 40 regular to a 46 long right in front of our eyes. It doesn't happen over night, but there are plenty of indicators. Sometimes we ignore them in favor of the security the old "company jacket" provides us.

When the company was a 40 regular, things were more predictable. Customers were happy and the employees were proud and excited about coming to work. Then, good customers recognized the company's quality and dependability and started to ask for slight variations in their services.

At first, it wasn't a big deal. But as demand increased, the new requests took the company in new directions. And to produce new customers, equipment purchases strained lines of credit and put pressure on revenue generating activities.

The field people started feeling the pressure of providing new services that differed from their original job requirements. These new services were not always priced properly and required more time at the job. Customer complaints started to increase because they weren't getting the quality in the expanded services that they had come to expect from the company's basic services. As discouraged field people resigned, management people doubling as technicians to meet customer demands filled their positions. The excitement of the vision was rapidly being siphoned off by sheer exhaustion and confusion.

What was the owner doing? He was spending more time in the office planning for "additional expansion" and neglecting the emerging problems. In effect, his people noticed he was wearing that tattered old 40-regular jacket more frequently. For the first time, it no longer looked good on him. Some even said he looked ridiculous, dated and out of touch.

From the owner's perspective, things looked great. In fact, he was planning to implement more new ideas. He had forgotten he hadn't had a staff meeting in two months. He hadn't noticed things that used to get done quickly were taking forever, even when assigned to his most responsive people. He failed to connect the dots among the frequency and types of incoming customer complaints.

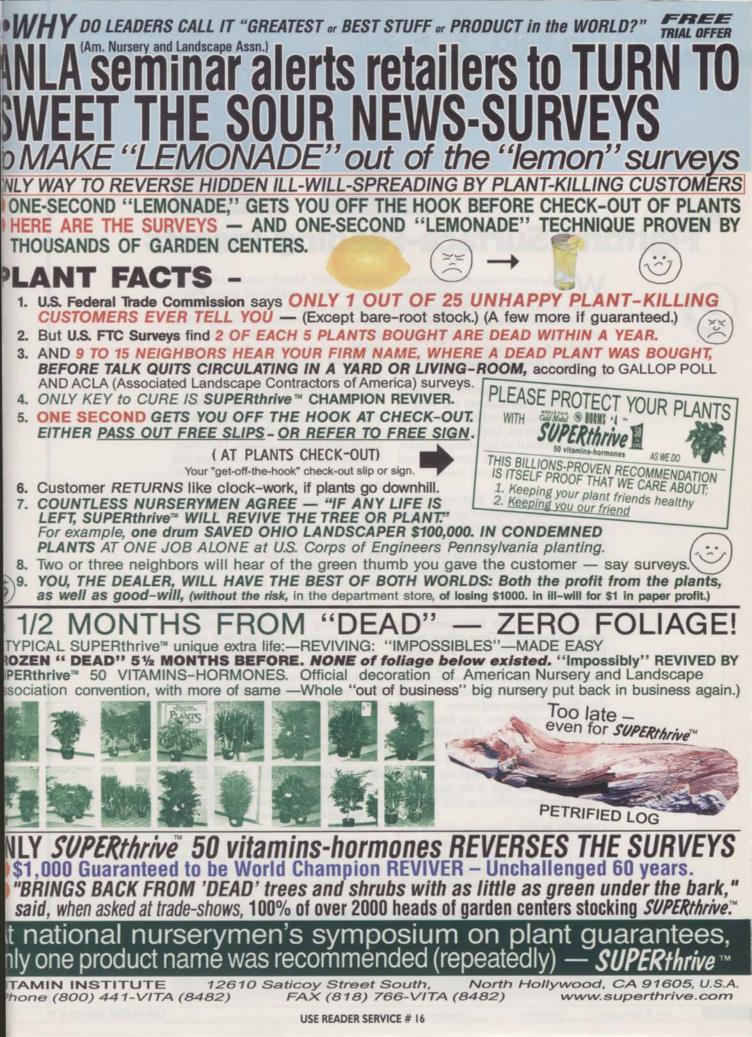
He was consumed with planning for new divisions in the company to meet new demands and had lost sight of the fact that his core business, which would fund these new ventures, was losing customers and good employees.

The company had become a 46 long. Even the people who proudly had worn the old 40 regular knew it was time for a change. The owner faced two choices – pull up the collar of the 40 regular and hunker down into that old familiar warmth or find a new tailor.

What would you do? (11)

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larry tish





Fighting Surface-Feeding Insects

With the onset of summer, green grass covers customers' lawns across the country. However, now is the time when attention shifts beneath the blades of green and toward the soil, where insects prepare to feed on luscious lawns.

While a host of turf insects find their nourishment below the thatch layer, they typically are not problematic until late summer. Early summer sees surfacefeeding insects, particularly chinch bugs and sod webworms. Understanding these insects, as well as their habits and life cycles, is the key to effectively controlling and protecting your customers' lawns.

SOD WEBWORMS. Sod webworms are most often identified as they grow into their adult forms, which are as lawn moths. These small, whitish-gray moths are distinctive for the way their wings fold in over each other and for their erratic, zigzag flight pattern. They typically hide deep in a lawn or in nearby shrubs to avoid direct sunlight.

The early nymph form webworms are most troubling. These critters begin feeding as soon as they hatch, and they are most active at night. Depending on the species, they will feed either on the crowns of the turf or the blades themselves, and they favor bluegrass and fescue.

How do you know you have a sod webworm-infested lawn? The webworms feed by chewing the turf leaf, and the cumulative damage resembles drought stress, especially as they thin out a lawn. The most telltale sign is the green frass pellets they leave behind as they feed.

CHINCH BUGS. Last year, chinch bug problems seemed more widespread than normal, but that was not actually the case. Instead, they caused more damage thanks in large part to a lack of rainfall in much of the country. Already-weakened turf was no match for the additional abuse. Again, the young nymphs are most problematic due to their aggressive early feeding. When chinch bugs infest a lawn, the signs resemble drought stress as the insects suck the sap out of the individual grass blades. If not controlled, the grass will first turn yellow, then brown and then die.

Chinch bugs come in two different varieties – the hairy chinch bug can be found in northern areas, while the southern chinch bug prefers warmer climates. The cooler, northern weather limits chinch bugs to two generations in a typical year, compared to three or even four in the South.

While ensuring your properties are properly fertilized and irrigated throughout the summer provides the best protection again infestation, a host of products are available for chinch bug control. The host of bifenthrin-based products on the market are traditional favorites.

Chinch bugs overwinter by digging into the thatch and going dormant, and the warming spring temperatures spur them to resume feeding and then mate.

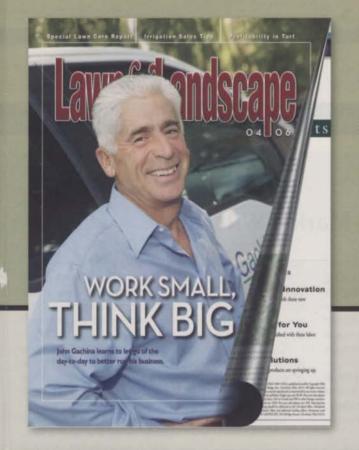
If preventive control is not an option, be sensitive to the pests' reproduction schedules to prevent additional generations from feeding too long. In the north, late May/early June and August are when hairy chinch bugs reproduce, while the southern chinch bugs favor a quarterly schedule for three or four cycles.

Control products typically carry 30day residuals. However, be prepared to make multiple applications to achieve the desired control, especially when battling second-generation chinch bugs, which can be quite hardy.

In addition, scout neighboring properties when treating customers' turf to see if infestations may be simply waiting for their opportunities to spread.

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.

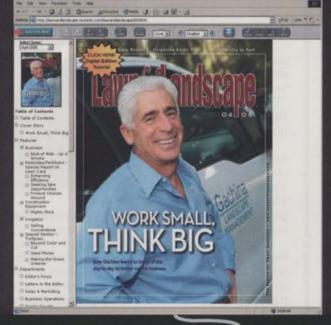


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housing forecast

Economists: Housing Market Will Cool

fter soaring to record levels for three consecutive years, the single-family housing market is gliding toward a "soft landing" in 2006, as rising interest rates, affordability issues and a reduced role for investors soften demand, according to economists who attended the recent National Association of Home Builders Construction Forecast Conference in Washington, D.C.

"After topping out in the third quarter of last year, it is pretty clear that the housing sector is in a period of transition," says NAHB Chief Economist David Seiders. "Sales and starts are trending lower toward more susdown slightly in 2007 to 1.09 million.

After posting a record 1.716 million single-family starts in 2005, NAHB is predicting that new home construction will level off to 1.595 million units in 2006 and 1.488 million in 2007, which would still rank high by historical standards.

Commenting on the dramatic home price increases in many markets in recent years, Seiders says home price appreciation is expected to fall from an average 12 percent in 2005 to about 4 percent in 2007, with mortgage rates rising to 6.7 percent later this year.

Seiders adds that the multifamily market has remained

stable since the late 1990s.

tainable levels. Even so, the slowing housing market is not likely to derail the current economic expansion as other industries pick up the slack."

Sharing a similar assessment, Michael Moran, chief economist at Daiwa Securities America, says, "The housing sector is going through an adjustment, not a collapse."

As economists predicted, the Fed raised its short-term interest rate to 5 percent in early May, the 16th consecutive quarter-

percentage point increase since it began moving up rates in June of 2004, starting from a lowly 1 percent.

Both Seiders and Glassman believe that the 5-percent mark should be enough to ease inflationary pressures in the months ahead and to keep the Fed from moving forward with additional rate hikes. However, citing higher energy prices and a low unemployment rate of 4.7 percent, Moran predicts the central bank won't stop until it raises the federal funds rate to 5.5 percent.

Seiders says that new home sales in the first quarter of this year were down 10 percent from the fourth quarter of 2005, and looking to the future he expects them to ease further in the coming months before leveling off in 2007.

NAHB is forecasting that new home sales will hit 1.13 million units in 2006, down 12 percent from last year's all-time high of 1.28 million units, and then edge of forecasting, says the forces driving housing demand (including home prices, population growth, household formation and growth in employment opportunities) vary significantly by region. Other factors that can affect demand include immigration and migration, energy prices, large-scale natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina and an area's appeal as a second home location.

Mark Zandi, chief economist, Moody's Economy.com, says "builders have done a good job of matching supply and demand" and "nationally, house prices and supply will go flat in 2006, 2007 and 2008." This implies that there will be some price declines in key markets, he says, but the markets are going to "correct, not crash."

Markets where Zandi anticipates significant corrections - defined as more than a 10 percent peak-totrough decline - are in the Northeast, the Mid-Atlantic, Florida, California, parts of Arizona and Las Vegas.

and is expected to continue the same pattern in 2006, with starts dropping slightly to 351,000 apartment units

from 355,000 last year. The rental market has solidified, and Seiders expects it to regain some ground while

red-hot condo markets start to cool. Seiders also predicts residential remodeling expenditures will continue rising, supported by an immense amount of home equity.

Looking at housing on a localized level, Bernard Markstein, NAHB's director

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H-2B UPDATE

USCIS Reaches H-2B Cap for Second Half of Fiscal Year 2006

WASHINGTON, D.C. – U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) announced that it has received a sufficient number of petitions to reach the congressionally mandated H-2B cap for the final six months of Fiscal Year 2006 (FY 2006). USCIS is hereby notifying the public that April 4 is the "final receipt date" for new H-2B worker petitions requesting employment start dates prior to Oct. 1, 2006. The "final receipt date" is the date on which USCIS determines that it has received enough cap-subject petitions to reach the limit of 33,000 H-2B workers for the second half of FY 2006.

USCIS will apply a computer-generated random selection process to all petitions, which are subject to the cap and were received on April 4, 2006. This process will select the number of petitions needed to meet the cap. USCIS will reject all capsubject petitions not randomly selected. USCIS will also reject petitions for new H-2B workers seeking employment start dates prior to Oct. 1, 2006 that arrive after April 4.

Petitions for both current and returning H-2B workers do not count towards the congressionally mandated bi-annual H-2B cap. "Returning workers" are exempt from H-2B cap limitations. In order to qualify, the worker must have counted against the H-2B numerical cap between Oct. 1, 2002 and Sept. 30, 2005. Any worker not certified as a "returning worker" is subject to the numerical limitations for the relevant fiscal year. Petitions received after the "final receipt date" which contain a combination of "returning workers" and workers subject to the H-2B cap will be rejected with respect to non-returning workers, and petitioning employers will receive partial approvals for those aliens who qualify as "returning workers" if otherwise approvable.

USCIS will continue to process petitions filed to:

- Extend the stay of a current H-2B worker in the United States.
- Change the terms of employment for current H-2B workers and extend their stay.
- Allow current H-2B workers to change or add employers and extend their stay.
- Request eligible H-2B "returning workers."

More information about the H-2B work program is available at www.uscis.gov or by calling the National Customer Service Center at 800/375-5283.



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IMMIGRATION ISSUES & LABOR SOLUTIONS

Are You Prepared For a Search?

The government is getting tough on immigration law enforcement, targeting businesses that knowingly employ illegals, including service industries like landscaping.

Whether your business is knowingly in violation of the law or not, you should be prepared if the Department of Home-

land Security (DHS) or Department of Labor (DOL) come knocking.

American Nursery & Landscape Association (ANLA) Certified Consultant Monte Lake of McGuinness, Norris & Williams prepared these guidelines to follow if your business is visited by a DHS or DOL representative wanting to conduct an audit or spot check, execute a search warrant or arrest employees for alleged immigration law violations.

 Review your current employment practices and procedures to

make sure they comply with the law. Make sure your staff is properly and consistently carrying them out.

• Review your recordkeeping practices to ensure you are keeping the proper records for the required time periods. Perform a "spot check" of I-9 Forms and other documents to make sure they are being properly and consistently filled out by responsible staff.

 Designate and authorize a management representative to meet and talk with DHS or DOL personnel when they visit your business. Educate the representative regarding



appropriate procedures, including when to call the owner or the company's attorney. Make sure other employees know to refer inquiries from the government to the designated representative. The company representative should be polite and cooperate with DHS

and DOL, always asking for proper identification if it is not offered by the government representative.

 Educate designated company representatives that government officials must have a search warrant to enter your premises to seize evidence or apprehend employees, unless the owner or representative consents or the property is located within 25 miles of the U.S. border.

 In the event of a criminal investigation, as evidenced by the issuance of a search warrant authorizing the

seizure of computer records and other employmentrelated documents, review the search warrant and make sure only those items listed on the warrant are taken and make an inventory of what is taken. Call the company attorney as soon as possible to seek advice and determine how much you and other employees should cooperate, particularly regarding interviews.

The full list of guidelines is available to ANLA members in the Compliance Center section of the association's Web site at www.anla.org.



MERGERS & ACQUISITIONS



Davey Tree Acquires Organicare

The Davey Tree Expert Co., Kent, Ohio, has added the Portlandbased Organicare company to its long list of recent acquisitions. The acquisition marks Davey's 17th in three years, and is in line with the company's long-term growth strategy, says Ken Celmer, senior vice president and general manager of residential/commercial services.

The company will be called Davey-Organicare and will continue serving customers in both Portland and Vancouver, Wash. Paul Drake started the company in 1988 and will be staying with the office as district manager, along with most of the other employees.

Richard Foote, operations manager in charge of acquisitions and expansion, agreed that the acquisition was a good fit. "Davey has wanted to penetrate the Portland market for quite some time," he says. He also pointed out that all of the Organicare employees can now benefit from being part of an employee-owned company. "Also, now that they're working for an international company with branches throughout North America, they have greater opportunities for training and growth," Foote says.

Drake agrees, saying: "Working with a company that is historically known for its tree expertise and employee ownership affords our employees different opportunities to grow and move up within the company."

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MERGERS & ACQUISITIONS



ECHO Acquires TerraMarc Industries

ECHO announced the acquisition of TerraMarc Industries, the manufacturer of Bear Cat chippers and chipper/shredders and Crary agricultural equipment.

Located in West Fargo, N.D., the company will operate as a subsidiary of ECHO under the name Crary Industries. The company's 2005 sales were in excess of \$35 million, with employment of 180 people. President Chuck Crary, founder of Crary Co., predecessor company to TerraMarc Industries, will continue to lead the organization.

"The Bear Cat line of products complements our current line of high performance outdoor power equipment," says Joe Fahey, vice president of marketing for ECHO. "Our common channels of distribution and focus on product quality will strengthen our offering to the markets we serve."

Terms of the sale were not announced.

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: Keep your work area clean and uncluttered.

SPANISH: Manten tu area trabajadora limpia y organizada. (Mahn-ten too ah-re-ah tra-bah-ha-door-ah lim-p-ah e or-gahn-e-sahd-ah.)

2. ENGLISH: Let me show you how.

SPANISH: Dejame ensenarte como. (Deh-ha-may N-sin-yar-tay coh-moh.)

3. ENGLISH: Don't rush it.

SPANISH: No te apures. (No tay ah-poo-rehs.)

4. ENGLISH: Get out of the sun for a few minutes.

SPANISH: Sal te del sol por unos pocos minutos. (Sahl tay dehl sohl poor ooh-nohs poh-cohs mee-noo-tohs.)

OBITUARY

Bell Laboratories, Inc.

Bell Labs Founder Passes Away

MADISON – Malcolm Stack, founder and president of Bell Laboratories, died at home on April 16, following a battle with cancer.

Stack was born on May 9, 1935, in Manchester, England. He left England at age 16 and joined the Canadian Navy, after which he immigrated to the United States.

Stack started Bell Laboratories in 1974 to produce rodent control products. Stack became highly regarded among his peers and was the recipient of numerous awards.

In lieu of flowers, the Stack family asks that you plant a flower, bush or tree in his memory this year. Donations can be made to the Creating Hope Fund at the Comprehensive Cancer Center at UW-Madison or to the Evans Scholars Foundation. More information can be found at www.maloncourse.com. – Dan Moreland & Brad Harbison

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announcement

at least 12 weeks

in advance to

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JUNE 13 – 17 Snow & Ice Management Association Symposium 2006, Hartford, Conn. Contact: www.sima.org

JUNE 13 – 14 National Lawn & Garden Show, Rosemont, III.

Contact: www.nlgshow.com, 888/316-0226

JUNE 15 – 18 2006 Florida Nursery, Growers & Landscape Association Annual Convention, St. Petersburg, Fla. Contact: jschaaf@fngla.org, www.fngla.org, 407/295-7994

JUNE 22 – 23 Independent Turf & Ornamental Distributors Association Distributors Management Forum, Long Branch, N.J. Contact: www.itoda.org, 814/238-1573

JUNE 22 – 24 Outdoor Power Equipment Institute Annual Meeting, Carlsbad, Calif. Contact: www.opei.org, 703/549-7600

JULY 8 – 11 The Ohio State Florist Association Short Course, Columbus, Ohio. Contact: ofa@ofa.org, www.ofa.org, 614/487-1117

JULY 8 – 12 123rd American Seed Trade Association Annual Convention, Chicago, III. Contact: www.amseed.org, 703/837-9365

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

JULY 23 – 25 Professional Landcare Network Legislative Day on the Hill, Washington, D.C. Contact: www.landcarenetwork.org, 800/395-2522

JULY 25 – 27 Pennsylvania Allied Nursery Trade Show 2006 (PANTS), Fort Washington, Pa. Contact: sally.oshea@verizon.net, www.plna.com, 610/544-5775

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Mike Dykstra, Dykstra Landscape Services Inc., Grand Haven, Michigan



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See more of what Mike Dykstra has to say at www.mowpro.com USE READER SERVICE # 21



ILT Vignocchi proves seasonal color can be a year-round money maker.



elisa Bell knows how plant rotations throughout the year can be beneficial. Bell, the landscape maintenance department manager at ILT Vignocchi in Wauconda, Ill., offers seasonal color to all of the company's maintenance clients, and many of them are buying. Her company has been offering the year-round service for the past 17 years, and started focusing its efforts on promoting and improving the seasonal color program about five years ago.

ILT's seasonal color service includes up to four visits per year to each site for beautification. As the name suggests, the idea is to add color to an area by

planting greens and flowers that coordinate with that particular time of year. ILT Vignocchi workers plant tulips and other bulbs in the spring, various summer annuals, mums and pansies in the fall and green decorations for the winter months as customers request them. When Bell joined the ILT Vignocchi team six years ago, she saw seasonal color as an add-on service with tremendous growth potential. "We realized this was a segment of the

by heather wood

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lawn & landscape

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Southwest Putting Green Technologies, Inc., 8535 E. Hartford Dr., Suite 105, Scottsdale, AZ 85255 USE READER SERVICE # 22 market that was growing and we wanted to be competitive," she says. "It was also an area in which we could differentiate ourselves from our competition by planting unique, beautiful annual flowerbeds and doing things like winter greenery."

GETTING STARTED. ILT Vignocchi's annual revenue from seasonal



venue from seasonal color is \$350,000 to \$400,000 and the service is part of all work orders and site enhancements. That accounts for about 25 percent of the company's maintenance service revenue.

To boost profits, she suggests proposing four rotations – one per season – to clients.

To successfully add seasonal color to their service menus, contractors need to consider logistics, Bell says. Will annual flowers be delivered to the site or yard, or will they need to be picked up from the grower and transported to the site? ILT Vignocchi generally has its annuals delivered because that option is available in the Chicago market.

Bell uses estimating software that calculates material and labor costs, which she adjusts based on indirect costs. "Say a property has 125 4.5inch pots," she says. "The system was built to provide an installed price per unit and we adjust the system each year according to market price increases."

The price the company charges includes fertilization, and the pricing structure is different for high-end residential and commercial properties, Bell says.

When she first arrives on site, Bell measures and photographs the beds. She gives this information to her estimator to generate a proposal. The continued on page 38, sidebar on page 36



Photo: ILT Vignocchi

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USE READER SERVICE # 25

site at www.sepro.com.

tools of the trade



Melisa Bel

fter six years of perfecting her seasonal color service, Melisa Bell, landscape maintenance department manager, ILT Vignocchi, Wauconda, III., offers suggestions as to the right tools to have on hand for the job. The following items can help the service run smoothly:

- · Rototiller This machine costs about \$2,000, she says.
- Enclosed trailer for transporting annual flowers - Use this in lieu of delivery, if necessary, Bell says, adding that an enclosed trailer can cost between \$6,000 and \$9,000.
- A space to store bed amendments - The amount of space needed depends on the amount of plant material

being stored. Bell stores about 50 cubic yards at a time.

 Digital camera – Pictures are part of preparing the seasonal color plan. But contractors should also regularly take photos of color work they do. "You can never have too many pictures," Bell says, adding that most of today's digital cameras are fine for the job, though a decent camera costs about \$300.

In addition, Bell uses several forms she created that assist her and her team in planning and organizing seasonal color rotations. She also uses estimating software. Bell's final bit of advice: "Be organized and consider all of the costs before jumping into seasonal color."



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business opportunities

continued from page 34

production staff uses the pictures with the forms Bell creates that specify what materials will be needed and where they will be planted. "There are times when I meet the crew on site, but usually they just work off of the forms," she says.

SELLING SEASONAL. ILT Vignocchi became more aggressive in marketing seasonal color about five years ago. Looking back, Bell says, "There was not one specific reason for adding the service, but rather many good ones. The improved beautification of our customers' properties leads to increased customer satisfaction, which leads to increased sales, referrals, etc. We weren't marketing it before and I was sure it would be easier to sell once we got serious about it."

About two-thirds of ILT Vignocchi's client base is residential, while the rest is commercial. The company makes it a practice to send a newsletter to existing clients early in the year to introduce the seasonal color concept and showcase a few of its creations. This helps get customers thinking about expanding their services to include seasonal color.

Once customers are thinking about seasonal color, one of the biggest challenges is gaining their trust to give ILT room to showcase its artistic expertise. This is especially true on the residential end of business, Bell says. "Customers some-



Photo: ILT Vignocchi

times want to be an active part of the process, but they can get off track, as there are a lot of details," she says, adding that she doesn't recommend showing the customer a catalog of flowers during the sales process because the multitude of information can be overwhelming for the customer and the conversation could lose its focus.

Instead, Bell shows customers a portfolio with examples of the company's seasonal color work. "When the customer sees the past work, it instills confidence and they see that you have good ideas," she says, adding that this allows her to take charge and do her job. "You want to understand their vision, but you don't want them to dictate the design process.

Bell finds that it's best to avoid discussing specific plant materials with clients during the initial consultation. "There

USE READER SERVICE # 28

june 2006

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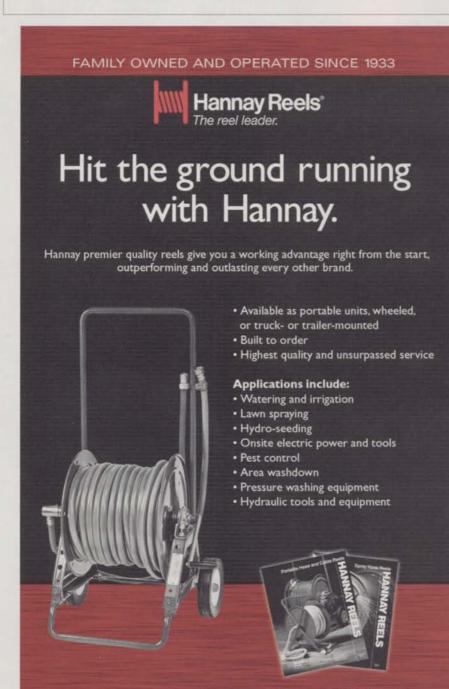
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are literally thousands of annuals to choose from," she says. "You don't want to bog someone down."

A better way to introduce seasonal color, she says, is explaining it to customers in terms of colors and themes. This saves them the confusion that could result from introducing them to the multitude of plant species. Bell then gives the customers a few days to think it over before following up.

Bell provides customers a contract that includes four rotations – one for each season. She prices each rotation separately. Bell says even if customers choose not to take her up on all four rotations, they at least have the idea in front of them and many times are so



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pleased with the summer rotation that they will sign up for other rotations in the same or following season.

CHOOSE WISELY. There is a rhyme and reason to the placement of annuals that needs to be considered to impress and retain customers, Bell says. For example, annual flowers draw attention to areas, so she doesn't recommend using them to try to hide unsightly places. For commercial sites, annual colors accent entrances and signage nicely, she says.

Consider existing elements at a site, such as perennials, and make sure the annuals complement, not

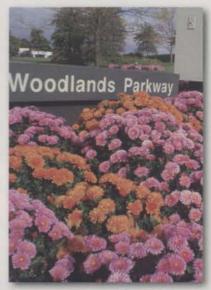


Photo: ILT Vignocchi

compete, with them. Another way to prevent competing arrangements is to keep it simple. Bell generally doesn't use more than three plant varieties in one bed.

Besides getting customers to trust her judgment, Bell says one of the most challenging parts of the service has been training the staff. Catching on to the proper way to fill out and follow the annual flowerbed form ILT uses has taken employees more time than expected, she says. But the system is worth the time it takes to learn, Bell adds. "There's a good amount of work in the way of training and planning in the beginning," she says, "but as the years go by, the amount of time it saves you is unbelievable." u

www.lawnandlandscape.com

Visit the June Online Extras section for more photos of ILT Vignocchi's seasonal color work.

USE READER SERVICE # 33

lawn & landscape ju

june 2006

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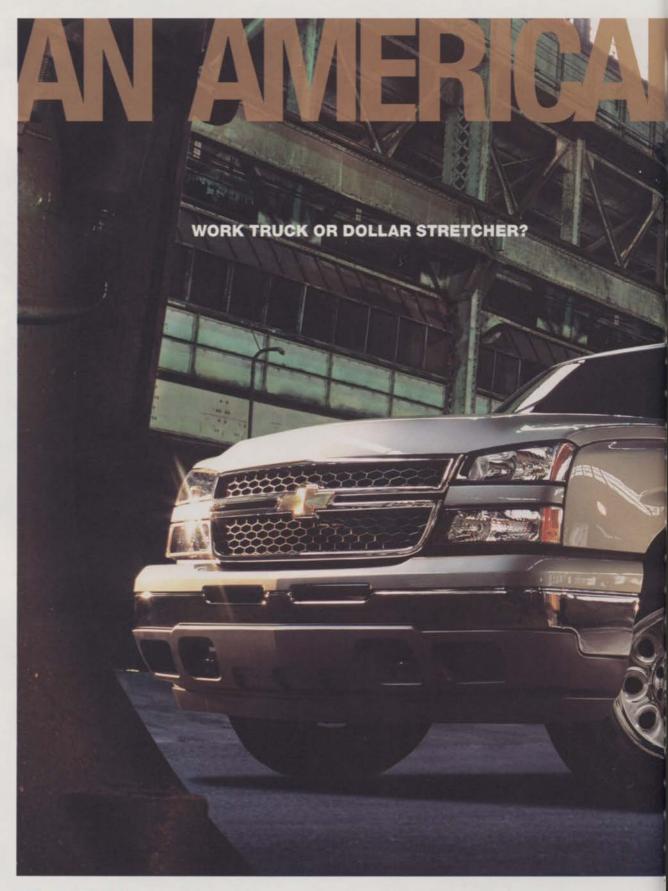
A tepid winter and an early spring afforded Philadelphia-based Cenova the opportunity to have its landscape crews conducting spring cleanup three weeks earlier than usual. And on this mid-April morning, Pagurek had to fill a mulch deficit so his crews could attend to their Greater Philly clients.

"It's a tough situation to be in," says Pagurek, the firm's president, who after a few strategic phone calls chased down the necessary materials. "We've got a reputation to uphold and our clients want their beds mulched."

continued to page 46

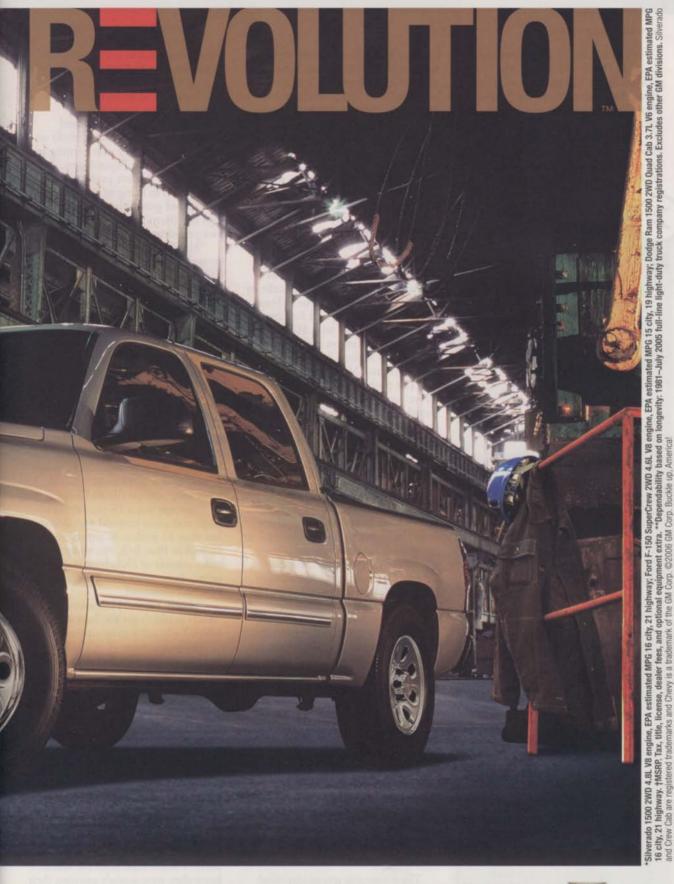
by mike zawacki





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continued from page 42

It's been a hectic 2006 for Cenova, to say the least. This spring, the Philly firm mulched 120 retail pharmacies from Harrisburg, Pa. to the Jersey shore, and by year's end will have spread nearly 3,000 yards of mulch.

Besides mulching, truck breakdowns, sick employees, moving into its new company headquarters this month or any of the other routine

>

cenova

PRESIDENT: Ken Pagurek Jr. HEADQUARTERS: Philadelphia, Pa. FOUNDED: 2003 EMPLOYEES: 23 to 25 year-round premerger and 30 to 35 year-round post-merger, 200 seasonal

SERVICE BREAKOUT:

59% Snow & Ice Removal 12.5% Design/Build 12.5% Tree & Ornamental Services 10% Maintenance/Mowing 2% Installation Only (no design) 2% Irrigation Services 1% Chemical Lawn Care 1% Power Washing

CLIENT BREAKOUT:

58% Commercial 30% Commercial Residential 10% Residential 2% Government/Municipal

REVENUE BREAKOUT:

2006 Revenue (projected)	\$4.0 million
(post-merger)	
2005 Revenue:	\$3.2 million
(pre-merger)	
2004 Revenue	\$1.7 million

THREE GREATEST CHALLENGES:

 Streamlining the recent merger while maintaining efficiencies.
 Finding and training employees to continually exceed our customers' expectations.

3. National companies undercutting pricing.

GREATEST LABOR CHALLENGE:

Language barriers while increasing our Hispanic workforce, which represents 25 percent of Cenova's total workforce.

CONTACT INFO:

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2745 W. Allegheny Ave., Philadelphia, Pa. 19132; PH: 215/225-4370, FX: 215/225-4371 WEB: www.cenovainc.com E-MAIL: k.pagurek@cenovainc.com business obstacles it has overcome, the most crucial challenge was Cenova's acquisition of Ecoscape, a small landscape firm its ownership group anticipates will strengthen the company and enable it to better perform in a highly competitive marketplace.

But the experience, which came together at a dizzying pace, had its own unique set of challenges, some that became evident only after the ink on the deal had dried.

GOOD TO GREAT. Cenova was performing well but needed to grow more quickly.

The company formed prior to Winter 2003 as a snow-only outfit by merging the snow divisions of Four Seasons Landscaping and Kenilworth Management Corp. with HPK Properties. In fact, Cenova is the fusion of Latin words derived from Ce (to rise or project) and Nova (new).

"The problem we faced was how do we keep our guys employed for 12 months out of the year by just pushing snow?" Pagurek says. "So in 2004 we converted our snow contracts into full-service contracts so we could be in our clients' faces 12 months out of the year."

To accommodate this growth, Cenova invested nearly \$1 million in a soup-to-nuts plan – everything from chainsaws to riding mowers – to equip itself for the challenge.

"We needed to assure our clients we could provide landscape services comparable to the reputation we had for plowing snow," Pagurek says.

It didn't take long, though, for Cenova's ownership group to realize it needed to further diversify its service offerings to strengthen its revenue stream. For example, without diversification, a weak winter or the loss of a major client could financially cripple the company. In 2005, the owners wrestled with how to make Cenova a viable player in Greater Philadelphia's highly competitive marketplace, says Harry Scott, a Cenova co-owner and vice president of marketing.

"We had a good handle on landscape maintenance," Scott says. "But we wanted to fine-tune the operations to build a recession-proof business. To do that, we'd need multiple revenue streams."

The ownership group identified hardscapes and landscape construction as untapped revenue streams. Cenova landed some jobs and did them well, but the owners learned they weren't as proficient with hardscaping as they first thought. "We were making money," Pagurek says. "But we weren't making much money."

Cenova's owners anticipated between 30 and 40 percent profit on hardscapes, but they were earning as little as 7 percent, Pagurek says. To troubleshoot the low profit margin, they'd need to bring in the expertise to lead and grow this new division, says Bill Blum, Cenova co-owner and vice president of operations.

"Hardscaping was the area we struggled with the most," Blum says. "That's where our biggest need was and without this knowledge and expertise we were going to be fighting an uphill battle. It's very easy to lose money in this industry. And if you continue to lose money, how good are you as a business?"

As fate would have it, in January Cenova's owners were contemplating their next move when Pagurek received a curious e-mail in his inbox.

COLD CALL, COURTSHIP AND

COLD FEET. For all intents and purposes, the acquisition of Ecoscape started with a 2003 snow removal trade magazine profile on Cenova.

Ecoscape was a 15-year-old landscape and snow removal firm doing less than \$1 million in annual revenue located in Blue Bell, Pa., about 20 miles outside of Philadelphia. At that point, then-owner Rob Halfpenny's firm had plateaued.

"I hit the wall," Halfpenny says. "And I couldn't get the business to where I wanted it to be size-wise."

Halfpenny wore all of the hats at Ecoscape, and his failure to have effective business systems in place ground his business growth to a halt. He faced two options – either downsize the company or sell off its assets. Halfpenny chose the latter.

"I had a snow magazine with an article on Cenova floating around the Ecoscape office for some time," Halfpenny says. "They were the first firm I thought of when I made the decision to sell."

Obtaining an e-mail address from the article, Halfpenny floated the idea of a merger past Pagurek in early January. "I wrote that, from the article, I knew they were actively growing their landscape business and whether they would consider buying my landscape business," he says.

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"I responded, 'Let's talk a little bit,'" Pagurek says. "We knew nothing other than Ecoscape had a good hardscaping business."

E-mails lead to phone calls which evolved quickly into lunch meetings between Pagurek and Halfpenny. Within a week the two sides were talking numbers.

"There was a lot about Ecoscape that we liked," Scott says. "Ecoscape did snow removal, did landscape maintenance and Rob had those operations finely tuned. But the one specialty Rob had was hardscapes – patio and walkway work – and that's where we wanted to be with Cenova."

By early February, Cenova's accountants were involved in the due diligence process reviewing Ecoscape's tax returns and financial statements to assess the company's economic health. In the meantime, Cenova's attorney began drawing up acquisition papers. Simultaneously, Cenova personnel began auditing Ecoscape's equipment inventory and account history. Pagurek wanted to act quickly. Not only was Cenova racing to the start of the spring contract and maintenance season, but also any hesitation increased the risk of outside interference.

"We felt if it was going to happen we had to move quickly on this merger because there's always the possibility of our competition getting wind of this deal," Pagurek says. "We know our competition is out there always looking for opportunity and a few thousand dollars could sway this deal out of our favor."

As part of Cenova's due diligence, the owners conducted a site-bysite tour of Ecoscape's clients. "We wanted to see the quality of work Rob was putting out on the street," Pagurek says. "Curb appeal is everything in this business and we knew what we wanted Ecoscape sites to look like. We wanted to determine whether these were sites we wanted the Cenova name on.

"If those sites didn't look good,

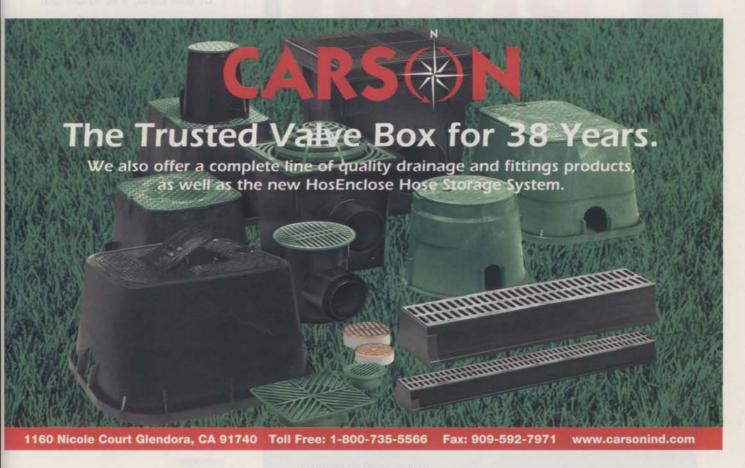
that would have been the red flag that this poor quality of work was considered acceptable for his crews," he adds. "That wouldn't have been acceptable to us."

Everything checked out to Cenova's satisfaction and the owners began negotiating a purchase price.

"We put our value on his company and he put together his value and we went from there," Pagurek says. "You get to a certain point where your dollar amounts are at a level you can both be comfortable with."

Or so Cenova's owners thought.

At the 11th hour, and the day before a big regional suburban landscape show where Cenova planned to announce the acquisition, Halfpenny got cold feet and backed out. "I had a lot of lingering concerns," he says. "Financially, this deal required a quick decision on my part and I felt I needed some more time to think on it. Also, I'd never worked for anyone other than myself before and I didn't know how I'd fit in at Cenova. The



cover story >

whole idea of not being my own boss anymore pushed me back a bit."

Cenova's ownership group was shocked and the situation grew tense.

"At the time we felt it was a slap in the face," Blum says. "We thought he may have been trying to strong arm us for more money."

Emotions ran high, talks broke

down and the two sides were divided.

"There were definitely some emotions involved on both sides," Halfpenny says. "But what helped me through it was Walt (Kaufmann, Cenova co-owner and CFO) took me aside at that meeting and said, 'Sometimes these things don't work, but that doesn't mean the doors are

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closed.' That kept me in tune that these guys were good guys and something could still be worked out."

Kaufmann didn't interpret Halfpenny's last-minute reluctance as a shady tactic. Instead, he recognized honest uncertainty and sympathized with Halfpenny's dilemma.

"I really thought he was good for us and he just needed to get his head together," Kaufmann says. "As far as I was concerned, I knew it would happen if he could work some issues out."

"We felt if it was going to happen we had to move quickly on this merger because there's always the possibility of our competition getting wind of this deal. We know our competition is out there always looking for opportunity and a few thousand dollars could sway this deal out of our favor." – Ken Pagurek

RE-EVALUATION AND COM-PROMISE. In hindsight, Cenova's ownership group readily admits it was hampered by time constraints amid a hurried due diligence process, as well as temporarily blinded by the prospects of a deal so sweet it ended up being too good to be true.

For Cenova, late February was a critical time. It was emerging from a pair of snow and ice events while getting a jump on landscape contracts and all the while trying to do its due diligence on Ecoscape. At the same time, the Cenova member responsible for the bulk of the due diligence work on Ecoscape, which included computing the original asking price, left the company.

Some days passed after the deal

june 2006

collapsed and everyone wondered if it had been abandoned in haste. So, Cenova's ownership group re-evaluated what killed the deal. Both sides declined to discuss detailed financial figures involved throughout the deal with *Lawn & Landscape*. However, Halfpenny wanted about 30 percent more for Ecoscape than what Cenova had offered. In addition, Cenova had offered to pay 50 percent up front for Ecoscape and the remaining half in six months, which made Halfpenny uncomfortable.

Cenova's owners recrunched the numbers, this time adding more weight to intangibles such as



Back row left to right: Harry Scott, Rob Halfpenny, Bill Blum. Front row left to right: Ken Pagurek, Walt Kaufmann.

Ecoscape's customer relations and account longevity. "We realized there was enough there to raise our offer," Blum says. "In the end, it was still a really good deal that was good for everyone involved."

Most importantly, both sides kept the lines of communication open.

"It was a Saturday afternoon and Ken called saying: 'Let's get this deal done,'" Halfpenny says.

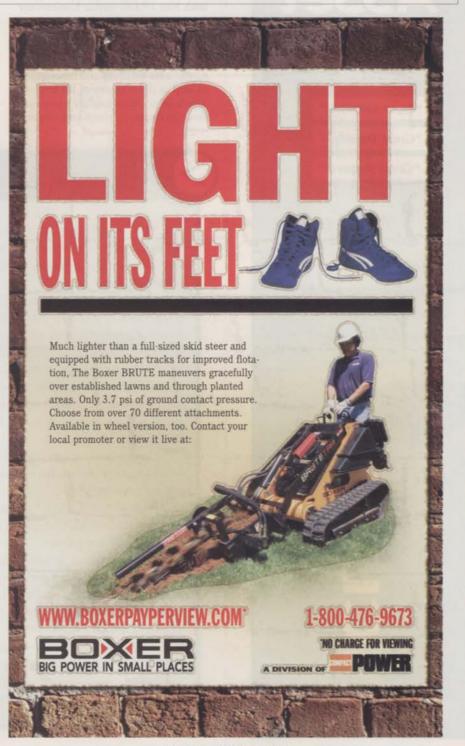
The two sides compromised on a new purchase price and Cenova agreed to pay two-thirds up front and the remainder after six months.

"They gave me that comfort level I needed," Halfpenny says.

"In the grand scheme of things, it was worth every additional penny," Pagurek says. "Increasing the amount was absolutely the right thing to do."

By the second week of March, with spring just around the corner, the two parties inked a deal that brought Ecoscape employees including Halfpenny, its accounts and the bulk of its equipment under Cenova's shingle. ASSIMILATION. Ecoscape's impact on Cenova was immediate. Halfpenny, as Cenova's director of operations, hit the ground running and immediately began to deliver on his promises. By late April, Cenova had hardscape work booked nearly two months out.

"We needed someone who could make a difference and take owner-



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ship of the hardscape situation day in and day out and grow that business," Blum says. "Rob goes out and physically acquires the work and doesn't spend a lot of time throwing money at marketing and advertising. He's a presence at festivals and home shows and really works leads. To me, that's going out and earning it."

In addition, Halfpenny brought with him 19 full-service homeowner association accounts that immediately bolstered Cenova's cash flow.

But not everything flowed as smoothly. Halfpenny brought to Cenova his foremen and laborers, as well as the majority of his key employees. Compatibility issues rose from Ecoscape foremen and workers

part

doing things differently then Cenova personnel, and vice versa.

The transition is similar to adopting a child into an established family, Pagurek says. There will be confusion, misunderstandings and some resentment from both parties, he says, but these issues must be worked through for the merger to achieve final success.

To facilitate this cohesion, Pagurek gathered his foremen together to hammer out transition issues. "We established the ground rules and a game plan," he says. "We're here to do a job and to do that job the proper way."

Then, they redefined and explained everyone's role at a company meeting. "We explained that some of

A the outset, Cenova's owners realized Rob Halfpenny may have some transition issues following the merger of his company, Ecoscape, with their firm.

ot

a team

In 15 years in business, Halfpenny had always been a business owner, and never an employee. They anticipated he may have difficulty adjusting to this new role as a Cenova employee.

"Rob was going from an owner's role to an employee role." says President Ken Pagurek. "That can be a real tough transition to go through. We wanted him to feel he was part of this team."

Cenova's owners wanted to reinforce that, while he wasn't an owner, Halfpenny was a valued team member.

As part of that effort, Cenova bestowed Halfpenny with a company truck – a 2005 Ford F-350 Lariat with all the perks.

"We gave him a company truck identical to what each owner at the company drives," Pagurek says. "We saw Rob coming into the company as a high-employee role and we wanted him to buy into Cenova's vision."

"We've tried our best to treat Rob not as an employee, but as one of us," adds Harry Scott, a Cenova co-owner and vice president of marketing. "He doesn't work for us, he works with us."

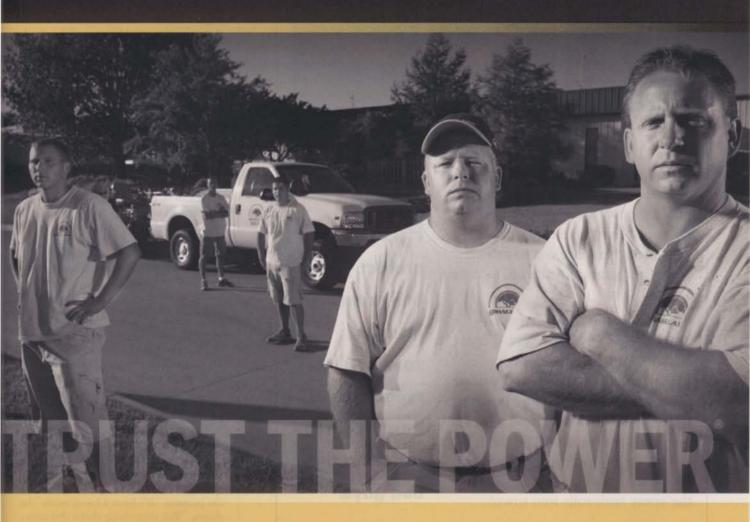


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Trimec Plus ★ protect your bluegrass, fescues, zoysiagrass, ryegrass and Bermudagrass turf from the bad guys. the new guys were foremen and their words were to be followed," he says. "If not, there would be consequences.

cover story

"We wanted to assimilate the efficiencies the new Ecoscape foremen and workers were bringing to Cenova," Pagurek says. "We let everyone know if there were any problems, or if they had issues with an individual or felt they were being treated unfairly, they were to go through the chain of command and we would address those issues."

But company personnel weren't the only ones adjusting. Clients can get spooked when they hear the company they trust is under new ownership.

Following an informative mailing outlining the merger, Halfpenny met with each Ecoscape client in person-the majority of which were home owner associations – and explained the merger and reassured them service would not suffer, but get better. Armed with the mantra that nothing had changed, he communicated the only difference was now they had a larger menu of services to choose from, such as tree trimming, irrigation and more comprehensive snow removal.

"The only change was in the name," Halfpenny told his clients. "There would be the same contacts and the same crews working the sites. That was the key for most of my clients. In the past, some had been burned by having a national company come in, buy out their landscape firm, and then have everything go to hell real quick."

Sure, there were bumps along the way, Blum says, but persevering through those trouble spots is part of the process. "It's been a lot of work," he shares. "But everything about this company has been a lot of work since it was conceived. So why would this merger have been any different?"

For Halfpenny, though, the fears he harbored prior to the merger about fitting in and no longer being an owner have bore no fruit. In fact, joining Cenova has provided him with opportunities for his own personal growth.

"It's amazing when you're not wearing every hat in the company that you're able to focus on your expertise and how easy it is to accomplish the goals you set for yourself," Halfpenny says. "Sometimes I can't believe I didn't do this two years ago." IL

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Find more information on Cenova's business practices and tips on how to value your business in the June Online Extras section.

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by mike zawacki

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Growing Pains

Success often comes with a price. As a landscape contractor's reputation grows so does demand and the need to increase laborers and equipment. *Lawn & Landscape* Message Board users weigh in with their philosophies for dealing with growing pains.

M

ichael Deno is experiencing his first growing pains. Deno, vice president of three-year-old Copper Sun Design Group, based in

Harrisburg, Pa., recently participated in a local tradeshow for residential customers to find out information for home improvement projects. Prior to the show, Deno subsisted on referrals as his only source of marketing or advertising.

However, the show generated interest and demand for Deno's services, which has stretched this one-crew operation to the max.

"At this point, it could be five months before we could begin new work," Deno says of the backlog. "Everyone wants to know when we can start their work and they're disappointed when I tell them it will be months from now.

Uncertain of whether this is the right time to hire additional employees and possibly invest in additional equipment, Deno recently posted his dilemma on the *Lawn & Landscape* Message Board.

"I've always wanted this problem," Deno says. "But now that it's here, I feel the pressure of having to make a hasty decision or possibly lose the opportunity to step up."

Message Board participants provided Deno with plenty of options to consider as he takes this next growth step.

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ACCOMMODATE DEMAND.

"Maintaining a five-month backlog of jobs is almost unheard of in the landscape industry," according to Andrew Aksar, president of Outdoor Finishes, Walkersville, Md.

As a result, Bob Keating, president of Liberty Land Management, Palm Harbor, Fla., says additional crews are necessary to take advantage of the revenue potential when dealing with an increase in demand for work. "I have never liked the word, 'backlogged,'" he says. "To me, that is like going to McDonalds, asking for a Big Mac and they tell you to come back in five months. A backlog is growth untouched and unrecognized."

Message Board participant Gene Varano, owner of Florida-based Gene Varano Landscaping, agrees that hiring is the best course of action. "A little more expansion now can allow you a bit of time to be real efficient with twice the men and workload when the economy turns rather than flailing through it when things are tighter," he says. "You don't have to raise prices to accommodate hiring. "If you don't expand now while you have a workload, how would you expand when you have less work at a lower margin?" he asks, adding that he suspects a lot of potential work – and revenue – is not being realized.

"Sure people are anxious to get their projects done," Aksar agrees, "but I'd bet you're leaving a pile of money on the table."

Expand to meet the demand is also Jeff Patterson's advice. However, he warns contractors to keep in mind that impatient potential clients may back out to find a firm that can meet their needs and tend to their projects in a faster timetable.

"I leave myself (labor and equipment levels) just shy of what I need to get all of my work done," says Patterson, a Michigan-based landscape contractor. "That means I have to really push to get everything done, but it also means that if there is a brief slowdown or hiccup I'm not left with excess capacity. Basically, my advice is to expand, but don't overbuild your business because it might come back to haunt you if the economy hiccups." Message Board participant Scott Floyd, general manager, Diamondscapes, Point of Rock, Md., points out another potential flaw in expanding to accommodate the workload – this action may not result in earning enough to cover costs that weren't accounted for when the job was priced.

"Most likely there is not enough money on these jobs to cover the extra overhead one would incur buying all the new equipment required to outfit another crew," he says. "These once profitable jobs now become losses or breakevens. If your work is quality and you sell yourself and your company as the best, potential customers – not all, but most – will wait to have your company do the work."

For contractors who do choose to add extra manpower and equipment to accommodate the work, Will Sharp, president of Lawn Dawg Services, Matthews, N.C., advises they do so only when they have a solid plan in hand. "To expand and not go crazy you'll need a real plan with sales goals and expenses tied together, not hastily put together in a

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"I've always wanted this problem . But now that it's here, I feel the pressure of having to make a hasty decision or possibly lose the opportunity to step up." – Michael Deno

panic," he says. "What is your closing ratio? Even on referrals, it should not be more than 50 percent."

OTHER OPTIONS. For contractors who feel expanding to cover the excess workload is not their preference, James Binns, Earthworks Landscape Gardening, Fayetteville, Ark., recommends subcontracting some of the jobs to other local landscape contractors. Also, narrow landscape jobs down by basing them on your best skills and abilities.

"Take only the jobs that you are good at," Binns says. "Don't take everything that comes your way."

Sal Mortilla, owner of Landscapers Unlimited, Long Island, N.Y., cautions against making a heavy investment in personnel and equipment.

"If I need more trucks, I rent them by the day or week," he says. "All my help have driver's licenses so there is no problem there because the labor is plentiful and skilled. Of course, the rented equipment and temporary labor would probably only work in the design/install area. Using my method in the past, I was able to turn what would have been a four-month backlog into one month or less." After reviewing Deno's story further, Todd Patton, president of Patton Property Maintenance, Haymarket, Va., questioned whether Copper Sun Design Group's influx in jobs came directly from the trade show. If so, that would impact whether Deno could continue to cover the costs of the additional workforce and equipment once those projects were completed.

"It's hard to hire and train new people and then have to let them go because of a shortage of work," Patton says. "Referrals are nice, but you'd better plan on some good advertising and bringing in some big money to make up the difference if you're going to keep the employees you've invested all that training in."

As a follow-up to his initial post to the Lawn & Landscape Message Board, Deno concludes he plans to step up his advertising efforts in order to continue "filling the pipeline" with future work while maintaining his current level of productivity. (u sidebar on page 58

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oto: Tan Wei ming Agency/Dreamstime.com

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approaching growth with a strategic plan

Strategic planning matches your business strengths to the opportunities in your market. The U.S. Small Business Administration offers eight elements to consider when undergoing the strategic planning process.

1. Mission Statement: A careful assessment of your business and its goals, as well as its future potential.

2. Philosophy: Defines how you envision the company to operate.

 Goals: Key functions that guide and maintain the business on a path consistent with its mission.

4. Objectives to Achieve Goals: Establishing and achieving several specific objectives that are clear, concise, attainable and measurable.

5. Environmental and Industry Analysis: Positions the business within its industry and the broader business environment.

6. Information Needs: Refers to the way you gather, screen, analyze and use information.

7. Internal Business Analysis: What gives you a competitive advantage?

 Finalizing a Plan: Once you know the competitors, customers, suppliers and situations your business faces, combine that with an understanding of your strengths and weaknesses.



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oto: John Dee

Manufacturers, dealers and landscape contractors share their best tips for choosing the right pieces of handheld products to round out equipment fleets.

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he key to a dependable piece of handheld equipment is quality.

Just ask Scott Thomas. A 21-year landscape veteran, Thomas knows all too well how going the cheap route can leave a landscape contractor with the short end of a broken string trimmer. In Thomas' case, he made the mistake of

purchasing a residential- vs. commercial-grade blower and paid the price. "It just wasn't cut out for the kind of work I needed it to do," says Thomas, who operates Team, a landscape firm based in North Broward County, Fla. He received less than a year of service out of that blower – about half the life of a commercial model, he estimates. "It was fine for residential use, but wasn't made for the type of use that's day-in and dayout," he says. "And, pricewise, you save a little money in the beginning when you buy residential equipment, but it won't last as long so it becomes more expensive in the long run."

Since committing to commercialgrade handheld equipment, Thomas

by mark phillips

issue focus

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For Spring 2006:

and rewarding. Energy levels are high. Attack hills and enjoy the long stretch Mowing will prove to be productive of green ahead. hasn't had a single regret. "You've got to buy quality equipment," he says. "You're just wasting your money if you're not buying commercial-grade."

Whether it's a trimmer, edger, blower or hedger, a small arsenal of dependable handheld gear that contractors don't need to treat with kid gloves can save them a lot of heartache and extra trips to the dealer.

"There seems to be two schools of thought," explains Randy Saelens, manager of portable power equipment for Moline, Ill.-based John Deere. "Some contractors buy cheaper models that they 'throw away' often. And others buy equipment for the long-haul – they want to buy heavierduty units that need to be maintained but will last longer." The contractors who choose the latter, Saelens says, are the ones who usually find that their investments pay off.

ENGINE CONSIDERATIONS. The standard for most anything engine-

related is power. And contractors tend to seek additional power when making purchasing decisions.

For example, a contractor may wish to replace his old blower with a new model, preferably an upgraded version with more power because he believes it will help him finish his work more quickly. But picking an engine on shear horsepower or blower speed alone can make for a hasty, if not ill-advised, decision, particularly now when the noise issue is so prevalent in many parts of the country, Saelens says. "Manufacturers are trying to make handheld equipment with the most power and the least noise by lowering the decibels," he explains.

Restrictions in some communities say where and what times louder noises are tolerated, while other laws stipulate maximum decibel, or DBA, levels allowed. Either way, contractors should review their communities' noise ordinances and buy suitable equipment. To determine how much noise a unit will make, contractors can find a piece of handheld equipment's decibel rating on its specifications sheet.

However, to work in some areas that have more intense noise restrictions, the contractor might have to be satisfied with a smaller, less powerful blower that is quieter, Saelens says.

Sometimes, while less power can still be good, not having adequate power is pointless for certain work. For instance, if jobs typically feature light weeds and normal grass trimming and edging. Jay Larsen, marketing manager for Tualatin, Ore.-based Shindaiwa, says a 20- to 25-cc trimmer can be ideal. For more demanding work, like thick weeds and tall grass, a trimmer engine in the 25- to 44-cc range may be better.

"With blowers, they could require more power simply because they are being used on a larger job," Larsen continued on page 66, sidebar on page 64





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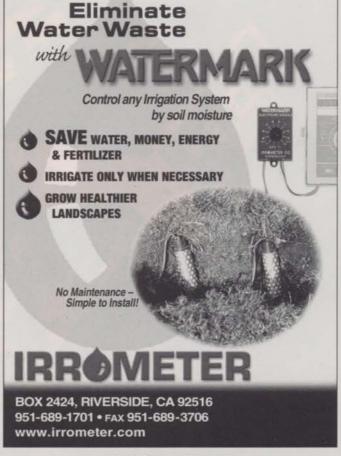
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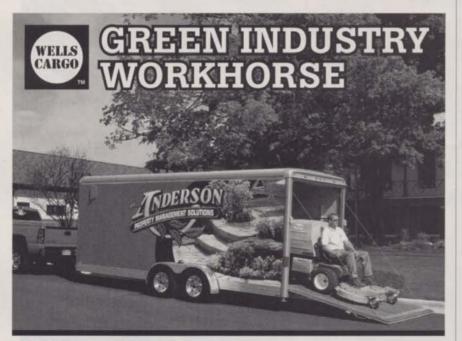
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not ready to buy just yet?

cometimes, glossy brochures aren't enough to lure land-Scape contractors into buying new pieces of handheld equipment. In order to see how particular pieces of equipment will operate and perform contractors should ask dealers for demonstration models or see what rental programs they offer. Many dealers stock demonstration models or have programs with manufacturers that allow for testing. But, obviously, contractors shouldn't abuse this program or keep asking for the same blower three weeks in a row, dealers advise.

"Different manufacturers offer different programs," shares Don Kruse of Chagrin Pet, Garden and Power Equipment Supply in Chagrin Falls, Ohio. "With the new technology on some of the engines, until someone holds the equipment and tries it out, it's hard to make a sale. This new equipment warrants a demonstration program - it takes the sales process to a new level, making it easier for the contractor to make an informed decision."





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adds. "For example, a large parking lot would require more output than a blower for a smaller residential yard."

In addition to noise and power balance issues, contractors also struggle with the choice of two-stroke vs. four-stroke engines. Manufacturers say it's a matter of personal preference.

Some manufacturers say the four-stroke engine's main advantage is it provides the contractor with more torque and power. Likewise, the engine's design lends it to better fuel economy. "The biggest feature for four-stroke engines is that they're cleaner burning," Larsen says.

A four-stroke engine's drawbacks include greater weight, as well as having more moving parts, resulting in more things that can go wrong, according to manufacturers.

On the other hand, two-cycle engines are lighter and also can produce a higher power-to-weight ratio than their four-cycle counterparts, manufacturers say. Landscape contractors can be set in their ways, and when it comes to handheld equipment they tend to stick with what they like and are comfortable with, Saelens says. "It depends on their fleet," he explains. "If they have a lot of two-cycles, they're probably going to keep it that way."

Engine life is another useful facet to consider prior to a handheld equipment purchase, experts say. For example, manufacturers say engines with higher "useful life" ratings are expected to last longer than other units. These numbers inform users how long an engine can operate before a major overhaul or replacement is necessary. Ratings in the United States and Canada generally begin at 50 hours and extend well past 300 hours. Sticking with a unit with a rating of 300 hours and greater ensures it will last longer, provided the landscape contractor follows the manufacturer's maintenance recommendations.

Thomas knows the value of

purchasing handheld equipment with extended life. "When I buy a piece of equipment, I want something that's going to last," he says, adding that he has had several pieces of handheld equipment for five years or more.

Likewise, manufacturers encourage landscape contractors to investigate how much upkeep a piece of equipment will need. More time shuttling units to the repair shop is less time spent landscaping.

Aside from "useful life" ratings, equipment longevity depends on how often it is in use and for how long each day. If a trimmer tends to be the workhorse, it makes sense to buy higher quality, experts say. But one type of unit that seems to wear out quickly, at least for Thomas, is the hedge trimmer. "For some reason, hedge trimmers just don't last as long as blowers, edgers and trimmers," he says. "I keep searching for the hedge trimmer that will last as long as everything else does."

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king Care of Business

COMFORT AND SAFETY. When purchasing handheld equipment, landscape contractors also should weigh the comfort factor into their decision-making process.

For instance, if a particular brand of trimmer is a pain to hold – due to weight or design – after only a short time period, it defeats the purpose. And since most contractors stray towards heavier-duty units with more power, Saelens says they may also need shoulder harnesses to increase comfort during longs periods of use.

Also, landscape contractors should look for ergonomic handles that make handheld equipment more comfortable to hold and use on the job, manufacturers recommend. For instance, before purchasing a string trimmer a contractor can test the simplicity or difficulty of adjusting a loop handle.

Contractors also should try on the strap of a backpack blower to ensure it fits right and that the unit has a nice center of gravity that's close to the spine so daily operation doesn't become back-breaking. Likewise, contractors should be aware of antivibration devices that are in place, so that the engine will last longer and the user won't continue to tremble after the unit is shut off.

In addition to weight and comfort issues, contractors should make sure the device is well-balanced. Manufacturers say balanced equipment is less tiring and is easier to control during the course of a long day.

ORDER UP. With power, comfort and safety issues finalized, landscape

contractors are left with one final decision – how many units of each particular piece of handheld equipment to purchase.

The answer depends largely on the size of the crews in the field.

For Thomas, he follows the "two of each" rule. He typically uses a crew of four; and they use two of each – two blowers, two trimmers, and so on. That way, if something breaks down, there's an extra one on site, since it's unlikely that all of the equipment is in use at the same time.

Saelens suggests the typical contractor's crew has a minimum of two trimmers and two edgers – he prefers the straight shaft version. Then Saelens recommends: "You round that off with a backpack blower and you're ready to go." IL

catalytic converters coming to handheld equipment near you



Photo: Echo

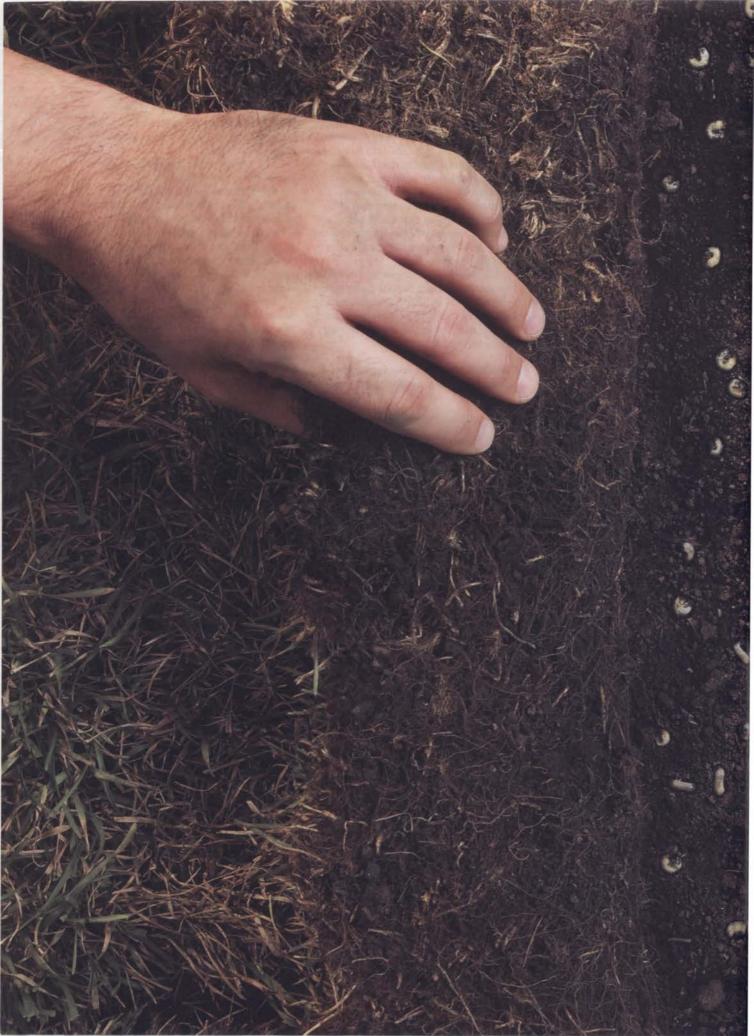
If proposed EPA rules go into effect, handheld equipment could get a little more expensive and a little heavier to the chagrin of manufacturers. The federal agency recently released a report that says catalytic converters on small engines don't pose a safety risk. Several manufacturers have come out against the ruling and are seeking to appeal to the Consumer Product Safety Commission.

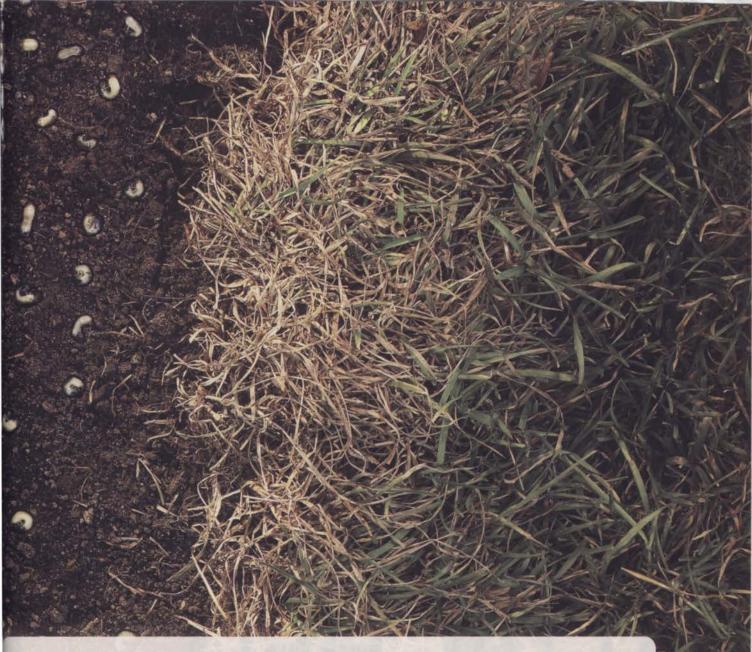
The EPA says engines less than 50 horsepower on equipment like mowers, blowers, trimmers and generators will account for 18 percent of smog-making emissions by 2020. Catalytic converters, devices that process organic contaminants and oxidize them into carbon dioxide and water through a chemical reaction, thereby releasing fewer pollutants, are already required on automobiles sold in the United States. The manufacturers argue that the devices on small engines would increase production costs and pose a safety hazard.

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. That's because of the risk of fire. Catalytic converters generate a lot of heat because of the chemical process that makes engines pollute less. And fires have been known to have started long after a driver has turned off the ignition.

Some manufacturers have voluntarily installed catalytic converters on equipment like blowers, but many have worked to reduce emissions by making engines that burn cleaner and, therefore, don't necessitate catalytic converters.





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ATTACHED

There are skidsteer loader attachments for almost every job a contractor tackles.



hen contractor Benjy Gold shows up to a jobsite with a four-in-one bucket attached to his skid-steer loader, his clients sometimes scoff. "A lot of times, I hear, 'That's nothing more than a wheelbarrow with a motor on it, "" says Gold, owner of Let the Dirt Dogs Do It, Tega Cay, S.C. "I tell them, 'You get your wheelbarrow and your shovel and help me move these rocks, and we'll see how you feel after a couple of hours."" ohn De

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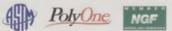


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The power of skid-steer attachments is often underestimated, Gold says. But contractors who do heavy work know these machines do the job while saving them time and energy and enabling them to make a profit.

ATTACHMENTS 101. Skid-steer loaders are a big part of the landscape industry. In fact, the industry holds the title for having the most skid-steer users of any industry, according to Douglas Laufenberg, product marketing manager for attachments and compact wheel loaders, John Deere, Moline, Ill.

Seeing a need to cater to these users, manufacturers have developed a multitude of attachments landscape contractors can benefit from.

There's an attachment for almost any job on the site, including grading and prepping an area to installing irrigation and laying sod, says Rob Otterson, marketing manager, Bobcat, West Fargo, N.D. Soil conditioners are ideal for clearing rocks, unwanted weeds, existing turf and creating a final grade in preparation for landscaping, planting seed or laying sod, Otterson adds, pointing out that trencher attachments are useful for contractors installing irrigation lines and drain tiles.

Augers, landscape rakes and sweepers have also been used in the industry for many years. Augers can dig holes for planting trees, shrubs and installing fence posts. And landscape rakes can be handy for removing small rock or stone for soil preparation.

Sweepers clean out jobsite dirt and debris. The powered broom enclosed in a bucket can collect material, eliminating the time it would take to complete the task by hand, Otterson says. "This keeps landscapers within the clean jobsite guidelines of a city or development," he explains. And manufacturers are constantly

And manufacturers are constantly adding new models to fill customer requests, Otterson points out. "Many attachments can be used on different types and brands of carriers, further increasing their utilization," he says. "And there are also unique attachments that can instantly present contractors with add-on service opportunities, including stump grinders, rotary cutters, combination buckets, sod layers and snow removal attachments. The contractor who is aware of these additions will be presented with more opportunities to grow their businesses."

PLAN FOR PRODUCTIVITY. While all of these attachments might sound appealing, contractors might not always have the funds to buy every attachment they desire. Therefore, professionals recommend a few attachments contractors can purchase that will provide them with the tools to perform the most common tasks.

Different companies call it different names, but many offer a multipurpose bucket. "A combination



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e<u>ssential attachments</u>

Following are the top 10 attachments used in the landscape industry, according to Bobcat and John Deere representatives. Keep in mind that some of them have different names when sold by other manufacturers.

- Auger: Use for tree installationrelated tasks.
- 2. Backhoe: Use for installing ponds, irrigation and drain tile.
- 3. Industrial grapple: Use for area cleanup or placing boulders.
- 4. Landscape rake: Use for removing ma-

terials or preparing soil for seed or sod.

- Pallet fork: Use for carrying pallets of sod and supplies that typically weigh 2,000 points or more.
- 6. Roller level attachment: Use for leveling a lawn or other land.
- Soil conditioner: Use for lot cleaning, grading and soil prep for seed or sod.
- Sweeper or broom: Use for cleaning streets and sidewalks near the work area.
- 9. Tiller: Use for loosening soil for planting or removing weeds.

10. Trencher: Use for installing irrigation line.

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bucket is probably one of the smartest and most fundamental attachments to buy," Otterson says, adding that contractors can doze, dig, dump, grapple and grade with the attachment. "It instantly increases a contractor's versatility by allowing them to do five functions with one machine. If a

contractor is starting with only one attachment, the multi-purpose bucket is a solid choice.'

Gustavo Valecillos, North American commercial division work tools sales consultant, Caterpillar, Peoria, Ill, agrees that this attachment is essential. The bucket opens, so it can be



used as a bucket or a clamp. It can then carry loads from place to place, further demonstrating its usefulness.

After a contractor maximizes his or her investment by buying a multi-function tool, he should also look for an attachment that decreases downtime. "For example, landscapers working in wet environments plagued by rain showers during the spring and early summer months might find they're often sidelined waiting for standing water on jobsites to dry out," Otterson says. "But with a condition-er attachment, they can turn over and even out the soil so it dries, and then they can start their work.'

A pallet fork is another timesaver, Otterson points out. Contractors can carry and load pelletized materials, such as sod and paving stone, with a pallet fork. "The time and labor contractors can save with a pallet fork and a combination bucket equates to increased productivity and profitability," he says. "The faster they can



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complete one job and start the next job, the more money they'll earn.'

In addition to pallet forks and buckets, Jeff Freiburger puts trenchers, augers, mowers and backhoes at the top of his list of essential attachments. "All of these items are cost-effective to buy to make your skid-steer the most useful tool in your business," says Freiburger, application specialist at FFC Attachments, Lee, Ill.

Landscape contractor Bill McCarley finds the leveler to be one of his most productive attachments. "We use them to remove debris so we don't have to hand rake the soil out," says McCarley, owner, Outdoor Creations of the Carolinas, Charlotte, N.C.

He also uses the attachment for precision when leveling lawns. As a bonus, he carries plant materials around at a site on a leveler. This saves him from buying a pallet fork and being forced to switch attachments on his machine. He can do several jobs with one attachment.

SMART SHOPPING. Contractors should think about which attachment or attachments are best for the tasks at hand before spending the money. Skid-steer loaders can cost \$16,500 to \$35,000, Otterson says. As for attachments, Gold bought a leveler without hydraulics for about \$300. But prices for most attachments range from \$2,000 to more than \$7,600, Laufenberg says.

Considering the price of the equipment, contractors should make sure they get the right attachment for the job. "When first starting their businesses, contractors should look to purchase attachments that can be used to complete as many jobs as possible," Otterson says. "For example, most contractors can use combination buckets and pallet forks on construction jobs. They also might find several uses for soil conditioners on a site.'

Also, contractors must consider whether the machine with attachments can fit into their typical

jobsites, he says. For instance, the machine might need to fit through a 36-inch gate. There are machines and attachments small enough to fit and powerful enough to get the job done.

Contractors will also need attachments that work well with their specific skid-steer. "The types of attach-ments used will dictate the amount of auxiliary hydraulic flow needed from the loader," Otterson says. "A customer who needs enhanced performance, usually required for a stump grinder, trencher or chipper, may need a high-flow machine.'

To get the most out of the equipment, consider the type of skid-steer with which the attachment will be used. In some cases, attachments are bought to fit more than one piece of equipment. With that in mind, Gold bought equipment with universal mounting plates so he can get more out of his attachments.

Some attachments are so universal that they can be used on full-sized

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skid-steers as well as on the compact models, McCarley says. Some of his colleagues have the capability to switch their attachments from one size machine to another.

However, just because they have the capability doesn't mean it's always a good idea. "We can't put a 6-foot rake in front of a compact skid-steer," McCarley says. "It's just not a good idea. Even though we have the capability to use the attachments on both large and compact machines, that is usually saved for specific situations."

But knowing his attachments are the right size for his machines isn't enough of a sell for Gold. Before he makes the decision to spend the money for an attachment, he rents it. Of all of the contractors who buy attachments, a large percentage of them rent the equipment before buying it, Valecillos says, adding that the motivation is usually financial.

Renting is also smart when the contractor only needs the equipment for one project, Valecillos says. "For a landscaper who rarely plant trees, a tree spade would be one to rent if they have jobs that require tree installation," Otterson says. "This provides the option of exploring new services and determining whether they fit their businesses with only a minor investment."

A similar situation happens in irrigation installation, he says. A contractor can rent a trencher or vibratory compactor to install an irrigation system and determine whether the service is something he or she wants to continue to offer without the risk of buying the attachment first.

COMING ATTACHMENTS. New

and changed skid-steer attachments continue to appear on the market. A newer piece for the skid-steer is a higher-powered backhoe attachment, Valecillos says. "The backhoe allows you to trench and add auxiliary hydraulics so you can run tools like augers," he says, adding that this is a tool that can be switched between a skid-steer and multi-terrain loader.

The size of some trenchers is also shrinking. Users, especially landscape contractors, have been asking for something smaller than the standard 6- or 5-foot trencher, Valecillos says. Because of that, a 3-foot trencher has recently been introduced.

Another innovation that may soon be introduced is the laser-guided attachment. "The laser system automatically moves the blade up or down to keep the base material exactly ongrade," Otterson says, adding that a fully integrated laser system can have a grade accuracy of +/- .25 inches. "This not only saves concrete, but also reduces the amount of time and labor required for flat work preparation."

The list of attachments keeps growing – the main reason being they enable contractors to complete more work in less time. Just ask Gold, who says, "The four-in-one bucket easily cuts my job time in half." @



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fter 18 years in the lawn care business, Ken Heltemes, owner of a Weed Man franchise in Raleigh, N.C., knows that when applying fungicides to prevent a disease infestation in his clients' turf, timing is everything.

"In Raleigh, because of the excessive heat and moisture from May to August, preventive disease control is a five application program," Heltemes explains. "For people in this area, if you have your first fungicide application completed by May 10, 99 out of 100 times you're going to be right on target."

According to lawn care operators (LCOs) and fungicide manufacturers, experience identifying diseases and treating them is what makes someone like Heltemes successful.

"The problem I see is that not only do some LCOs not identify the proper disease, but they don't understand how to treat for it," explains Steve Stansell, lawn market manager for Syngenta Professional Products, Greensboro, N.C. "A lot of times the homeowner is thinking the problem has something to do with their watering habits or something else going on in their lawns, and they don't understand they have diseases also."

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by kristin van veen-hincke

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educate his or her customer about diseases and offer fungicide treatments to manage current outbreaks and prevent future problems from recurring, the service can be a profitable one. Also, the advent of newer products at lower price points specifically customized for the LCO is making this service more appealing and affordable for LCOs and their customers.

WHEN DISEASE STRIKES. What determines a particular disease in a given area is a complex interaction of the turfgrass type (species and cultivar), climate in the geographical area, and also many cultural factors (fertility, mowing, irrigation), points out Dave Spak, product development manager, fungicides, Bayer Environmental Science, Research Triangle Park, N.C.

"For instance, tall fescue is a common grass in the transition zone that will routinely develop brown patch during the summer months when temperatures and humidity are high," Spak explains. "What can further aggravate the problem is overwatering at night or overfertilization, particularly with nitrogen. Disease activity will continue indefinitely provided the weather conditions remain conducive."

In cool-season regions where Kentucky bluegrass, perennial ryegrass and fine fescue are prevalent, brown patch can be an issue, in addition to other diseases, such as dollar spot, rust, powdery mildew, leaf spot and summer patch, Spak states.

In warm season regions, where Bermudagrass, St. Augustinegrass, Zoysiagrass and centipedegrass are grown, brown patch, dollar spot, leaf spot, rust and other diseases also may develop. Diseases on warm-season grasses tend to be exacerbated during the cooler months when these grasses are not actively growing, Spak says.

WHAT IS A FUNGICIDE? Fungicides belong to a group of chemicals called pesticides that are used to protect plants from pests. Fungicides can be classified several ways but most often

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are grouped by how they are used to manage the disease, either as contact or systemic fungicides. Contact fungicides are applied to the foliage and prevent infection of the fungus by remaining on the outside of the leaf. Systemic fungicides are applied to the foliage and in addition to providing a barrier for infection are absorbed into the plant to protect the plant from the inside, Spak defines, listing the following questions as those LCOs should consider when purchasing fungicides.



Photo: Bayer Environmental Science

- Is the fungicide labeled for use on home lawns?
- Is it labeled for the diseases that I would like to control?
- Does it require a tank-mix with other fungicides to control the target diseases?
- How long will it control the disease or diseases that I need to treat?
- What formulations are available (liquid or granule)?
- Does it come in easy-to-use packaging?
- Is it priced right?

- Can it cause any phytotoxicity to the turf or ornamentals that I am regularly treating?
- What specific application techniques are required (spray volume, nozzle type or surfactant)?

When it comes to using contact and systemic fungicides, David Ross, technical manager for turf, Syngenta, Greensboro, N.C., suggests LCOs use contact materials preventively. "You can use the products both ways," he says, "but we recommend products

> be used preventively because when you go out there prior to a disease outbreak or early in the cycle of the disease, there's not much of it there so it's just easier to control. But if you come out and you have a disease running rampant, it's going to be harder to control that disease."

Also, LCOs who manage sites with prior disease histories can implement preventive control measures more easily because they understand the conditions that favor the onset of the diseases, Spak says. But when an LCO doesn't have this knowledge, curative controls are required. "Some diseases may show up unexpectedly, based on specific weather patterns or changes in cultural practices,' he says. "In this case you have no other choice but to act curatively. Higher rates of fungicides are often necessary to get acceptable control of the disease when applied curatively because the disease is more advanced.

"Preventive applications generally are a better value than curative applications," Spak adds. "The old saying 'an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure' applies here."

Though, in the past, fungicides were more focused to the golf course care market and, therefore, were priced higher than LCOs would have liked, some fungicide manufacturers have introduced or plan to introduce fungicides specific to the lawn care market that are priced more reasonably, providing them with more opportunity for revenue growth in disease control services.

Some of these newer products also have two active ingredients vs. just one to broaden the disease spectrum,

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trees and disease

Turf isn't the only plant material diseases love to attack when the conditions are just right; trees are also susceptible to disease outbreaks. Here is some background on common tree diseases. Lawn care operators should keep this information on hand in order to identify tree-specific diseases in their clients' landscapes and treat them with the appropriate method, including microinjection and soil treatments.

American Chestnut Blight: A fungus that has virtually wiped out the American chestnut, as a commercial species, from eastern hardwood forests.

Annosus Root Rot: A rot of conifers in many temperate parts of the world.

Anthracnose Diseases: Particularly severe on American sycamore, white oak, black walnut and dogwood trees.

Armillaria Root Disease: Attacks hardwoods and softwoods and kills shrubs and vines in every state.

Beech Bark Disease: Causes significant mortality and defect in American beech; results when bark is invaded and killed by fungi.

Brown-Spot Needle Blight: Delays growth and causes mortality of longleaf pine.

Cankers on Western Quaking Aspen: An aggressive pioneer species that frequently colonizes burned sites, making it an important component of many western ecosystems.

Canker-Rot: Fungi that causes serious decline in southern hardwoods, especially the red oaks.

Comandra Blister Rust: A disease of hard pines that is caused by a fungus growing in the inner bark.

Diplodia Blight of Pines: Attacks pines and is most damaging to plantings of both exotic and native pine species in 30 eastern and central states.

Dogwood Anthracnose: Infection of dogwoods is favored by cool, wet spring and fall weather, but can occur throughout the growing season.

Dothistroma Needle Blight: A devastating foliar disease of a wide range of pine species.

Dutch Elm Disease: Primarily affects American and European species of elms; economic loss resulting from death of high value urban trees.

Eastern Dwarf Mistletoe: Is the major cause of death in black spruce.

Fusiform Rust: Causes death within five years of a tree's life if a stem infection occurs.

Littleleaf Disease: The most serious disease of shortleaf pine in the Southern United States; affected trees have reduced growth rates and usually die within six years.

Lucidus Root and Butt Rot: One of the most common root and butt rots of southern hardwoods.

Oak Wilt: A disease that affects oaks, especially red oaks, white oaks and live oaks.

Scleroderris Canker: Has caused extensive mortality in conifer plantations and forest nurseries in the northeast and north central United States and eastern Canada.

Sirococcus Shoot Blight: Affects conifers in the northern United States and southern Canada.

Sudden Oak Death: Occurs in forests in California and Oregon.

Walnut Anthracnose: A widespread and destructive disease of walnut species, particularly the eastern black walnut.

White Pine Blister Rust: Attacks pines with five needles per fascicle, including Eastern and Western white pine, sugar pine and limber pine.

> - The Forest Insect and Disease Leaflet Series, USDA Forest Service

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providing systemic and contact control of more than one disease at the same time, Stansell says. "This can be a very cost effective way for LCOs to control diseases," he shares.

"Since single fungicides don't control all diseases, two active ingredients are very desirable," Spak adds. "Also disease control is often better when you combine lower rates of two fungicides compared to a high rate of a single fungicide. And the convenience of mixing a single product rather than having to buy, store and mix two products makes applying a two-ingredient product easier."

ELEVATING PRODUCT EFFEC-

TIVENESS. No product will control a lawn disease unless it is timed and applied correctly.

For starters, Stansell says proper disease identification is necessary to fungicide success. "If an LCO has identified that the lawn has a certain disease, the advantage is they can protect the homeowner's turf from dying by controlling that disease with fungicides. Diseases will actually kill spots or sections of the lawn and make it look very bad so knowing the disease that needs to be controlled and being able to match it with the right product is half the battle in terms of preventing this from happening."

"Anyone who is doing lawn work and hasn't done fungicide work in the past would have to learn the diseases and be clear, because a lot of the diseases look very much like an insect problem, for instance, so properly identifying the pathogen is important," Ross adds, condoning proper training for technicians so they can identify the various diseases and treat them effectively.

Jeff Kollenkark, owner of a Weed Man franchise in Fresno, Calif., agrees. "You must properly identify the disease and evaluate the weather pattern and what time of year you're in to determine whether it warrants a fungicide application," he suggests. "I think knowing the disease is a key step otherwise you could be wasting money by putting the wrong product down. Once you get beyond that it's about doing what's best for the customer."

Following label directions regarding specific requirements after application is also important. "The majority of fungicides are most effective when they are allowed to dry on the leaf, but each fungicide has specific requirements," Spak says. "Therefore, it's important to be aware of adverse weather or untimely irrigation. Some diseases, particularly soil diseases like fairy ring, require watering-in before the fungicide has dried on the leaf. Once the spray has dried on the foliage it becomes difficult to wash off." Concerning post-application practices, Heltemes recommends LCOs warn homeowners not to mow immediately after application because the majority of the better fungicides are systemic, so a good 24-hour drying period is necessary. He prefers a good four to six hours with no irrigation. Several fungicide manufacturers

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offer information on their Web sites that provide a history of diseases and maps to show LCOs what is prevalent in their region. These sites also track the current year's outbreaks.

FUNGICIDE SERVICES. According

to lawn care operators, there are two

categories of customers who want fungicide services - those who want completely diseasefree properties and will do anything for them and those who will pay for a couple of fungicide treatments to try to prevent disease problems from occurring. "For us, it's

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about a 70/30 split where 30 percent of the people who use fungicides say, 'I don't want to see diseases at all," Heltemes explains. "The remaining

70 percent take from one to four treatments to minimize diseases but stay within their budgets."

Kollenkark agrees, pointing to the higher cost of fungicides as the reason some customers limit the number of curative treatments they receive, making preventive applications much

want the problem to become serious or they want to go on a preventive program," he says, adding that his company will treat 167 lawns for summer diseases and another 25 for winter diseases this year. "About 30 out of our 2,600 customers go on a preventive program, but I think it's

"Disease control is often better when you combine lower rates of two fungicides compared to a high rate of a single fungicide. And the convenience of mixing a single product rather than having to buy, store and mix two products makes applying a twoingredient product easier for the technician." - Dave Spak

> more attractive. "The people who take the fungicide service are either ones who have a chronic history of disease on their lawns in the past and don't

going to be more this year. We made about 700 applications last year for disease control, and that represented probably about 300 customers."

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Fungicides are typically about six times more expensive than herbicides, according to LCOs. Compared to insecticides, they could be twice as much depending on the insecticide. The price of the fungicide also varies depending on the focus of the product. According to fungicide manufacturers, some newer fungicides targeted specifically for the lawn care market are priced 33 to 50 percent lower than other fungicides.

Heltemes' preventive services include five fungicide services per year. In order to maintain what would be considered a normal profit margin, he would have to charge three to three and a half times the normal application price, which is the equivalent of 15 more applications. "The competition has us down to double the application price for five applications. I'd love to get three or three and a half times, because that would be more in line with the type of margins we think about on herbicides, but you just can't expect the homeowner to keep forking out that money."

"We try to keep it simple for our customers," Heltemes adds. "Not to confuse them, we make the application a multiple of their current application price."

Kollenkark sees a slightly higher profit margin. "I'll have an 80 percent profit margin with an herbicide and 65 percent profit margin with a fungicide," he says.

DISEASE EDUCATION. It has become increasingly important for customers to understand that without fungicide treatments even the best LCO may not be able to save a lawn from disease. But Heltemes says customers are not knowledgeable about diseases or their effects on lawns, despite the annual mailer he sends to highlight common diseases and promote his fungicide services.

"We leave information sheets that talk about disease three times a year, and then when we see disease on a lawn during a regular fertilizer application, we leave another information sheet that talks about disease," Heltemes says. "We heavily educate our customers."

Weed Man Fresno also has a newsletter that it distributes to every customer. It includes information on the weed, insect and disease issues that customers are currently facing in the region. "We tell customers what to look for and how to manage their watering and why we're doing what we're doing with our applications," Kollenkark says, adding that he disagrees with Heltemes and thinks customers are actually starting to understand and recognize diseases in lawns. "We also encourage them to call if anything looks suspicious, but most people are getting pretty good at identifying diseases now. We advise those who have a chronic problem to go on a preventive program for the year and this helps obtain better control."



USE READER SERVICE # 70

june 2006

irrigation

Commercial Irrigation nnovations

Highlighting irrigation's bevy of benefits can maximize sales to commercial property managers.

by heather wood

n 1915, John Brooks began to install labor-saving watering devices at industrial and commercial sites, as well as city parks, in Michigan. The devices were piping networks, mostly made of copper. This was an early form of irrigation. Today, Marc Dutton owns Brooks' former company and sees the leaps and bounds the industry has made since those early days. "Today's irrigation world has greatly benefited from the invention of

plastic pipes, much-improved splicing techniques for wires and, of course, the computer chip, which has given us phenomenal improvements in irrigation control," says Dutton, owner, Marc Dutton Irrigation, Waterford, Mich.

While copper piping may be just a memory, commercial irrigation remains a growing service, and the technology used in commercial system components continues to evolve, making convenience an easier sell for contractors. **MEET THE CUSTOMER.** If money is spent on landscaping to make a commercial site look attractive, the property manager and building owner will want to protect the investment. One way to do that is with adequate irrigation. "No one wants to drag a hose out and risk injuring pedestrians or wait until after business hours to water," says Jeff Carowitz, senior consultant with San Marcos, Calif.-based Strategic Force Marketing, and a consultant for Hunter Industries, also in San Marcos.

This is why business owners opt for irrigation systems. But for many commercial land owners, not just any irrigation system will do. Photo: Rain E

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"Compared to residential customers, commercial customers generally are willing to spend more up front for better performance over time and less maintenance," explains Mike Rivers, director of the commercial division for Rain Bird, Tucson, Ariz.

The amount a commercial client will spend compared to a residential client depends on the region and the size of the irrigation system, Carowitz adds, pointing out that contractors usually provide a more elaborate costbenefit analysis for commercial clients because these clients are generally willing to spend more if they know the systems will perform well.

Commercial building managers also want to know how much training their employees need to have to work the system, Rivers says, adding that a low-maintenance system is typically best. "The building manager is responsible for keeping an eye on the system and checking it once a month for proper operation," Carowitz says. Other important factors those shopping for commercial irrigation systems should consider are durability and vandal resistance because "many commercial sites are unguarded, especially at night and on the weekends," says Rick Heenan, sales manager at DIG Corp., Vista, Calif.

IN CONTROL. Recent advancements have made it possible for irrigation contractors to control systems from a remote location, which means contractors can manage system schedules in place of property managers. Because contractors have complete control of the systems they install, this can also reduce their workload, which equates to a higher productivity rate.

"Having a remote to communicate with an irrigation controller is much easier for a commercial landscape contractor," Heenan says. "Often times, the controllers are placed in remote locations, such as on the side of a road or deep within a landscape, that are difficult to approach and park close to. That's why a remote makes it easier and safer to communicate with the controller. Contractors should save labor hours staying in their trucks to program controllers instead of spending time walking to each one."

In addition, PC-based, or central controls have become popular, Carowitz says, adding that some controllers rely on weather-based stations or Evapotranspiration-based controllers to make sure water is applied at the correct rate according to weather conditions. This can be done away from the job site or, in many cases, the controllers are self-adjusting.

PC-based or central controls start around \$5,000 to \$6,000, Carowitz says, adding that "the sky's the limit," depending on the number of controls the system offers. Some systems cost as much as \$40,000 to \$50,000. Weather-based or ET-based controllers can add \$150 to \$350 to the cost of an irrigation system.



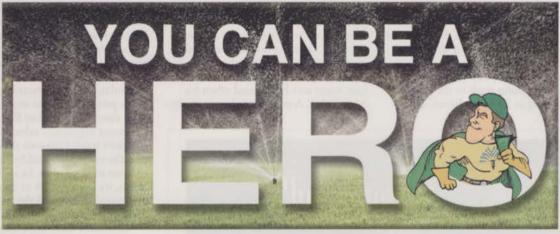


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irrigation

REALIZING WATER SAVINGS. Even before remote controllers, irrigation systems were designed to save water. Commercial contractors and manufacturers were the first in the irrigation industry to be concerned with water conservation, Carowitz says. In fact, there have been water conservationdriven irrigation tools in the industry for as long as 20 years, Rivers adds. Smart controllers, or weather-based controllers, reduce labor costs because the contractor can minimize seasonal programming changes, Heenan says. Programmed controllers can also work remotely, shutting down systems when it's raining, checking weather and performing other functions to make sure water isn't being used when it's not needed. A commercial remote con-

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troller like this can cost about \$600, Carowitz says.

Pressure-regulated sprinklers and valves are also efficiency boosters. "When managing a larger network of pipes, it makes sense to regulate the pressure for each station," Carowitz says. "The advantage is that you're controlling pressure, running at optimum pressure and not wasting water."

It costs about \$60 to \$70 to add a pressure regulation valve to each sprinkler head, Carowitz says, noting that the valve can be added at any time on most models. In sprinkler heads, it's usually a 20 to 30 percent additional cost to add the pressure regulation feature, he adds.

Generally, there are a number of products on the market that can help save water, Rivers says. He estimates self-adjusting controllers save up to 50 percent of the amount of water used at a site. "When you talk about product-based savings, an irrigation system is a system," he says. "Many variables contribute to an efficient system. First, it should be installed and maintained correctly in order to realize a savings."

There is no concrete way to tell how much water a system can save. "People want to believe there's a silver bullet product, a solution that's guaranteed to save 50 percent, but that won't always be the case," Rivers says.

Rather, the amount of water saved depends on the specific site, its climate and conditions, Heenan says. "The bottom line is that with the use of smart controllers, the savings are seen both in time management and water conservation."

Because time management also can be important to the contractors installing these advanced features, they might want to know how much work will be involved if they choose to go the route of advancements. In general, the features don't require more installation work or maintenance once they're installed, Carowitz says. However, some of the features, like a central control, may require a higher level of interaction.

EQUIPMENT EFFICIENCY. Cuttingedge commercial irrigation equipment can help commercial property managers realize a savings in other ways as well. For instance, some of today's rotors can undergo abuse from children kicking or standing on them or turning them to spray water on their friends, Rivers says.

continued on page 94, sidebar on page 92

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iust <u>the beginning</u>

A s commercial irrigation technology advances, it is also becoming more accessible. While controller popularity has been rising, prices have been on the decline, says Jeff Carowitz, senior consultant, Strategic Force Marketing, San Marcos, Calif., and a consultant for Hunter Industries. In the early days of central control systems, the software alone could set the contractor back \$20,000 to \$25,000. Today the software costs about \$3,000 to 4,000, he estimates, adding that as with most technology, the price goes down over time. "It's becoming more common to see central controls on smaller buildings," Carowitz adds. "They're trying to make the units more attractive by

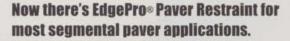
pricing them right. Like any technology, there are basic and sophisticated units. People choose which they want and pay the price accordingly."

Mike Rivers, director of the commercial division, Rain Bird, Tucson, Ariz., agrees. "There is a real desire to bring technological advancements into irrigation," he points out.

The industry will also see a rise in rain and moisture sensors, Rivers predicts. "There are many products now, and I think there will be many more in the near future, that calculate Evapotranspiration and automatically adjust irrigation time and schedules as a result," he says.

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sprinkler heads won't strip, he says. In fact, some rotors

irrigation

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include a memory feature so that if they are tampered with, they will return themselves to their original arc setting, River says, adding that this can be an easy sell to a municipality. "Municipal workers then don't have to fuss with the heads to get them back to their original positions," he explains.

Newer rotors are made to withstand abuse that can cause costly damage, he says. If someone turns a head, this action would normally strip the head's gears. But the newer

Rotors also are being made to reach farther distances. This benefits those who want fewer rotors to maintain. For example, it is common for commercial sites to have sprinkler heads 20 to 80 feet apart, Rivers says.

SERVE THEM RIGHT. After a commercial irrigation system is installed, maintenance is typically an annual requirement. In many cases, irrigation system maintenance is contracted out to a contractor, Carowitz says, adding that maintenance usually includes a spring start-up and a winter shutdown.



Photo: Hunter Industries

There will always be a demand for maintenance, Dutton agrees. "The reality is that an irrigation system is a simple mechanical device, and like any mechanical device with more than two moving parts, maintenance is necessary."

Dutton offers maintenance contracts where service specialists visit a site on a regular basis. "Problems can be identified sooner, thereby catching problems before they become either more expensive or more obvious," he says. For some of his larger clients, he can monitor systems and change settings via computer modems and phone lines, saving the maintenance person a trip.

Dutton keeps separate records for the service and installation departments and is able to track each department's profits. "We find the profit margins in service to be 2½ to three times greater than those for installations," he says.

Some companies may not have the personnel to offer this service. "If you don't have a maintenance person on staff, contract jobs out to another company who does," Carowitz advises. "You can provide services all on one bill and get away with not having a maintenance department in-house."

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Visit the June Online Extras section for more commercial irrigation sales tips. Also, check out the Lawn & Landscape Message Boards to ask other contractors about their experiences with commercial irrigation services.

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spotlight on business software

Contractors are learning that they can't afford not to invest in business software to streamline. their business operations.

Technological Advanta

t is hard to imagine life without electricity, but for Daniel Houck, vice president of Include Software, Glen Burnie, Md., it's no harder to imagine than why a lawn care company wouldn't take advantage of all that a software

package could do for its business. "When electricity comes to your

house, you can be in any room and turn on any appliance and electricity flows to it," Houck explains. "With a software product, everything is flowing through the system like electricity. No matter what you're doing - sales calls, estimating, proposals, detailed job costing, financial analysis, inventory tracking, payroll, time cards, vendor and catalog management - it's all taking place in one software package."

Despite the fact that Lawn & Landscape research reveals that 64 percent of landscape contractors have purchased business software in the past 12 months and 55 percent plan to purchase it in the next 12 months, David Mathias thinks the green industry is very paper-intensive. Mathias, vice president of sales and support at Sensible Software, Ijamsville, Md., says using white boards and Post-It notes is "not the most efficient way of running a company," which is why contractors should invest in a good software

by jennifer lash

june 2006



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package. Using business software, he says, will help contractors to better track what their costs are and what their revenue is.

Joe Kucik, president of Real Green Systems, Walled Lake, Mich., agrees. "Say a guy has 300 customers and he spends one day a month hand-writing invoices - that's asinine," he says. "That's only one function out of the hundreds that can come from software - you really can't afford not to have it.'

SMART INVESTMENT.

What makes one company's software options better than its competitors? Ultimately that's up to landscape contractors to decide, depending on the needs of their businesses. For Darren Poulsen, owner, Prosecutive Landscaping, Midvale, Utah, he was looking for a "really specific client management system to keep track of our customers" - and it took him more than two years to find it. "I found a pretty complete client management software," he says. "It didn't have a bunch of add-on modules, and I didn't have to buy the base software and then eight or nine different pieces of it."

Modules are offered by some software companies as additional features to customize software for a contractor's have optional add-on modules because many software companies out there might offer what the contractor needs in just one package, which would be less costly in the long run.

Software packages "really do everything. They're an all-for-one business solution," Chapman says, explaining that some manufacturers offer software versions for both small

"Using white boards and Post-It notes is not the most efficient way of running a company, which is why contractors should invest in a good software package." - David Mathias

specific needs. However, Christopher Chapman, chief operating officer at Insight Direct, Boston, Mass., says lawn care contractors should "be careful" when looking at software packages that

and large landscape businesses, the only difference being that software for larger companies allows contractors to enter more customers into the database. "The small business has just



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as many needs as the big business, just with fewer transactions," he says.

And Houck says some software manufacturers are "in a constant state of development and improvement,"

and any upgrades that might arise are made available to clients as part of their annual maintenance fee, rather than as an additional charge.

SHOP AROUND.

As with any big purchase, contractors are strongly encouraged to do their homework before choosing a software package to help streamline their businesses.

That's what Bruce Birdsong, owner, Precision Landscap-



ing, Dallas, Texas, did. "We listened to what other contractors told us and talked with various suppliers, trying to get in-depth information about what each of their software packages did,

he says. "We also watched them demonstrate how each one of their software programs worked."

Since it "seems to be impossible to find one software package that will do everything a business wants," Kucik recommends that contractors talk to businesses that are similar to their own to find out what works best for them and get ideas. "Find out what they are doing - you can even go spend a day with them and watch them run their system to see how it works," he suggests.

Some software packages are better at specific tasks than others, so Kucik says focusing on "the part of your business that's most important to you" will allow the software to help you in the areas where it matters most. "In some cases, you might have to give up functionality in one area to get functionality that's most important to you in another," he says.

Houck says the best way for contractors to learn about the different software options is to contact the software vendors directly to find out about their products. Some software manufacturers also make their contractor client list available to potential buyers so they can see how the software is being used in a company similar to their own, Houck adds.

When contacting these references, Houck suggests contractors ask them if they are happy with the product, what the perks are, if they've had any problems with it, and if they feel the

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spotlight on business software

software manufacturer offers good support.

Birdsong says the implementation of the software his company purchased went smoothly, as "their technical support, step-by-step installation process and the questions they asked us about how we ran our business" helped to tailor it to the needs of the company.

"We didn't have to adjust to how the software was written - we saw that in some of our competitors' businesses and didn't want to have to do that."

DON'T FEAR THE UNKNOWN, Can

you turn a computer on? If so, and you haven't yet moved to using business software in your office, you might be missing out. Chapman says being able to turn a computer on and embracing the integration of business software as an opportunity are really all that's needed to start taking advantage of what software can do for a contractor's everyday routine.

"We understand who our end users are; we're really teaching the basics of computers to many of our customers," Chapman says. "We do hands-on training because we know we're not selling to computer scientists; we're selling to hardworking business owners. These people are kind of in unfamiliar water and it takes awhile to get used to it."

Mathias agrees that some familiarity with computers will help make the transition to using software a bit smoother, but he says contractors "need to realize that depending on their level of computer expertise, there may be somewhat of a learning curve.'

Change can be good, though, and contractors might not understand that the investment - of money and time - in a business software package can make them more profitable in the end. Kucik thinks that the larger investment in the software system, the larger the return on the investment will be.

There is a wide variety of business software available for landscape contractors, and the price varies from company to company. Kucik says there are companies that sell software packages from as low as \$500 to as much as \$15,000. While that might sound like a large range, Kucik points out that the cost of the software is really the smallest investment you'll make.

"The investment of your time to get the software up and running, the cost to your business, the interruptions, cost of opportunity - all those things cost way

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spotlight on business software

more," Kucik explains. "If you spend \$15,000 for software, at the end of the day that will be the smallest portion of your business expenses. But I caution contractors not to buy on cost, but on functionality. If you make a decision based on cost, you're going to be disappointed 99 percent of the time."

Poulsen says his company spent "probably a couple thousand dollars" on its software, "which, competitively speaking, was a good price." And despite it taking a few years to pinpoint a program that fit the company's needs, the investment of both time and money were worthwhile in the end. "Put time and energy and thought into how you want to utilize the software," Chapman says. "It's not a seamless operation. A little bit of time and energy in the implementation process will pay off in huge dividends down the road."

When Prosecutive Landscaping finally settled on its software, the employees gave themselves some time to learn it – 30 days to be exact. "Honestly, we're still learning," Poulsen admits. "We're always working on learning the software better; as new things come out, we start to apply different parts of it to our operation."

After contractors make it over the initial software hurdle, things generally get easier and the investment of incorporating software into the company starts to pay off. "Once you get someone comfortable in a software-using environment, they start to realize what they can really do with software," Chapman says.

AFTER THE FACT. Instruction manuals can teach only so much and one's computer skills might not be enough to dissect and implement a business software package, so it's advised that when a contractor is shopping for software he or she should know what happens after the sale.

"We don't just sell them the software and say, 'Adios, you're on your own,'" Houck explains. "We do consulting and business profit development. We assess their business practices, set up the software implementation, deliver the software, offer training, and follow up by offering them support on site, at our offices, at their offices, on the phone, online, and via tutorials."

Technology is rapidly changing and, as a result, there are constantly new upgrades for software packages. Most software companies charge their clients an annual maintenance fee, which includes technical assistance, tutorials, upgrades and message boards as an outlet for contractors to speak to others in the industry utilizing the same programs. While it's another expense, it's one that a contractor really can't afford not to pay. "Software is definitely a worthwhile investment; the same with the yearly expenses," Birdsong says. "They continually make updates in the software to keep improving it; it's always changing."

To help educate contractors on software updates, some software manufacturers offer conferences once or twice a year, Kucik says. "When you get your initial training, you know only 10 percent of what that software does," he explains. "Continuing education is very important to getting the most out of your system."



Some software manufacturers offer unlimited technical support with their annual fees, Kucik says, adding that some only provide a certain number of hours and then charge for additional hours. Regardless, some type of support option needs to be offered with any software package one decides to purchase. As Chapman says, "You're really picking a business partner when you're purchasing software."

Software "has improved the historical data for our clients, it's great at scheduling, you can put in map points and it'll map routes – it has delivered everything we could have hoped it would," Poulsen says about the software program he purchased. "I wish I would have bought it sooner." u

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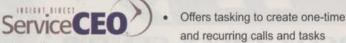
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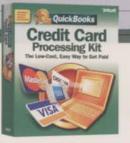
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Bush Hog M2673 Mid-Mount Zero-Turn Mower

compiled by heather wood

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- Includes heavy-duty cast iron spindles
- Quick Foot allows height adjustment from the seat
- · Has a 73-inch cut width
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- Bush Hog 334/874-2700, www.bushhog.com

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- Optional attachments include two- and three-bag grass catchers, mulch kits and snow blades
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Exmark Phazer Zero-Turn Riding Mower

- Features a 34-inch cutting deck designed with the gated property in mind
- Powered by a 19-horsepower Kawasaki engine
- Designed with a low center of gravity
- Comes with 18-inch tires to further enhance stability
- Mulch kits are available on all models
- Also available with a 44-inch cutting deck
- Exmark Manufacturing 402/223-6300, www.exmark.com

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Encore Xtreme Riding Mower

- Available with 19-, 23- and 25-horsepower Kawasaki or 20- and 25-horsepower OHV Briggs & Stratton V-twin air-cooled engines
- Deck sizes range from 48 to 60 inches
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- Encore 800/267-4255. www.seriousred.com

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- Tunnel deck has a 149-square-inch discharge area
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product spotlight > > >

Ferris 2000Z Model Zero-Turn Mower

- Features a 61-inch double-top 10-gauge deck
- Engine options include a 25-horsepower Kawasaki or 27-horsepower Kohler gasoline engine
- Drive train features high-capacity, fan-cooled hydraulic pumps and large-displacement wheel-motors
- Additional features include Roll Over Protection System with retractable seat belt, deck lift and flexible discharge chute
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www.gravely.com

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Massey Ferguson ZT29 and ZT33 Zero-Turn Mowers

- Features a 3-cylinder, liquid-cooled diesel engines in 29- or 33-horsepower
- Includes a 60-, standard 72- or high-volume 72-inch mower deck
- Offers leg room for comfort
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- Massey Ferguson 800/767-3221, www.masseyferguson.com

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june 2006

product spotlight

Lastec 2861 AGC Zero-Turn Mower

- Articulating 61-inch rotary mower
- Features three 21-inch decks
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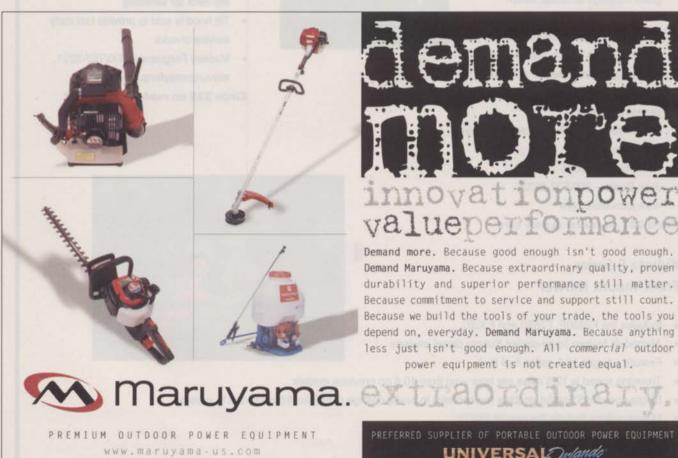
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- Scag Power Equipment 920/387-0010, www.scag.com

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 engine choices
- All three engine choices offer full-pressure oil lubrication
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 provides hydraulic capacity
- Four-wheel-drive models have on-the-go shifting between twoand four-wheel drive
- Simplicity Manufacturing www.simplicitymfg.com

Circle 229 on reader service card

Work Visas



"Are you having a difficult time finding minimum or low wage legal workers? Let us help you get the low wage labor force that you need, just as we have for hundreds of other companies for years." *Robert Kersbaw Attorney at Law*

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' Great power & precise trimming.

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lawn & landscape june 2006

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- Telemarketing
- Block Leading
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- Neighborhood Marketing

Sign up for this **FREE** seminar Today! Call 1-800-422-7478 or sign up at www.realgreen.com space is limited, lunch will be provided



These free Marketing Seminars are presented by Joe Kucik, owner of Real Green Systems. A Green Industry veteran since the 1970's, Joe is recognized as an expert in growing and managing service companies and has presented at dozens of industry conferences and events over the past 20 years. Joe built up his first lawn care company to 10,000 customers with over \$3 million in annual revenue and sold it in 2001. He then

acquired a small business, building it to 8,000 customers in two locations and \$2.6 million in annual revenue before selling it in 2003. In late 2003, using the same business strategies, he started a new company from scratch and currently has over 6,400 customers and \$2.1 million in annual revenue. This is in just three years! At this seminar, you can learn first hand how Joe, and other businesses that have consulted him, have dramatically increased revenue and profitability using his proven marketing techniques. If you are interested in growing your business, this is an event you cannot afford to miss!

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August 10th

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USE READER SERVICE # 100

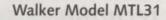
product spotlight > :

Ventrac HM2 Series Mowing Decks

- Designed and built to cut well and last long
- Features a rugged all-steel reinforced
 carrier frame
- Frame incorporates a full-length rear roller that maximizes grass striping
- Deck can be quickly tilted to a near-vertical position for cleaning, transportation, storage or sharpening blades
- Venture Products 866/836-8722, www.ventrac.com

Circle 229 on reader service card





- Features a 31-horsepower Kohler Aegis engine
- · Top speed of 7 miles per hour
- Change in transmission gearing and addition of steering lever dampeners provides higher speed with better control
- · Designed to start easily
- Walker 970/221-5614, www.walkermowers.com

Circle 230 on reader service card





Snapper 2500 Pro Series Mid-Mount Zero-Turn Mower

- Newest addition is a twin-stick model
- Features a 25-horsepower Kawasaki engine
- Includes a 52-inch mowing deck
- Features two independent hydrostatic, drive systems, a 7-gauge steel mower deck and frame, three field-serviceable spindles and two seven gallon fuel tanks
- Reaches a forward speed of 10 miles per hour
- All models feature four-ply 23- or 24-inch rear drive tires and a rubber discharge chute
- Snapper Pro www.snapperpro.com

Circle 231 on reader service card



Toro Z Master Diesel Zero-Turn **Riding Mower**

- Includes 52- and 60-inch machines
- Powered by a 23-horsepower Kubota liquid-cooled diesel engine
- Features a 12-gallon fuel capacity
- Ground speed reaches 11 miles per hour
- Adjustable baffle allows for fine tuning
- Toro 800/348-2424.
 - www.toro.com/professional

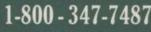
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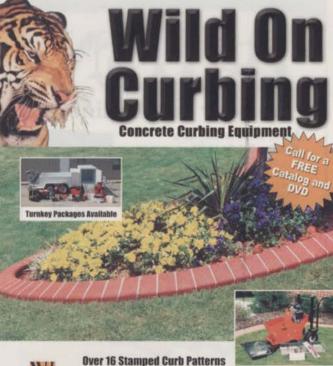


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USE READER SERVICE # 99

june 2006

product spotlight >

Wright Sentar Standing/Sitting, Zero-Turning Radius Mower

- Features cutting widths up to 61 inches
- Padded seat with mono spring suspension folds out of the way, allowing for more room on trailers
- Rapid-Hite deck adjustment system lets the operator quickly adjust the deck height from 1 to 5.25 inches
- Powered by a two-cylinder, 19-plus horsepower engine
- Can reach up to 11 miles per hour forward and 5 miles per hour in reverse
- Has a fuel tank capacity of 10.7 gallons
- Wright Manufacturing 301/360-9810, www.wrightmfg.com

Circle 233 on reader service card

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If you're a landscape contractor who's looking to offer holiday decorating services - or if you

aren't happy with your current holiday décor business - check out Holiday Bright Lights'

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Woods MZ-Series Mow'n Machine Zero-Turn Mower

- Powered by a 33-horsepower Generac industrial V-twin engine
- Carrier frame deck has 7-gauge skirts with a 10-gauge top plate and 10-gauge reinforcements
- Available in 61-inch and 72-inch deck sizes
- Includes adjustable, full-suspension seat for operator comfort
- Oil is cooler for prolonged hydraulic pump and wheel motor life
- Woods Equipment 800/319-6637, www.woodsequipment.com

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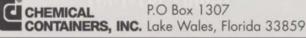
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USE READER SERVICE # 102

lawn & landscape june 2006

Circle 234 on reader service card

Spanish Phrases for Landscaping Professionals

SPANISH PHRASES FOR LANDSCAPING PROFESSIONALS

JASON HOLBEN DOMINIC ARBINI "Spanish Phrases For Landscaping Professionals" is a collection of user-friendly words and phrases to help English speaking Managers and Crew leaders communicate with their Hispanic employees. It covers hiring and training, safety, equipment use and maintenance, demolition, prep., installation, light masonry, grounds maintenance...etc. There is also a section for dealing with injuries. This book is NOT a textbook, but rather a "point and shoot" phrase book for Landscapers who need to say it NOW, and who have not found time to learn Spanish while working 60 hour weeks.

CHAPTERS INCLUDE PHRASES FOR:

- Installation
- · Sprinklers and Irrigation
- Sod and Bedding
- Planting
- Clean Up
- Mowing and Trimming
- Prunning
- · Do's and Don'ts of Operation
- Index of Key words

Perfect for lawn care owners and training professionals!

scaping Professionals: 1. Visit www.lawnandlandscape.com/store 2. Call a Lawn & Landscape Store Representative	I'd like to order copies of Spanish Phrases for Landscaping Profession- als @ \$24.00 per copy.			
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product spotlight >

Yazoo/Kees Max2 Mowers

- Two new zero-turn riding models: ZVKH72302 and ZVKH61302
- Full-floating deck is constructed of 10-gauge steel with 7-gauge side skirts and a rolled-front edge
- Feature quick-lift cutting height adjustment with standard foot assist
- Dual 5.6-gallon fuel tanks
- Yazoo/Kees 877/368-8873, www.yazookeys.com

Circle 235 on reader service card



1000

Kunz Engineering AcreEase

- Pull-behind finish cut mower
- Adds extra width to zero-turn, riding mower, ATV or utility vehicle
- Features an 18-horsepower Kohler Command electric start engine
- 60-inch fully floating deck is equipped with side discharge and deep deck design
- 1.5- to 5-inch adjustable cutting height
- Kunz Engineering 815/539-6954, www.kunzeng.com

Circle 236 on reader service card

BOB-CAT FastCat Compact ZT

- Available with 36-, 42-, 48- and 52-inch decks
- All feature Kawasaki engines starting at 17-horsepower
- · Reaches speeds up to 8 miles per hour
- Features high-back deluxe seat
- Includes a two-year commercial warranty
- BOB-CAT www.bobcatturf.com

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USE READER SERVICE # 104

122

> > product spotlight

Newer walk-behind mowers offer features that can simplify mowing.

Encore Premier Walk-Behind Mower

- Available with 13-, 15- and 17-horsepower Kawasaki engines
- Hydrostatic and pro belt gear drive models offered
- Deck sizes range from 32 to 48 inches
- Cutting height ranges from 1 to 4 inches
- Features a 2-year warranty
- Encore 800/267-4255, www.seriousred.com

Circle 238 on reader service card

Everride Wasp Walk-Behind Mower

- Features a dual V-belt with large rear tires for maximum traction
- Increases 10-inch casters with double strut support
- 6-gallon removable fuel tank included
- Available in either a 32-, 36- or 48-inch deck
- · Has sharp turning-radius trimming ability
- EverRide 402/274-8600, www.everride.com
- Circle 239 on reader service card



Get Behind These

Gravely GR1336FX Walk-Behind Mower

compiled by heather wood

- Five-speed all gear mower
- Powered by a 13-horsepower Kawasaki twin engine
- Features the Gravely Air-Flo Deck
- Includes a zero-maintenance
- XL Spindle and hardened steel blades
- Covered by a two-year manufacturer's warranty
- Operates at 7 miles per hour ground speed
- Gravely 800/472-8359, www.gravely.com

Circle 240 on reader service card

Great Dane Scamper Walk-Behind Mower

- Features an extra-wide stance for hillside stability
- Includes steering control levers
- Fail-safe controls force mower to stop if operator lets go
- Striping capability
- Models range from 14- to 17-horsepower
- Available in 36- and 48-inch cutting decks
- Great Dane 402/274-8600, www.greatdanemowers.com

Circle 241 on reader service card



Landscaper Pro Walk-Behind Mower

- Gear-driven mowers available in 36 or 48 inches
- Features a 7-gauge full radius deck
- Includes five speeds with reverse assist transmission
- Built with a welded deck
- Offers a two-year warranty on the Kohler engine and a one-year warranty on the mower
- Baffling under deck offers vacuum strength
- Landscaper Pro 800/222-4303, www.landscapersupply.com

Circle 242 on reader service card

RedHawk Walk-Behind Mower

- Includes both belt or hydro drive systems
- · Built from 7-gauge steel for maximum strength and durability
- Avalable in 32-, 36- and 48-inch cutting widths
- · Commercial-grade catcher can be added
- RedHawk 800/508-3246, www.redhawk-usa.com

Circle 243 on reader service card

Scag SWZ Walk-Behind Mower

- Engine choices range from 16- to 21-horsepower
- Features Hydro-Gear hydraulic pumps and wheel motors
- Tough cutter deck spindles have cast-iron housings and tapered roller bearings
 - Includes choice of 36-, 48-, 52- or
 - 61-inch cutter decks
 - Scag Power Equipment 920/387-0100, www.scag.com
 - Circle 244 on reader service card

Yazoo/Kees Kutter IZT Series Walk-Behind Mowers

- Feature dual IZT transmissions from Hydro-Gear
- Available in a 36-inch, 15-horsepower or 48-inch, 17-horsepower unit
- · Equipped with the new KAI series Kawasaki V-twin engine
- Include a wide stance and 16-inch rear tires for traction and side hill stability
- · Ground speeds reach 6 miles per hour forward and 3 miles per hour in reverse
- Yazoo/Kees 877/368-8873, www.yazookees.com

Circle 245 on reader service card

124

> product spotlight

Toro Turbo Force Cutting Decks on Mid-Size Mowers

- Featured on mid-size commercial walk-behind mowers
- Offered on 36- and 52-inch decks
- Includes an adjustable discharge baffle, which allows fine-tune cutting
- Heavy-duty, 7-gauge welded steel deck construction is designed for added durability
- An under-the-deck rubber discharge chute provides clipping dispersion and allows for close trimming without damaging surrounding structures
- Toro 800/348-2424, www.toro.com/professional
 Circle 246 on reader service card

TAP INTO

RHAT

www.irrigation.org/SIM.htm





Walker Walk-Behind Mower

- Features a 15-horsepower Kawasaki engine with full-pressure lubrication
- Includes a side-discharge and mounting deck up to 56 inches
- Castering tail wheel on the tractor allows the deck to move independently with flexible deck suspension and spring counterweighting so the deck follows ground contour
- Includes a forward speed control system and easy-to-use steering controls
- Walker 970/221-5614,
 www.walkermowers.com

Circle 247 on reader service card

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USE READER SERVICE # 105

products >



Zodia

CLEAR

Paramount Solutions Spreader Rack

- Designed to save space in vehicles by attaching lawn fertilizer spreaders to the vehicle's already existing rear trailer receiver
- Features two-spreader holding capacity
- Available in black painted finish or stainless steel construction
- Able to hold fully loaded spreaders (not recommended)
- Possible brake light attachment that plugs into trailer receiver
- Paramount Solutions 508/852-5501, www.paramountglobalsolutions.com

Circle 248 on reader service card

Bomar Magnum Hose Nozzle

- Solid metal, true fire hose quality hose-end nozzle
- Ideal for syringing greens and spot watering
- Made of stainless steel, zinc alloy, brass and sanopreme rubber grips
- Flow is 37 gpm at 80 psi
- Available in 3/4- and 1-inch hose thread
- Bomar Technologies 951/244-1593, www.bomartechnologies.com

Circle 249 on reader service card

Burlingham Zodiac Chewings Fescue

- Fine-textured turfgrass
- Said to have improved disease resistance and ability to mow at cut heights of 1/2 inch
- · Ideal for northern cool-season turf in sun or dense shade
- Can be used in low fertility
- Burlingham Seeds 800/221-7333, www.burlinghamseeds.com

Circle 250 on reader service card

Cleary Tri-Star Insecticide

- Label amendment accepted by EPA that says product can be used by professional lawn care operators
- Ideal for residential and commercial applications
- Designed for the control of a broad range of insects
- Cleary Chemical 800/524-1662, www.clearychemical.com

Circle 251 on reader service card



Campbell Scientific CR3000 Micrologger

- Designed to provide editing capabilities with an internal CPU that is accessible via the on-board keyboard and custom LCD display
- Said to withstand many climate and weather conditions to collect research-grade environmental data
- Most commercial censors can be measured with 28 single-ended or 14 differential analog inputs
- Also includes four 24-bit pulse counters and eight control/digital ports for serial sensor input
- Campbell Scientific -

www.campbellsci.com/cr3000

Circle 252 on reader service card



Compact Power Mini-Skid System Trailers

- Includes units for the Boxer Brute, Boxer and Kanga Kid product lines
- Have receptacle areas for attachments
- Trailer sizes include 5 feet by 8 feet, 5 feet by 10 feet and 4 feet by 7 feet
- Designed so that an operator can safely load or unload the mini-skid in either the forward direction or by backing up
- Compact Power 800/476-9673, www.cpiequipment.com

Circle 253 on reader service card

126

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The Dual Spreader Carrier

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- No assembly required
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- 3 year limited warranty
- For more product information visit www.paramountglobalsolutions.com

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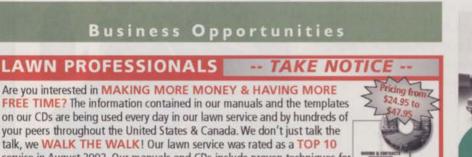
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Florida Lawn & Landscape Businesses for Sale \$130,000 to \$3.7 Million CIBB, Inc. (239)936-1718 cibb@cibb.net <mailto:cibb@cibb.net>

Business for Sale

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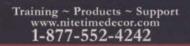
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The author is sales and marketing manager of RBR Snow Snow Removal, Islandia, N.Y., and can be reached at 631/234-8288 or pat@rbrsnow.com.

Listening To The Customer at RBR Snow Removal

istening and responding to customer feedback or the "voice of the customer" has always been an important tool for any company interesting in retaining customers and acquiring new ones.

But with increased competition in the snow removal and landscape industries, interpreting and understanding this voice is now often the difference between a successful business and one that has its fleet of trucks parked at the office because they have nowhere to go.

At RBR Snow Removal, communication with our customers is the cornerstone of our continued success. To ensure customers are pleased with our services, we regularly ask them about their experiences with us.

One method in which we hear from our customers is via a customer survey we send out at season's end. We started sending out post-season customer surveys about five years ago after I received a similar customer care initiative from the automobile industry. I was so impressed by the car company's effort to collect my feelings on my experience with them that it inspired us to implement this same marketing tool into our own operations.

RBR's post-season survey provides our customers with the opportunity to tell us how we are doing, what they like and dislike about our services and what they would like to see from us in the future. These surveys are at the heart of our customer communications.

The survey, which takes about 10 minutes to complete and fax back to us, includes questions about response time, courtesy of our phone staff, quality of the services we provide, whether expectations were met, comparisons to other contractors they may have used in the past and qualities such as reliability, cost, customer service, equipment, and services they look for in a snow management company. Customers are asked to rate our performance from excellent to poor based on their answers.

Sent at the end of every winter with our final invoice (and, as a result, costing us next to nothing to distribute) to our 300 commercial customers, our survey comes back to us with a return rate of approximately 20 percent. Though 95 percent of the surveys come back

- 5 Keys to Successful Client Surveys
- Don't wait too long after season's end to send the survey. Get opinions while they're still fresh in your client's mind.
- 2. The survey should give customers an opportunity to tell you how you are doing, what they like and dislike about your service and what services or changes they'd like to see from you in the future.
- 3. Limit or arrange your questions so it takes the client no longer than 10 minutes to complete the survey. Any longer and they may become discouraged.
- Positive comments are great they highlight what you're doing right, but negative comments provide you with insights into what you can do better.
- 5. Survey results are not the last step. Meet with clients expressing negative feedback and talk to them, in person, about how you can improve your service.

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with positive comments, we do receive negative responses, which we use to help improve our operations.

In one instance, for example, a client noted in the post-season survey that he wasn't totally thrilled with our previous performance. With this survey information in hand, we were able to meet with the client, address the issues he expressed and eventually put his mind at ease. If we hadn't solicited customer feedback, this

client would never have told us about his negative experience and we would never have had the opportunity to retain him as a customer.

Our customer satisfaction strategy doesn't end with our receiving completed surveys. The RBR management team reviews every response and then we have an open discussion about the feedback and what it means to our operations. If we collectively agree with any of the service improvement suggestions or requests, we implement them.

The survey also serves as the perfect sales tool. We use the positive feedback from our current clients and share it with potential clients. This provides them with strong testimonials, hopefully proving to them we are the right contracting company to partner with for their snow removal needs. – **Pat Feehan** 11

We Want Your Feedback

Do you have a successful business system at your company that you would like to talk about in our How We Do It section? If you do and you're willing to share details about how and why you implemented this system, as well as the costs associated with it, contact Lawn & Landscape's Nicole Wisniewski at 800/456-0707 or nwisniewski@gie.net.

some questions to consider

- · How was our response time?
- · Was our phone staff courteous when you called our office?
- Rate the quality of our services?
- Did we meet your service expectations?
- Compared to previous service providers, how do we rank in terms of reliability, cost, customer service, equipment and personnel presentation and services offered.
- Would you recommend our business to a colleague or friend?

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