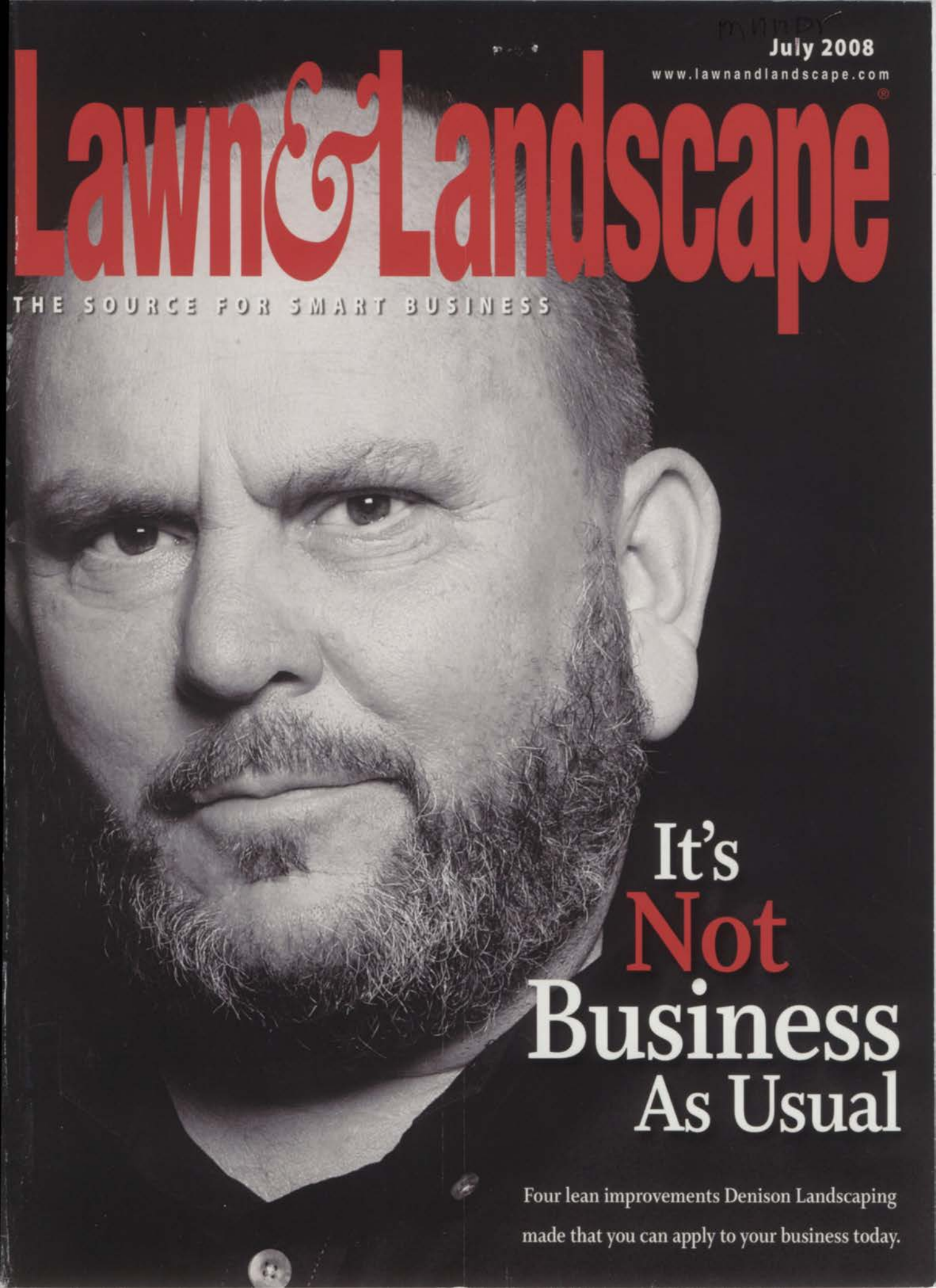


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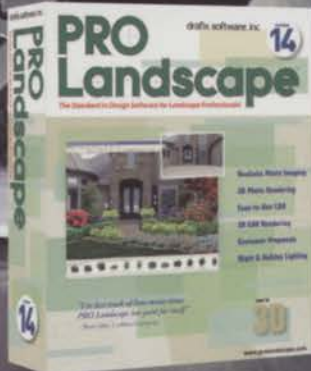


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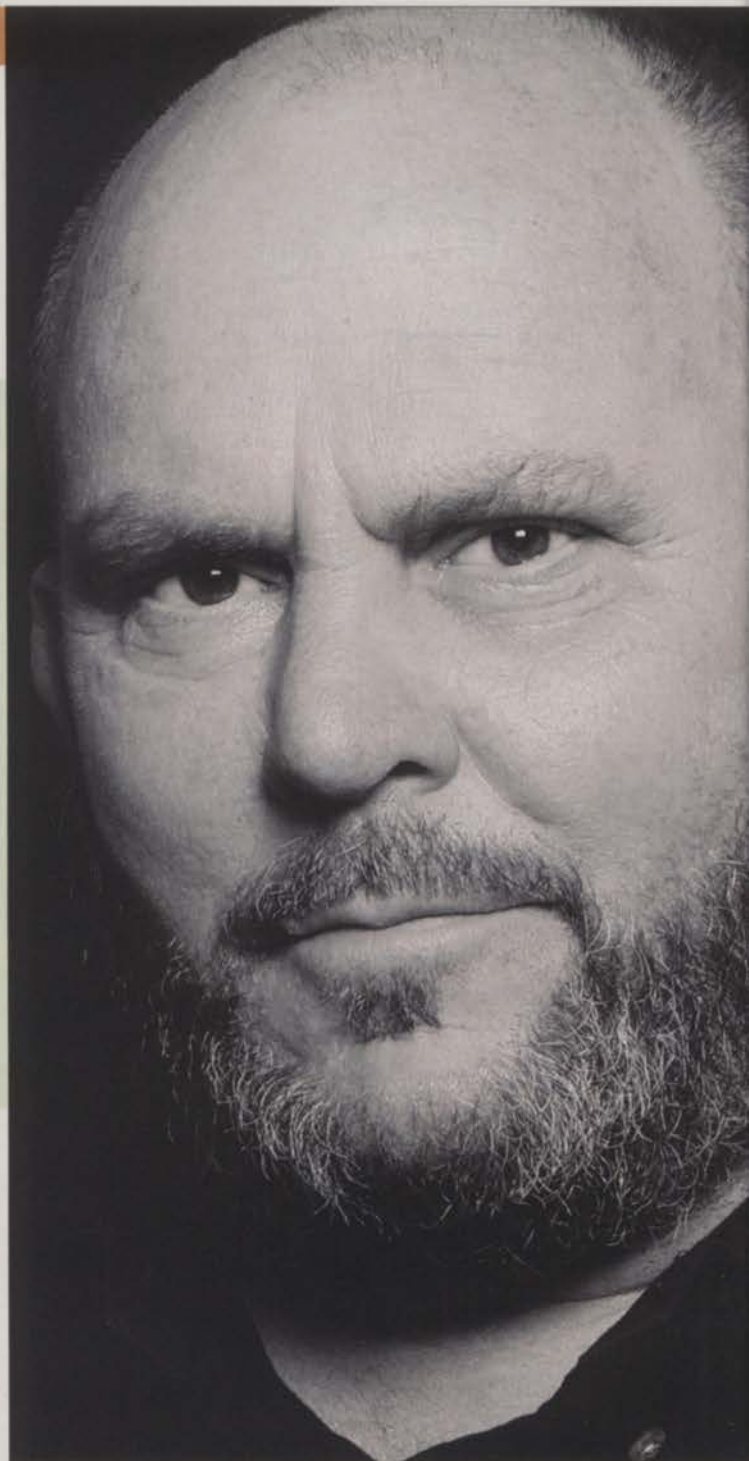
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The Daily Resource for Landscape Contractors | lawnandlandscape.com

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MSDS/labels. Important pesticide use and safety information is easily searchable by clicking the "resources" tab and choosing "MSDS/labels."

Weekly news and product information. Click the "news" tab and choose "e-newsletter" to sign up to receive weekly industry updates.

Magazine archives. Click the "magazine" tab and "issue archives."



Podcasts

Watch for a year-long series of podcasts on ways to grow your lawn and landscape business, retain employees and enhance your internal operations. We'll also feature a turf plant health podcast sponsored by **Roots**. Be sure to watch for more information on specific topics and launch dates for these podcasts in our weekly **Lawn & Landscape** e-newsletter.

The Month Ahead | lawnandlandscape.com

OPTIMIZE PROFITS

For more ways contractors can increase productivity and maximize profits on installation jobs, go to the Online Extras section at www.lawnandlandscape.com.

CURBING IMAGES

Check out the pictorial of a curbing installation job and images of finished landscapes and get fresh insight to apply to your upcoming installation jobs.

IRRIGATION EXTRA

See how much a Las Vegas homeowners' association has saved this year with the installation of soil-moisture sensors in this online extra.

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USE READER SERVICE # 12



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Lawn & Landscape.tv is Here!

Lawn and landscape professionals enjoy networking – anywhere, anytime. Trade shows, seminars, association meetings, message boards and so on, contractors are always eager to share ideas and learn a business tip or two that can net them extra dollars on the bottom line.

Message boards, chat rooms, podcasts and Webcasts represented the first wave of online networking and learning. Now, *Lawn & Landscape*, is pleased to debut a new method of connecting with other professionals in the lawn and landscape industry – our social networking site, www.lawnandlandscape.tv. It's a one-stop site for enriching your business and industry knowledge as well as communicating with your peers. In addition to social networking capabilities, blogs and photo galleries, one of the main components of our site is video. Think of it as a YouTube for the lawn and landscape industry.

Whether you're a small, medium or large landscaping firm, www.lawnandlandscape.tv provides social networking tools such as blogs, video sharing and before and after lawn and landscape photos and designs to communicate with real contractors just like you. It's what our message board community has been asking for, and we're excited to bring it to you.

Installing and maintaining landscapes is a visual process. Seeing a new construction project take shape or observing the maintenance technique of a seasoned crew is a beautiful thing. No longer do you have to search the Internet in hopes of stumbling upon a site that offers dedicated videos and photo galleries pertaining to operations, field training, plant identification, business seminars, as well as conversations and opinions that actively shape industry trends.

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Through its business management content, *Lawn & Landscape* provides its readers with pertinent, practical information on how to become more productive, efficient and profitable in their businesses.



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For the latest on fire ants, check out
"Tangling With Fire Ants" on page 54.

HELPING MILITARY FAMILIES

About 5,700 U.S. military families are asking for assistance from Project EverGreen's Green Care for Troops program that is designed to lift the burden of caring for their green spaces while their loved ones are serving in the armed forces in the Middle East. For most of us, it's a simple task to care for our lawns and landscapes, but for our U.S. military families at home it is the last task on their minds.

We all know the economic and environmental lifestyle benefits of well-maintained green spaces. It is our mission to assist them with this burden. More than 1,300 volunteers nationwide are assisting our families at home through GreenCare for Troops – three-quarters of whom are affiliated with the green industry. In managing this national program for Project EverGreen I have the opportunity and honor to converse with our military families and soldiers daily. One military wife e-mailed me recently to thank us for our assistance and said, "It is so nice to know that there is someone on our side."

Thank you to everyone who is volunteering, and for those who are interesting in helping Green Care for Troops serve the needs of more families, please visit www.projectevergreen.com and click on the Green Care for Troops link under "get involved."

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USE READER SERVICE # 14

IMMIGRATION

E-VERIFY TO BE REQUIRED
OF FEDERAL CONTRACTORS



Following President Bush's executive order requiring all federal contractors to use an electronic verification system to avoid employing illegal immigrants, the government published a proposed rule in the Federal Register on June 12. Comments from the public are accepted until Aug. 11 (see sidebar, "To Comment...").

The Department of Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff designated E-Verify, the Web-based system, as the tool it will require contractors to use.

In a June state of immigration address, Chertoff said the administration hopes to implement the system by the end of the year.

The proposed rule requires that certain federal contracts (generally those over \$3,000) contain a clause requiring the contractor and certain subcontractors use E-Verify to verify employment eligibility of all newly hired employees and all existing employees directly engaged in the federal work. The goal is to help federal agencies avoid contracting with companies that knowingly hire illegal workers. It also aims to protect U.S. workers by discouraging companies from hiring illegal immigrants, which may drive down wages, the rule says.

About 70,000 employers are currently enrolled in E-Verify, formerly known as Basic Pilot. From a federal standpoint, using the system is voluntary; however, 11 states have E-Verify requirements on the books. Arizona requires all businesses to use the system when making new hires; other states just require government contractors to do so.

DHS does not have an exact figure on how many businesses will be affected, but it may affect "hundreds of thousands, if not millions" of workers, Chertoff said.

One business that may be affected is Fox Run Nurseries, an Alexandria, Va.-based full-service landscape company. About 60 percent of Fox Run's business comes from federal, state or local government contracts. Owner Lou Kobus says his company is not using E-Verify yet, but he's prepared to move in that direction when it becomes a requirement. Fox Run has about 60 employees. "You won't find the legitimate contractors are worried about this," he says, adding he's not concerned about the administrative side of it. "It's just another cost of doing business."

Senske Lawn & Tree Care/Senske Pest Control, a \$19 million company in Kennewick, Wash., is another green industry firm with federal contracts.

Since learning of the executive order, the company's human resources representative has begun the E-Verify registra-

TO COMMENT...

To comment on the proposed regulation, submit written comments to the Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR) Secretariat on or before Aug. 11. Comments may be submitted the following ways:

ONLINE – Visit www.regulations.gov. Submit comments under the heading "Comment or Submission." Use "FAR Case 2007-013."

FAX: 202/501-4067. Cite FAR case 2007-013.

MAIL: General Services Administration, Regulatory Secretariat (VPR), 1800 F Street, NW, Room 4035, ATTN: Laurieann Duarte, Washington, DC 20405. Cite FAR case 2007-013.

All comments received will be posted without change to www.regulations.gov, including any personal and/or business confidential information provided. For more information, contact Meredith Murphy, procurement analyst, at 202/208-6925.

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tion process. "I really don't see much impact on our hiring process," says Gene Chafe, Senske's federal contracts administrator. "We already require DMV records checks, drug screenings and criminal background checks. The E-Verify process seems pretty simple, and I wouldn't anticipate the process to take more than a few minutes to complete."

Though landscape contractors aren't bracing for a big impact, the proposed rule has many critics. The American Civil Liberties Union is one of the most vocal in asserting the system will fuel the black market for identity theft.

"E-Verify or a similar electronic employment eligibility verification system will exacerbate, not decrease, the incidence of identity theft," said Timothy Sparapani, ACLU's senior legislative counsel, in a Congressional subcommittee hearing in early June. "Requiring each worker to present his or her identity to be granted permission to work will lead some desperate undocumented immigrants – and those who smuggle and illegally employ them – to steal the identities of work-eligible American workers. In short, the identities of work-eligible individuals will become commodities for borrowing and sale."

Kobus agrees that the system isn't foolproof. "You can find out if the Social Security Number is a good one, but that doesn't tell you if the worker is legal or not," he says.

Additionally, Kobus questions the government's ability to enforce and administer such a requirement. On the other hand, he does say there may be some benefit: Leveling the playing field between "legitimate" companies and so-called "low-ballers."

"Government contracts have been going for dirt cheap over the last two years," he says, citing one multi-million contract where the lowest bidder came in 60 percent less than the second-lowest firm. Kobus says such companies must be paying illegal immigrants less than the required wages to bid this low. "Those are the things that are happening, so thank goodness those companies won't be around for much longer."

Tom Delaney, director of government affairs for the Professional Landcare Network, adds that such a rule may heat up the immigration debate once again. "But then again, McCain and Obama don't even want to talk about immigration, so I guess we'll see." —Marisa Palmieri

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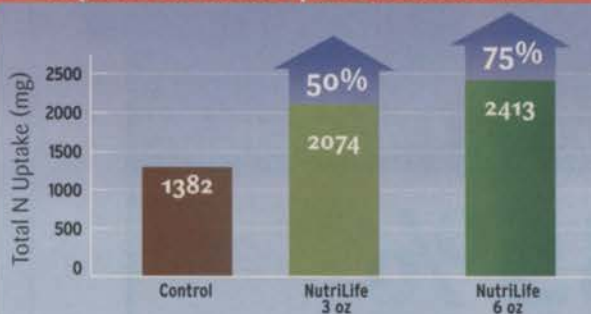
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USE READER SERVICE # 15

USE READER SERVICE # 16

INDUSTRY GROWTH

Iowa's Green Industry Exceeds \$500M Mark

Iowa's green industry has enjoyed 74 percent growth since 2004, a recent Iowa State University Extension survey reveals, making it the fastest growing segment of the state's agriculture industry.

Since 2004, Iowa's green industry went from \$311.5 million in estimated value of sales and services to a \$538.2 million economic impact, study the study, which was authored by extension specialists and ISU faculty Cynthia Haynes, Ann Marie VanDerZanden and Jeffery Iles. The researchers surveyed landscape contractors and designers, as well as arborists and garden center owners.

Most survey respondents expect their businesses to grow in employment, annual gross payroll and sales, and total annual expenses by 2010. Though the size and type of businesses varied, most had only one location, were family-owned and have been in business less than six years, Haynes says. "Respondents participating in our study were generally optimistic," she points out.

"Those people and businesses that can afford to pay for [landscape] services have not scaled back their commitment to their properties," agrees Bryan McGinness, president of Des Moines-based Write Outdoor Services. The company, which employs 116 employees, including 40 seasonal workers, forecasted more than 18 percent growth this year alone and plans to double in size by the year 2012. Growth will come organically and through continued mergers and acquisitions. The company purchased Des Moines-based Heard Gardens earlier this year.

Another landscape company who is reaping the benefits of Iowa's growing green industry is Des Moines' Perficut Lawn & Landscape. The company, which earned \$3 million in 2002, is expecting \$11 million this year, according to President Kory Ballard. Since that time, the company also has gone from 24 full-time and 45 seasonal employees to 40 full-time and 125 seasonal employees, as well as doubling its vehicles from approximately 34 in 2002 to 70 of its signature blue trucks today.

Though Perficut has enjoyed strong growth, it has felt some of the negative effects of rising business costs, including soaring gas prices – mainly, some unpaid bills for work performed, resulting in cash flow restrictions. Also, Ballard has seen some large developers make cutbacks or close their doors since 2007 and, on the residential side, he has seen some customers spend less and be more selective in the services they choose to purchase. On the commercial maintenance side, the excessive snow this winter resulted in property owners spending more than they budgeted, so they are making service cutbacks on their lawn care as a way to recoup costs, Ballard shares.

In fact, due to the residential construction slowdown, many Iowa landscape professionals have not raised prices "because they



market watch

85%

Spelling Errors

The percent of 5,000 writing samples that contain at least one or more grammatical or spelling errors. The root of most problems was the exclusion of "be," "have," "do,"

"on" and "at." Source: Whitesmoke.com

are scared of losing work," Ballard says. "We are paying more for all of the products we use and have been unable to adjust the prices accordingly."

Despite these challenges, Ballard says the company will still continue growth in the next few years "but at a much slower rate than in the past," citing growth plans in the 5- to 10-percent range.

Though most Iowa landscape contractors see a reduction in new residential home building, they are seeing customers invest money in their existing residences instead, McGinness says. Both Perficut and Wright Outdoor Services report the phone is still ringing with clients requesting quotes. Even with Perficut's initial \$50 consulting fee to meet with design/build customers, only four potential clients declined because they didn't want to pay the fee so far this year.

McGinness and Ballard plan to see the most growth come

from their tree service divisions. In addition to that sector, McGinness says his enhancement profit center is enjoying strong growth, and Ballard plans to see a boost in recurring revenue from obtaining new maintenance clients after completing their installations.

Iowa's green industry provides more than 11,000 jobs. Haynes and her colleagues plan to use this preliminary research to create further educational programming and professional development opportunities to address industry needs. Building the skills of the workforce will help position Iowa's green industry for further expansion, she says.

Moreover, when it came to identifying factors that could limit business success, survey respondents pointed only to the availability of skilled labor and capital, which are also limitations in states with larger green industries than Iowa, Haynes points out. —Nicole Wisniewski

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USE READER SERVICE # 17

USE READER SERVICE # 18

MERGERS & ACQUISITIONS

ValleyCrest Acquires \$15 million D.C. Firm

In June, ValleyCrest Cos. acquired Pine Ridge Landscaping, a \$15.1 million full-service landscape firm based in Chantilly, Va. Terms of the transaction were not disclosed.

The deal was a good fit for a few reasons, says Roger Zino, president of ValleyCrest Landscape Maintenance. These include the firm's leadership, commercial maintenance base, consistent growth and good operations. "They really run a tight ship," Zino says. Pine Ridge former owners William Cumberland and Wayne Shiveley join ValleyCrest as regional vice presidents. The acquisition is the third this year for ValleyCrest, which ranks No. 2 on *Lawn & Landscape's* Top 100 list with 2007 revenue of \$935 million.

Zino says acquisition inquiries have picked up over the last two years. "The more acquisitions we do and as the leader-



ValleyCrest
COMPANIES

ship teams continue to work with ValleyCrest and enjoy the experience, the more the word gets out," he says. Zino adds that economic uncertainty may increase sellers' interest.

Though Zino declines to say how many more acquisitions are on the horizon for ValleyCrest, he says the company is always looking to partner with firms that have great leadership teams and share ValleyCrest's values. Firms' size, location and service mix are secondary factors, he says.

"It's hard to predict in any given year how many of those come to bear," Zino says. "We look at the opportunities as they become available and we welcome the exploratory discussions to find out if there is a good match. We don't really have a target number." —*Marisa Palmieri*

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USE READER SERVICE # 19

FUEL PRICES

Six Causes of Pain at the Pump

The cost of filling up a truck, mower or other piece of equipment is enough to send chills down the spine of the average lawn care operator trying to stay in the black. The price of fuel seems to increase faster than lawns grow after a good spring rain. To the casual consumer or fleet operator, the price jumps seem to have no rhyme or reason. Yet behind the scenes, several factors are at play causing green industry professionals to consider adding or increasing fuel surcharges.

Here's a look at six main reasons gas prices are climbing:

CRUDE OIL. The price change in a barrel of crude oil is constantly in the news because it is important for gas prices. For the most part, when the price of crude oil goes up, you can expect the price at the pump to increase as well, according to the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO). The U.S.

buys crude oil in the world market, and the high world demand mixed with the shrinking total U.S. share of the market causes the price to skyrocket.

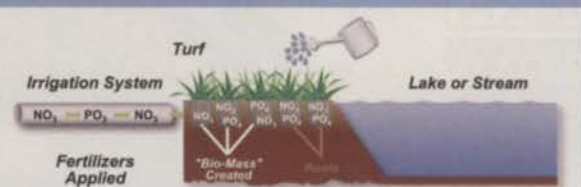
SUPPLY AND DEMAND. Not unlike the price of crude oil, the price of gasoline is partly determined by what's needed and what's available, the GAO says. Some regions' prices are always higher than others because of their distance from the supply, according to the Energy Information Administration (EIA). It costs more to get the gasoline there from the ports, refineries and pipelines.

REGULATIONS. Federal and state requirements for gasoline have an impact on the cost of filling up a fleet. Rules are in place in some parts of the country that require gasoline to

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USE READER SERVICE # 21

»»» WHAT ABOUT DIESEL?

Diesel engines generally are more fuel-efficient than gas-powered ones, but the trade off is that diesel fuel costs more.

Like gasoline, diesel fuel is a product of crude oil. Unlike gasoline, it's a distillate refined from crude oil, meaning it requires a different method of refinement.

Also, less of it is produced. On average, about 7 gallons are produced from a 42-gallon barrel of crude oil, as opposed to an average 19.4 gallons of gasoline, according to the Energy Information Administration.

This form of fuel has been met with soaring demand over the past few years, and U.S. refineries have been working at more than 90 percent to meet it, according to the U.S. Government Accountability Office.

Diesel fuel is used for most of the transportation vehicles in the U.S. because there are few alternative options at this point.

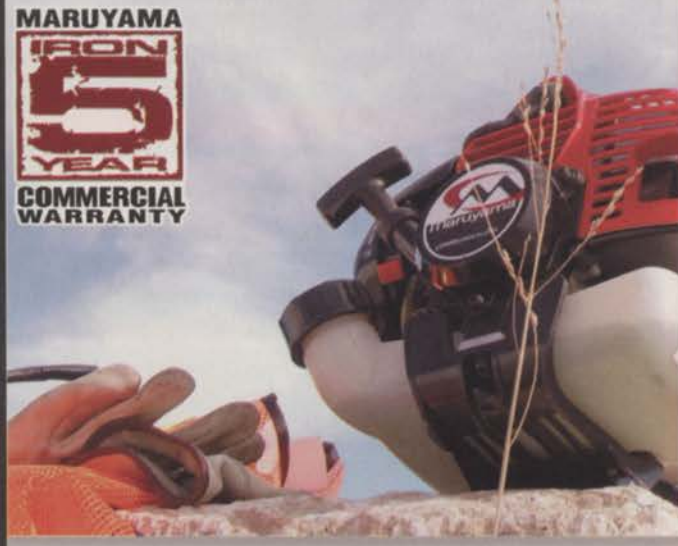
have additives designed to reduce carbon monoxide and smog when the fuel is burned. The extra step adds to the cost of producing the fuel. About a third of the U.S. gasoline supply is reformulated to meet regulations, the EIA says.

SEASONAL FACTORS. Events that occur at certain times of year, such as hurricanes, can stop production at refineries for a short time, temporarily decreasing the supply, the EIA says. This is why most regions of the country saw a jump in prices after Hurricane Katrina. Other seasonal events, such as summer vacations, up the demand for the fuel, causing higher prices.

TAXES. Federal, state and local government taxes accounted for 15 percent of

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USE READER SERVICE # 22

the retail price of gas last year, the EIA says. There are 11 states that added their own tax on top of the federal one. But taxes have remained fairly steady in recent years, so they haven't been a cause of the volatility, according to the GAO.

INDUSTRY CHANGES. More than 2,600 mergers occurred in the petroleum industry in the 1990s, the GAO reports. Mergers sometimes involve companies that compete with each other, leaving less competition in the end. This enables gas retail companies to charge more at the pump. — Heather Wood

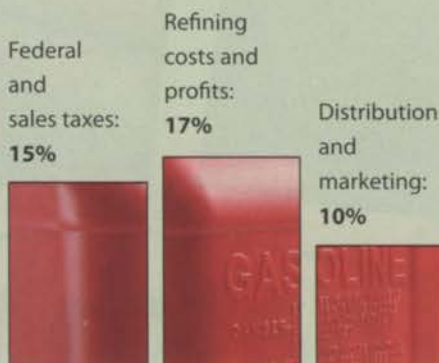
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USE READER SERVICE # 24

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Is Thatch the Culprit?

Insecticide failure happens. However, professionals understand lack of post-treatment irrigation, too much thatch, poor timing and accelerated microbial degradation are often key contributors. With today's modern neonicotinoid insecticides, control is much better; yet researchers still hear of product failure. Is it failure?

Thatch. Thatch layers have been and probably always will be the number one reason why a grub control insecticide doesn't work. Thatch, especially layered thatch, acts like a thick piece of blotter paper. Even when insecticides with lower KOCs (organic carbon binding constant), significant amounts of the product can be bound and held within thatch layers.

The thatch layer must be managed in order for any soil insecticide to work efficiently. Some professionals figure if they core the thatch before applying an insecticide that the insecticide will somehow, magically, go down the holes to kill the grubs, mole crickets or billbug larvae. Research has shown that this is simply not true.

Wetting agents and surfactants also seem to have little influence on modifying the binding capacity of thatch. In short, if you pre-wet the thatch and apply the insecticide with immediate irrigation, you can often get some of the insecticide through the thatch.

If you experience a grub insecticide failure, check the thatch levels in the area first.

Irrigation. Post-treatment irrigation of a grub or mole cricket insecticide has always been important. Irrigation seems to be most important following liquid applications where the insecticide has a tendency to dry and stick onto leaf blades and stems before irrigation is applied. Granular formulations can somewhat overcome this issue by holding onto the insecticide in a protected granule until rainfall or irrigation arrives. Remember, the goal of the application is to get the insecticide to the zone where the target insect is feeding. For most grubs and mole crickets, this is the soil-thatch interface.

Improper Rates. When the industry was using significantly higher pounds of active per acre, there was fair room for error in the application. However, with insecticides that are applied at 0.2 to 0.3 pounds of active per acre, there is much less room for error. When asked to investigate alleged product failures, I always ask questions on the method of application. What kind of sprayer was used, and when was it last calibrated?

Summary. If you experience a failure of a soil insecticide, don't grasp for an unusual reason. Check the thatch, your post-treatment irrigation and application techniques. **LL**

Shellar is an urban landscape entomologist at The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH



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USE READER SERVICE # 25



Plant Production

Knowing a plant's production cycle helps contractors get the material they need when they need it.

PLANT MATERIAL is an important part of any landscape. But how exactly does it get into landscape contractors' hands? "All plants, from annuals to ornamentals, follow the same basic route to market, but the types of growers vary along the way," says Jeff Gibson, landscape business manager, Ball Horticultural Co., West Chicago, Ill.

An originator is a plant breeding

and production company that distributes its products – seed or vegetative cuttings – through a broker. These brokers, or wholesale distributors, provide the seed or cuttings to a specialty grower.

For annuals, these specialty growers grow young plants from seed to make plugs, or produce liners (rooted cuttings) from cuttings. Those cut-

tings may come from licensed stock growers have at their locations or, more typically, the growers receive cuttings directly from production facilities around the world.

For woody ornamentals, growers are specialized production nurseries that are licensed to either take vegetative cuttings from stock plants on their own properties or to grow liners that are sold to wholesale growers who finish the plants.

The next step is a wholesale finish grower, who receives the plugs or rooted liners and grows them to fill the containers in which the plants will eventually be sold. At times, the specialty plug or liner grower may also be a finish grower.

From there, the plants are sold to retailers (such as garden or home centers), landscape distribution centers or directly to landscape professionals.

Being aware of this plant production cycle can be useful for contractors who want the freshest plant material in a timely fashion. Gibson suggests contractors start working with their suppliers six to nine months in advance to avoid receiving root-bound or overgrown material. "Working backward through a standard production cycle with their supplier will help contractors get the maximum performance out of the annuals they buy, as the plants will be fresh when received," he says. "Contractors will also be more likely to get preferred varieties rather than just what the grower has available at that time." **LL**



1.



2.



4.



3.

1. Originators distribute seed and cuttings (pictured) to brokers and wholesale distributors.

2. Specialty growers grow seed and cuttings into plugs and liners. 3. Wholesale finish growers grow the plugs and liners to fill the containers they're sold in, and then sell them to retailers. 4. Landscape professionals can purchase plant material from wholesalers or retailers.

Photos: Ball Horticultural Co.

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It's Not Business As Usual

Four lean improvements Denison Landscaping
made that you can apply to your business today.

BY MIKE ZAWACKI/MANAGING EDITOR

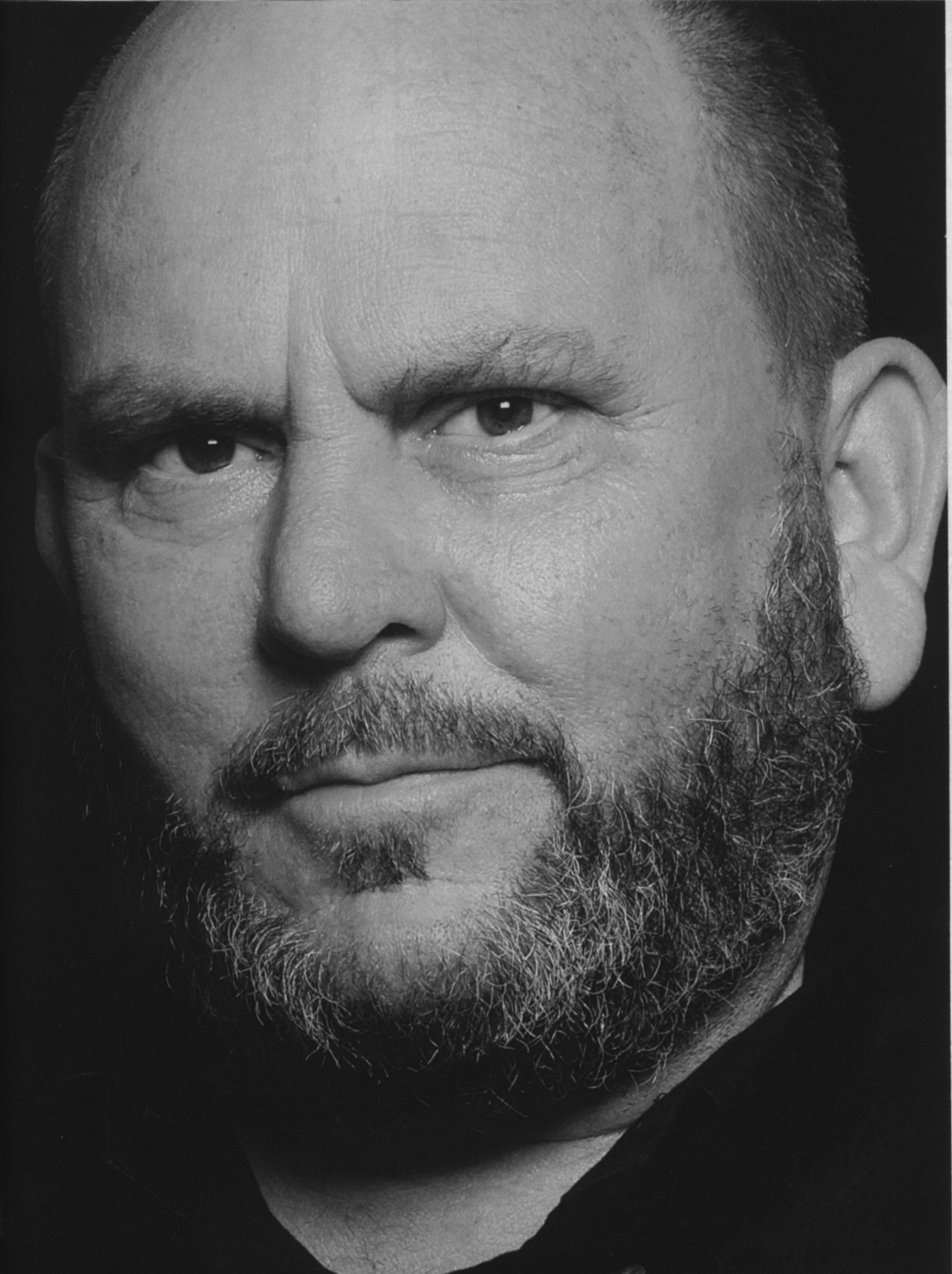
Consider John Denison a believer.

Two years ago his son and operations manager, Joshua Denison, along with the company's logistics manager, Sabrina Kittrell, presented a plan that would change his 34-year-old company, Fort Washington, Md.-based Denison Landscaping & Nursery. Having witnessed the Japanese efficiency principals firsthand at Ariens Co., they wanted their boss to take a leap of faith and adopt lean management.

John Denison admits some apprehension about tinkering with his company's business model. He was familiar with lean concepts and knew just enough to talk conversationally with industry colleagues. But what was there to fix? The \$36 million full-service landscape company was a leading player in its market. In addition to maintenance, design/build, installation, irrigation and snow removal operations, he also oversaw nearly 800 acres of plant farms that not only supplied his needs, but also those of other landscape contractors and the general public. His profit margins ranged from 12 to 24 percent, depending on the service area.

"We were on top of the world," John Denison says. "We had more work than we

John Denison
Denison Landscaping
Photo: Risdon Photography





Brothers: Duane, John and Frank Denison.
Photo: Risdon Photography >>>

DENISON LANDSCAPING & NURSERY

OWNER/PRESIDENT: John P. Denison

EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT:
Duane Denison

OPERATIONS MANAGER: Joshua Denison

MAINTENANCE MANAGER: John Howell

DESIGN/INSTALLATION MANAGER:
Frank Denison

HARDSCAPES MANAGER: James Denison

PAYROLL MANAGER: Katelyn Denison

CORPORATE SECRETARY: Donna Denison

FOUNDED: 1973

EMPLOYEES: 140 year-round, 75 seasonal

H-2B WORKERS: 195, 76% of total work force

SERVICE BREAKDOWN:

- 5% Maintenance/Mowing
- 15% Design/Build
- 67% Installation only
- 12% Irrigation Services
- 1% Snow and ice removal

CLIENT BREAKDOWN:

- 52% Commercial
- 10% Residential
- 28% HOAs, condos and apartment buildings
- 10% Government/Municipal

could do and we were able to pick and choose what we wanted to do."

But ominous clouds loomed on the horizon. Forecasts warned of an impending economic downturn ushered in by a collapse in the housing market, among other factors. Committing to lean would improve existing business systems and control escalating costs, Josh Denison says. "We saw ourselves as doing well in the market but that things were probably going to change rather quickly," he says. "We looked at this process as a tool to get us in the best condition possible."

The profitable economy caused Denison Landscaping to become lax with its business systems. Lean would get things back on track, says Duane Denison, John's brother and the company's executive vice president. "We were bringing back good practices that had eroded away because of the good economy," he says. "Anybody

in their right mind wants to run their company lean."

So, trusting in his employees' enthusiasm, John Denison green lit lean management. "It's not easy to sell me on certain things," he says. "I guess I'm an old-school person. At first, this seemed like more of the same old stuff. But they had enough oomph in their convictions to convince me lean was something we should do."

In hindsight, it proved to be a shrewd move. The halcyon days the company enjoyed into late 2006 are now a distant memory. "We're hitting the bricks pretty hard," John Denison says. "As of June 1 our payroll is the highest it's ever been and our revenue is off \$500,000 in May. That's a real concern."

Lean, though, may be Denison Landscaping's saving grace. At the very least the exercise forced the company to reevaluate its business



Photos (middle spread and page 29): Denison Landscaping



processes, identify areas for efficiency and increased productivity and reinstate business maxims. "What we did was take the processes in place and fine tune them," Kittrell says. "Lean has taken our routines and made them more productive because the guys are watching how they spend their time. Lean has taken our processes and made sure we're using everyone to their fullest capabilities. John had a great company prior to lean. What lean did was formalize it and funnel it to where we're eliminating waste and improving our time management."

Once economic conditions stabilize, John Denison expects lean management principals will contribute 1 to 2 percent annually to his bottom line. "For a \$36 million landscape company that's a significant amount of money," he says. "You want to go out and do the job with processes that

are as lean as you can, whether you're calling it lean management or just good business. It has surely revitalized the way we look at doing business."

John and his team at Denison Landscaping say many of their lean-inspired innovations are applicable lessons for landscape companies of any size and scope.

RECYCLING. The magnitude of waste the company produced over the course of a year never ceased to amaze the leaders at Denison Landscaping. Take, for example, the 50,000 wooden pallets that accompany orders of sod and bagged mulch throughout the year. After their use, Denison Landscaping was either burning or paying someone to haul them to the dump.

But following lean management guidelines, Kittrell realized a golden opportunity. Now these once nuisance items are either sold or recycled into

REVENUE:

2008.....\$37.5 million (projected)
 2007.....\$36.2 million
 2006.....\$36.8 million
 2005.....\$30.2 million

EQUIPMENT BREAKDOWN:

Riding mowers: 20
 Walk-behind mowers: 20
 Trimmers: 50
 Blowers: 50
 Vehicles: 150+
 Trailers: 70
 Skid-steer loaders: 48

MANAGEMENT PHILOSOPHY:

It is important to improve our organizational structure and accountability of all personnel to achieve success.

UNIQUE BUSINESS SYSTEMS OR PROGRAMS:

700+ acres for plant propagation and storage;
 15 30-yard trash containers for recycling;
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WHAT KEEPS US AWAKE AT NIGHT:

Immigration reform, the availability of H-2B workers and a downturn in the economy causing a slow down in cash flow while commodity prices increase.

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 Web: www.denisonlandscaping.com



mulch that is then used in future landscape projects.

Like pallets, plastic mulch bags – as many as 450,000 in a year – were another seemingly useless throwaway commodity. “They were being sent to the landfill,” John Denison says. “Now we’re bringing them back, we’re cutting them, we’re cleaning them and we’re selling them to a plastic recycling company. Before, we were paying to get rid of them.”

In the past, workers would throw out as many as 900,000 plastic plant containers in a year. Now the used

such as a composting program and recycling excess dirt from landscape projects to the company’s nursery to reduce material waste.

The recycling program took six months to go from concept to cash. Today, Denison Landscaping has 15, 30-yard trash bins where refuse is separated out into metal, wood, plastic and other types of trash. In addition, the new initiative is managed by the company’s tool room employees and didn’t require any additional hires. John Denison estimates that over the course of a full year the recycling

Lean Facility

Within the next 18 to 20 months, Denison Landscaping will move into its new, \$2.5 million headquarters. The strategic move nearly doubles the space the company currently occupies, from roughly 36 acres to 60 acres of a recently purchased 153-acre farm. The new facility will include a new 18,000-square-foot, LEED-certified office building, as well as state-of-the-art shop, tool yard and staging area. Also, the facility’s location grants easier access to the Washington D.C. beltway and positions Denison work crews within 15 minutes of Northern Virginia and only minutes from its clients to the north.

The new facility will be the culmination of all the lean management lessons the company’s leadership learned over the last year, as well as reflect additional cost-saving innovations. “In looking to the future of lean management at Denison Landscaping, we see our new facility as a new starting ground for us,” says Josh Denison, the company’s operations manager, future leader and original advocate for adopting lean management principles. “We’re looking at designing this facility in ways that will afford us processes that are the least time consuming, that involve the least movement and are the most efficient.”

pots are brought back, cleaned and reallocated to the company’s nursery operation, which in the past purchased pots when it needed them.

Denison Landscaping has also begun recycling its metal refuse, items such as copper wire, piping and other leftovers from irrigation installations. “We’ve brought in \$5,000 just from taking our metal refuse to the scrap yard instead of putting it in our dumpsters for the landfill,” John Denison says.

Other initiatives have taken root –

program will contribute as much as \$50,000 to his bottom line.

MORNING MINUTES. Most mornings Denison Landscaping’s staging yard was chaotic, to say the least. “Traffic was everywhere and mostly traveling into each other,” Kittrell says. “We’d have numerous accidents during the morning launch because everyone was rushing to get out.”

Even worse, there were days when work crews were still in the staging



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USE READER SERVICE # 26

Destroyers vs. Builders

One of the most eye-opening revelations in adopting lean management processes at Denison Landscaping were exercises regarding “builders” and “destroyers” within the company, says owner John Denison.

Achieving lean status, according to the principals of this management philosophy, starts with people who fall into two categories: destroyers and builders. These two employee types are polar opposites, the yin and yang of a work force. Unlike a builder, who is generally an attentive, positive visionary, a destroyer is characteristically ineffectively trained, displays negative attitudes, lacks the ability to listen to new ideas and possesses no strategic vision.

“That was an enlightening realization, that after being in business for almost 35 years some of the people you have on staff are destroyers and others, some you didn’t realize, were builders,” John Denison says.

Each week during the lean management process, Denison Landscaping employees undergoing training were given a scenario and had to consider it through the eyes of a builder and then through the eyes of a destroyer, says Executive Vice President Duane Denison. At the conclusion, the question was presented to employees, “Which one are you?”

“It was incentive for the individual to make the right choice,” he says.



Pictured above: (top row) John David Denison, intern; Katelyn Denison, payroll; and James Denison, hardscapes; (bottom) Monica Denison, administration; Josh Denison, operations; John Denison, president; and Donna Denison, corporate secretary.

Photo: Risdon Photography

yard at 9:30 a.m.

Lean management, John Denison says, has shown the company that it’s all about minutes. Denison Landscaping reassessed the traffic pattern of its morning launch, diverting everyone from multiple directions to one single flow of traffic. It departmentalized who loads trucks and when trucks get equipped for the day’s tasks. Mechanics were organized so that three to four guys are stationed at the front of the deployment line to inspect and troubleshoot minor truck issues so these problems don’t escalate and impede traffic flow. In addition, each division is assigned its own starting point.

“We talk all the time about minutes and how minutes add up into hours and can be factored into a dollar figure,” John Denison says. “So with the change in our traffic flow during

the morning launch, if we can get it to save us 10 minutes with 70 vehicles being dispatched, then we’re looking at a cost savings of 700 minutes per day in the morning.”

At this time, Denison Landscaping has shaved off about six minutes from its morning launch, with most trucks dispatched by 7:45 a.m.

SPLIT SHIFT. An offshoot of Denison Landscaping’s drive to dispatch work crews in the least time possible lead to another lean innovation. Before the lean initiatives, during the morning launch trucks would line up outside the equipment area and wait for equipment, creating a time-consuming bottleneck. To complicate this situation, there was no accounting of broken tools and equipment. “In the past, returning workers would just put the broken equipment on the floor of the tool room,” Kittrell says. “If they didn’t tell anybody, someone would go out with it the next day. Then we’d have to run a replacement piece out to the job site.”

Utilizing lean principals, Denison Landscaping established split shifts for the equipment shop and tool room. The second shift of employees works from 1 p.m. to 11 p.m. and is responsible for fixing equipment and outfitting trucks for the next morning’s launch. “We’re able to get equipment fixed that night and ready for the next day,” John Denison says.

Since adopting the split shift, Kittrell says the company has seen an 85 percent improvement in these departments’ performances.

ACCOUNTABILITY. “Awareness and accountability” is John Denison’s mantra when he discusses lean management because every manager wants his

continued on page 129

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DIVIDE and Conquer

Should mowing and pruning crews be two separate entities, or is it more efficient to have one crew manage both? Online message board users share their methods.

Is there more than one right way to organize mowing and pruning crews and maintain productivity? Jerry Zezas wondered this as he examined the setup at his company, Blue Heron Irrigation and Landscape in Nokomis, Fla., and considered splitting the crew into separate groups to conquer the tasks. He enlisted the help of *Lawn & Landscape* online message board users to see if he was making the right decision in terms of efficiency.

TRYING TWO. Zezas' project manager suggested separating the mowing and pruning crews on the company's larger commercial accounts. "He says the efficiency of personnel just doing mowing or just doing pruning will make up for the additional travel time and fuel expense," Zezas posts.

The manager proposed creating one mowing crew that mows properties weekly and one pruning crew that prunes monthly. "He's convinced that two smaller crews will create more efficiency for our larger properties."

Todd McCabe sees merit in breaking down the crews because it can be more



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Monday	7	1/2	3:30	Brentwood	Gen	8
Tuesday	7	1/2	3:30	"	"	8
Wednesday	7	1/2	4	"	"	8 1/2
Thursday	7	1/2	4	Crestview	:	8 1/2
Friday	7	1/2	4	"	"	8 1/2

Employee Signature: *David B.* Total Hours: **41 1/2**

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Displays the total time worked by each employee

Mountain View LANDSCAPE

David Burns
Time card for: Monday, August 11, 2008 - Friday, August 15, 2008

Jobsite Name	Cost Code	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thu	Fri	Total
Brentwood Job	Irrigation	7:38	7:35	7:53	-	-	23:06
Crestview Job	Planting	-	-	-	-7:58	7:49	15:47
		7:38	7:35	7:53	7:58	7:49	38:53

David Burns
Regular Hours: 38:53
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efficient. "The thing I don't like about having a mowing crew pruning is that you are going to have a truck or trailer sitting with about \$10,000-20,000 in mowers and equipment that is not being productive," says the president of McCabe Landscape Group in Wrightsville Beach, N.C. "I like for my mowers to be mowing and not sitting on the truck."

Not only does Bill Atwood want his mowing crews to make the most of the equipment they haul, but he also doesn't want to fill the trucks with additional items as the day goes on that would make it harder to access the mowers.

"(Mowing crews) do not do any pruning as that will fill the landscape trailer with limbs and other debris and make it difficult to get mowers in and out of the trailer," says the owner of Bill's

"The thing I don't like about having a mowing crew pruning is that you are going to have a truck trailer sitting with about \$10,000-\$20,000 in mowers and equipment that is not being productive."

— Todd McCabe, McCabe Landscape Group

Complete Lawn care and Landscaping in Trumbull, Texas. "We cannot afford to have \$60,000 worth of equipment sitting still to prune a few trees or bushes."

Atwood's mowing crew's responsibilities include mowing, edging, trimming and blowing off hard surfaces. They also perform some weeding and spray weed killer in sidewalk cracks when necessary.

His pruning crew maintains oak trees, palm trees, crepe myrtle trees and any other large shrubs or bushes in need of care. In addition, the crew tackles mulch installation, seasonal color, fertilization, aeration and any other tasks the mowing crew doesn't perform.

Chuck Twist found a slightly different way to make the separation work. He has three to four crews that mow and one that trims and does odd jobs.

"Since there are not enough hours to keep the trim crews busy all day, they only work a half day trimming and then they come in in the evenings, after the mowing crews have finished for the day and clean and service all the equipment and trucks,"

says the president of TNT Lawn and Landscape in Stillwater, Okla. "They clean the shop and organize everything so that the mow crews only need to come in in the mornings, grab their route sheets and go."

The challenge Twist encounters is that many employees don't enjoy working evenings.

Twist adds there is one other employee who mows on a tractor with a grooming mower two days a week, but his main job is attending to the mowing and trimming crews' needs. He is responsible for finding the parts that are needed, making repairs in the field and monitoring the quality of field and shop operations.

COMBINED EFFORTS. Some posters think forming two separate crews might create the opposite of the desired effect. Pruning all day could get boring and cause the crew to work less efficiently, they say.

Another notion was that a combined crew can be the way to go if it's managed properly, says Bob Keating of Liberty Land Management in Palm Harbor, Fla. He learned by experience that separate crews didn't work well for his company because the pruning crew didn't maintain properties frequently enough, leaving them looking unkempt between visits, he posts on the message board.

"The property, by getting a full trim each visit, looks better consistently. The weeds are tended to quicker. There are fewer trimmings to trim and pick up. The annual beds get tended to quicker. And more importantly, I have fewer vehicles on the road, along with fewer people," he says. "I can just look at my maintenance profit margin now versus (with separate crews) and know for a fact that I run a well-oiled machine."

In Keating's case, the trim crew handles soft bed edging, tree canopies and palms to 12 feet, and the overall detail of the property. The mow crew edges the hard surface, mows, trims and blows the clippings.

In terms of enhancement and small landscaping jobs, Keating says a different crew is warranted because he bills clients extra for that work instead of billing it as part of the standard maintenance contract. **LL**

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USE READER SERVICE # 29

add-on services



Christmas

in july

BY EMILY MULLINS/ASSOCIATE EDITOR



Contractors add holiday lighting to their service menus to supplement the slow winter months.

About three years ago, The Lighting & Landscape Co. acquired a small landscape lighting firm that came equipped with a few holiday lighting prospects. Little did Marcus Craig know but the service would quickly grow to comprise 40 to 50 percent of the company's total business. "Holiday décor has proven to be a very solid aspect of our business," says the vice president of the Niceville, Fla.,-based company. "From a small-business perspective, it's a really easy sector to grow."

Many landscape contractors agree holiday lighting and décor is a profitable service that, compared to some of the other off-season services, is relatively easy to offer clients. And the number of contractors who offer it grows every year, a trend that Scott Heese, president of Holiday Bright Lights, has seen firsthand. His company, which manufactures lighting products and provides training and marketing materials to holiday decorators, has witnessed membership to its holiday décor program grow by 40 percent since last year.

Requiring few pieces of specialized equipment and having a low learning

Photos: Holiday Bright Lights

add-on services

curve, holiday lighting is a great way for contractors to generate supplemental income during the slow winter months. And, perhaps an even greater draw, it's a fun service to offer. "We added the service about 10 years ago as another source of income when the market slows down in the winter," says Todd Dilley, owner of Outdoor Environments, South Savage, Minn. "It's an important aspect to our business financially, and it's a fun aspect we look forward to."

Holiday décor is a sustainable business as well, particularly in the commercial market. "Regardless of economic slows and peaks, most commercial establishments have some sort of holiday décor every

year," Craig says. "It's a fairly viable business because there is a demand for it year after year."

GETTING STARTED. Most contractors already have the equipment necessary to offer holiday lighting services, including ladders, hand tools and trailers for hauling. The one wildcard item is a boom lift, which is the most specialized piece of equipment a contractor needs to do the work. Because holiday installation is seasonal in nature, Craig finds it most cost effective to rent a 60- or 80-foot boom lift for \$5,000 to \$6,000 a year than to invest \$60,000 to \$100,000 into owning a boom unit. Dilley also rents a boom lift for about \$400 a week. Contrac-

tors should be able to effectively enter the holiday lighting market for about \$20,000, Craig says.

Of course, this cost varies from company to company. For example, some contractors choose to keep an inventory of holiday supplies while others invest on an as-needed, per-client basis. Each method has its merits. For example, companies that maintain an inventory will have the extra expense of storing the materials in the offseason, while companies that invest on an as-needed basis risk being unable to secure stock.

Like with equipment, most landscape companies already have the manpower for the work. Because of the low learning curve, mowing and

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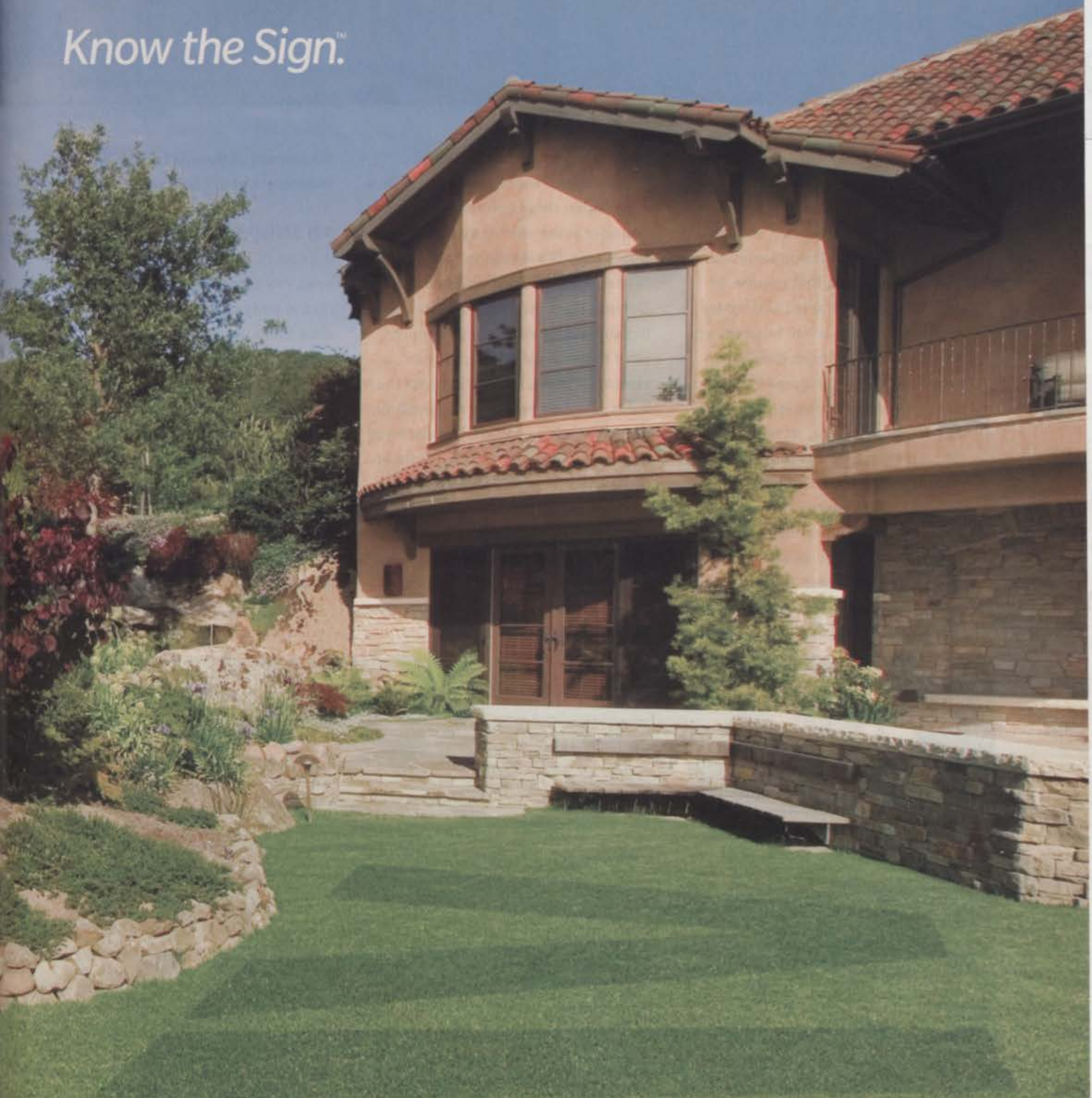


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add-on services

maintenance crews are capable of adapting to holiday services. Training can be done in-house, but supplier-sponsored seminars are a solid source for assembly and design techniques.

For companies that require additional workers, the fall and winter are ideal times to solicit laborers who have been laid off from other landscape companies. Most of Craig's large commercial jobs require 10 to 12 people on a crew, so he doubles his staff from October through January. Companies with smaller holiday divisions, like Outdoor Environments, make due with their established landscape crews, which remain on staff throughout the winter. Most of Dilley's residential jobs are serviced by pairs

of workers, and commercial jobs involve two or more pairs of installers.

Another thing contractors should consider is the electricity available to them, says Bill Mansoor, maintenance manager for Designs by Sundown, Denver. The company's outdoor lighting supervisor visits each property prior to the installation to ensure electricity is available to support the lights. Tripped breakers and malfunctioning lighting displays can eat away at the service's profitability. "A lot of companies provide proposals that look wonderful on paper, but they can't keep the lights going throughout the holidays because they overextend the amount of lights that can be used," Mansoor says. "Always use

80 percent of the electricity you have available and the lights will stay on."

SET SCHEDULES. Haphazard scheduling can ruin a holiday lighting business. No client wants his decorations up too early or too late. In fact, clients want them up at the same time. Craig has implemented a precise internal scheduling system that has closely tracked productivity and efficiency throughout the years. Labor hours for each job during the previous season are examined and fine tuned and turned into next year's schedule. "You have to be an expert in scheduling labor and processes or else you'll have unhappy clients," he says.

Depending on the commitment



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add-on services

level, some companies' holiday services are year-round routines. The Lighting & Landscape Co. initiates and finalizes contract proposals from February to May. The installation schedule is created and tweaked during the summer months. Commercial installations are completed in phases starting as early as September and residential installations begin in late November. Maintaining each property keeps crews busy through December, and take-down work is finished in February, just in time for contract season to begin again.

Making up 5 percent of its \$242,000 in annual revenue, Outdoor Environments starts holiday lighting proposals in mid August and per-

forms installs beginning Nov. 1. Take-down work is scheduled from late January to mid-February, depending on the weather.

Craig says weather should always be considered during the holiday lighting season and he factors "cushion days" into his crews' schedules. These make-up days come in handy when the weather is uncooperative or a schedule becomes too hectic. Craig factors in one cushion day every three weeks, but suggests companies new to the holiday services market factor in one per week.

INTRICATE INSTALLS. When it comes to holiday lighting, commercial and residential installations are very differ-

ent ballgames, Craig says, adding his client breakdown is 90 percent commercial, 10 percent residential. Most residential clients want all of their decorations up at once, while commercial clients are more willing to have their projects completed in stages. The Lighting & Landscape Co. begins with the lighting stage, when crews hang lights, sans extension cords, without plugging them in. "Commercial clients don't mind because the lights aren't noticed by the public," Craig says.

The greenery phase follows, and includes garland, wreaths and other daytime décor. Depending on the size of the property and the job's complexity, the phases of a commercial job can take three days to two weeks. "We

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try to coordinate based on the type of commercial establishment and any holiday events they might have coming up," Craig says. "Some jobs also require more than just lights, which we have to factor in as well."

The Lighting and Landscape Co. offers free maintenance services

throughout the holiday season and guarantees to handle any issues within 24 hours. The company also takes a proactive approach by visiting properties every evening to make sure everything is up and running.

Like the installations themselves, pricing differs from commercial to

residential holiday lighting projects. Craig prices his landscape lighting jobs based on labor hours for the install as well as the take-down work. Size and complexity of the project, as well as the price for renting a boom lift if necessary, are factored into the final price. The company has holiday lighting contracts ranging from \$1,000 to several thousand dollars.

Outdoor Environments sees a profit margin of 7 to 12 percent on its holiday lighting services. Dilley prices his lighting services by the square or liner foot, depending on if he's working on trees or houses. While it's hard to determine an average price, the average residential project ranges from 1,000 to 2,500 square feet and the average commercial job is 3,000 to 5,000 square feet, he says.

While Dilley doesn't have a scheduled maintenance program, his crews will troubleshoot any problems, like burned out lights and fallen Santas, free of charge.

SELLING SUCCESS. A savvy business sense is essential to operating a successful holiday lighting service, contractors say. "One of a contractor's biggest mistakes is trying to simplify this business," Heese says. "Without the proper tools and training, this add-on service can quickly become their biggest headache."

To help clients see the service's value, contractors should present themselves as a holiday lighting expert and stress the intricacy involved in doing the job right.

"Christmas décor doesn't sound that complicated, but it is really easy to do a lousy install job," Heese says. "You have to demonstrate to clients that they can't do this at the quality level that you can. If you can't do that, then they won't use you." **LL**

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Greg Black, owner of Black Landscape Contracting, Mechanicsburg, Pa., started using PGRs about three years ago with two primary goals: to see fewer clippings and to keep the turf on the area's minor league baseball field – a key account – shorter and tighter. More recently, his goal has been to mow less often and save money on fuel. And he's been successful on

Photos: Bayer Environmental Science

BY EMILY MULLINS/ASSOCIATE EDITOR



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USE READER SERVICE # 39

The Many Roles of PGRs

Plant growth regulators (PGRs) do more than just slow turf growth. Other uses include suppressing unwanted turf species and keeping woody ornamentals under control.

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- Suppress turf growth during overseeding to give young seedlings time to grow.
- Inhibit or suppress *Poa annua* seed heads.
- Eliminate tall seed heads in roadside grasses.
- Suppress growth of various turfgrass species, giving desirable turfgrass an advantage.
- Reduce the need for trimming around trees, landscape fixtures and edges.
- Improve turf health and color, stress tolerance and root development.

Uses on Ornamental:

- Reduce trimming needs.
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- Improve root development, branching and overall vigor.

all accounts. "We've seen decreases in clippings and in the time it takes to mow each property," Black says. "Fuel savings have definitely been noticeable because our shorter mowing cycles have reduced gas consumption."

PGRs are becoming more popular among lawn and landscape professionals, with 19 percent planning to invest in the products this year, compared to 14 percent in 2007, according to *Lawn & Landscape* research. Manufacturers say this could be because contractors, like Black, are catching on to PGRs' time- and labor-saving benefits.

Fuel prices are currently at their highest levels in history and mowing costs have increased as a result. Because PGRs slow turf growth, a reduction in mowing is realized, says Dr. Dennis Shepard, field technical manager for Syngenta Professional Products, Greensboro, N.C. In turn, reduced mowing can help mowers perform better and last longer because of less wear and tear. Additionally, PGRs can improve turf quality and density and boost stress tolerance.

SEEING SAVINGS. Black's crews use

PGRs on both commercial and residential properties. About 80 percent of Black's clients receive blanket PGR treatments, along with fertilizer and liquid iron applications to maintain turf color. Some commercial properties, particularly those billed hourly, only receive PGR applications on hard-to-mow areas like embankments. "Using PGRs on hourly accounts results in fewer billable hours," he says. "For us, it's a wiser business decision to only use PGRs on seasonal accounts."

Since using PGRs, Black's crews complete each mowing job 20 to 25 percent faster, and can mow every 10 to 12 days instead of every seven. "Instead of four cuts a month, we can get by with three, or sometimes two, using PGRs," Black says. Like time savings, fuel savings have been considerable. Each of Black's seven maintenance crews saves about \$100 in fuel each week, for a total weekly savings of about \$600. "We don't have to double cut because turf is not as thick or as heavy," he says.

The time savings depend on a variety of factors – from the time of year to the product used to the rate of turf growth. But contractors using PGRs can ideally expect to mow every other week vs. every week, or once every 10 days, says Ben Cicora, herbicide and plant growth regulator business manager at Bayer Environmental Science, Research Triangle Park, N.C. "The savings are most significant during peak mowing seasons like spring and fall when grass is really growing," he says.

Control, though, depends on the type of product used and the application rates. Some turfgrass PGRs will slow turf growth for a few weeks, and others, a few months. The product a contractor chooses will depend on his

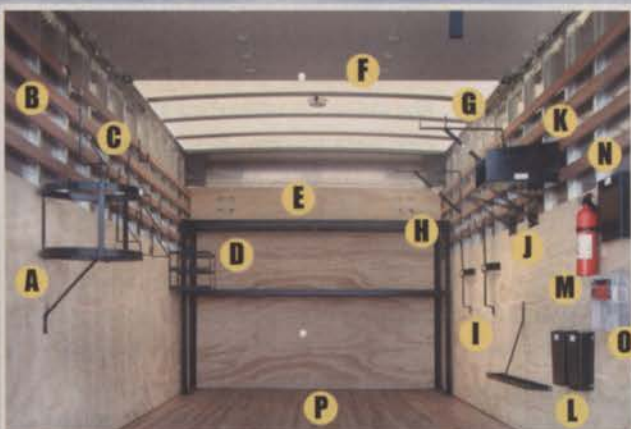


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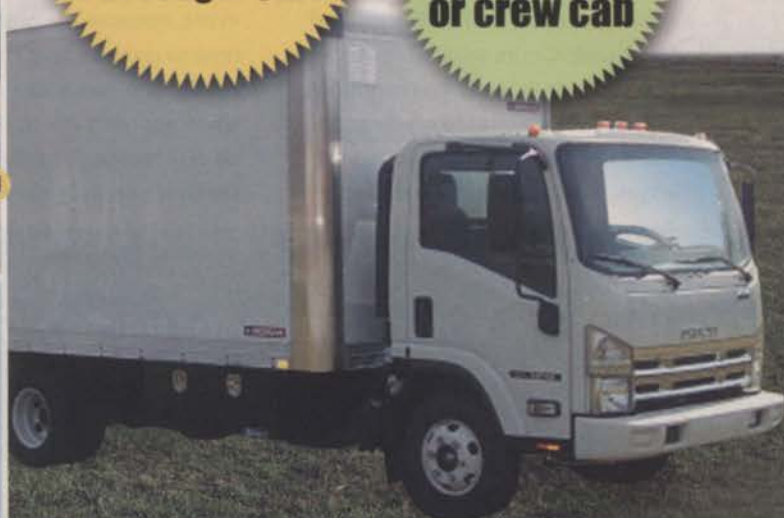
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desired results and his budget. Some PGRs will control turf for three or four weeks, which may be suitable for contractors battling the busy spring season. Contractors will pay more for longer control.

PGRs are most often used on cool-season turf in the Midwest and Northeast, Cicora says. They're also used most frequently on commercial properties with hard-to-reach areas, like embankments and parking lot edges, which take contractors too

example, PGRs should not be used when turf is susceptible to insect or disease damage because it will have no chance to outgrow the injury. Also, PGRs shouldn't be used on turf that will experience a lot of activity, such as an athletic field prior to a sporting event, because the grass will need time to grow and repair itself.

Climate conditions also play a role when applying PGRs. Usually, there is no real reason to apply PGRs once the temperature rises above 85 or 87 de-

an alert reminds crews when the next application should take place. Crews also keep job calendars in their trucks as an extra reminder.

"When you miss an application, it's like the turf is unleashed after it's been held back forever," Black says. "Once you make an application you regain control, but it can be pretty unsightly until then."

Black monitors humidity when applying PGRs and makes applications when the temperature is between 55 and 78 degrees. The products shouldn't be applied when conditions are dry because turf will wilt. Black's crews also maintain most of their client's irrigation systems, so they can adjust watering times as needed for effective PGR applications. For clients who manage their own irrigation, Black instructs them on proper watering techniques and gives them a disclaimer on what their lawn will look like if they don't follow through.

PRICING. The price of PGRs varies, Cicora says, and can range from \$60 to \$120 an acre or \$1.50 to \$3 per 1,000 square feet, depending on the product. Contractors spent an average of \$3,747 on PGRs last year, according to *Lawn & Landscape* research.

To recoup the cost, lawn and landscape professionals need to weigh the product cost and the labor costs of spraying and mowing.

Black spent about \$4,800 on PGRs last year and he recouped this cost through fuel savings alone. But on new or specialty accounts, like the baseball field, he factors in a fee to cover the PGR's cost by considering property size and the amount of product used. Black's average application rate is about 12 ounces per acre and then he includes a 30-percent markup fee. **LL**

"Instead of four cuts a month, we can get by with three, or sometimes two, using PGRs."

— Greg Black, Black Landscape Contracting



much time to mow properly.

For lawn and landscape professionals struggling with labor challenges, PGRs can also help reduce maintenance costs and allow a contractor to reallocate labor as necessary.

WHEN TO APPLY. PGRs should only be used when turf is stress free, says John Spalding, PGR product manager, PBI Gordon, Kansas City, Mo. For

greens because the turf goes dormant, Cicora says. However, lush, irrigated turf may need a PGR application about once a month during the summer.

Black's crews apply PGRs to each property every 18 to 20 days. If this window is missed, turf "jumps out" with uncontrollable growth, Black says. To prevent this occurrence, Black enters each PGR application and date into a computer system and

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USE READER SERVICE # 41



Tangling with fire ants

Difficult to manage, fire ant bait is a key to controlling their numbers on clients' properties.

TIMOTHY S. DAVIS

Black imported fire ant (*S. richteri*).
Photo: Scott Bauer.

For landscape contractors who don't live in fire ant country it is difficult to understand just what a problem fire ants can be for people. After all they are just ants. Once contractors or clients have their first tangle with them, though, they quickly realize there is no such thing as just



Fire ants are responsible for an estimated \$6 billion in annual damage in the U.S. Photo: Scott Bauer



Widely disliked for their venomous, painful stings, fire ants have spread across much of the Southern U.S. Photo: Scott Bauer.

ants. To date, fire ants range as far north as Virginia on the East Coast and Tennessee at lower elevations. With estimates placing annual fire ant damage in the U.S. at around \$6 billion, managing fire ant populations may be an opportunity to add a new dimension to a contractor's service menu.

BIOLOGY. The Internet will yield a number of home remedies for dealing with fire ants, and some are very entertaining to read. Unfortunately, most of these remedies are ineffective and many can be very hazardous.

While fire ants are very susceptible to insecticides, it is often difficult to reduce their populations to a level acceptable to many clients. Fire ants are difficult for people to manage because they occur in very high numbers. It isn't uncommon to have as many as 300 to 500 mounds in a single acre. They have a very high reproductive potential and during a mating flight can travel long distances.

Fire ants are never going to be eradicated, and any treatment, no matter how effective, is only temporary.

“When dealing with clients you will be most successful if you communicate clearly with them about what to expect from a fire ant management program.” — Timothy Davis, Clemson University

MANAGEMENT. There are three broad categories of products in fire ant management. These include individual mound treatments (IMT), bait and broadcast granular products. Each product is a different type of tool in a landscape contractor's tool box, and each has its place in a management plan. What the professional landscape contractor is selling, though, is not the product, but their knowledge of each tool and how to use it to effectively.

Fire ant bait, though, should be the meat and potatoes of a landscape contractor's fire ant management plan. Bait allow contractors to use the foraging behavior of the ants to deliver the bait to mounds throughout the treated zone. When treating an area 100 percent

coverage is not necessary to achieve success. Fire ant bait has very low levels of insecticide. The components used in fire ant bait breakdown quickly and leave no residual insecticides.

Field testing under rigorous scientific control has shown, if used correctly, fire ant bait provides 85 to 95 percent reduction in the fire ant population. When broadcast correctly they are relatively inexpensive, costing between \$7 and \$15 per pound. Most labels call for 1- to 1.5-pounds-per acre.

BAIT AND SWITCH. Despite their advantages, fire ant bait is the most difficult strategy to use correctly, and they require some extra knowledge by the applicator.



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“The Internet will yield a number of home remedies for dealing with fire ants, and some are very entertaining to read. Unfortunately, most of these remedies are ineffective and many can be very hazardous.” — Timothy Davis, Clemson University

Bait works by using the fire ants behavior to deliver the insecticide to the colony. Fire ant bait has three different parts: a matrix, usually defatted corn grit gel; a carrier/attractant, usually soybean oil and an active ingredient.

These three components work together to deliver the insecticide directly to the fire ant colony.

Fire ants are voracious predators, but they do not eat solid food. They place food on the “lip” of the late stage

larvae. The larvae then excretes digestive enzymes onto this “lip” and eat the liquid results. All of the other ants feed through a process called tropholaxis where they feed from oils secreted by these late stage larvae. It's quite elegant actually, since this gives them built in food tasters. If anywhere in the colony ants become sick due to poisons, then the queen does not eat from the food source. She can always make more workers and the colony lives on. Bait takes advantage of this process by allowing the workers to deliver the toxin throughout the colony. This is also why most bait is relatively slow acting.

The first key to getting high levels of control with this product is to use fresh bait. The soybean oil used as an



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USE READER SERVICE # 43

attractant can quickly go rancid once exposed to air. Most of the active ingredients are also sensitive to UV light and water. So purchase only what you need from a reputable dealer.

The second trick is to broadcast the bait, which allows the contractor to treat mounds he can and can't see. This allows foraging ants to pick up the bait and bring it back to the colony.

The third and most important trick is to broadcast the bait while the ants are actively foraging. It doesn't always work to spread fire ant bait when it is convenient. If the ants are not foraging you are wasting time, energy and money putting out fire ant bait. Fire ants will forage when the surface soil temperatures are between 75 and 95°F. Using a pre-bait test may be the easiest way to determine foraging activity. Place a small amount of bait, wait 30 minutes. If the ants hit the pre-bait then it is a good time to broadcast.

Avoid rain or irrigation immediately after a bait application. The water is quickly absorbed by the bait matrix and can render a treatment ineffective.

When dealing with clients you will be most successful if you communicate clearly with them about what to expect

from a fire ant management program. If they understand how long it takes a particular product to work, and how long the treatment will last before a retreatment is needed and what levels

of fire ant control to expect, then they will be much happier with the professionals work.

Remember, what you are selling is your knowledge, not the product. LL

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Timothy S. Davis is an import fire ant specialist at Clemson University and is pursuing his doctorate in entomology. In 2006 he assumed responsibilities as an extension program leader for consumer horticulture and state coordinator of the Master Gardener Program in South Carolina. His expertise in fire ant research has been recognized world wide and has taken him to Argentina, Australia and Taiwan. He can be reached at 803/730-7956 or via e-mail at tdvs@clemson.edu.

About The Author



Concrete Plans

With the potential for impressive profit margins, landscape curbing is a viable service addition.



Jim Carter has a single regret about adding curbing to his landscape menu last year, and it's that he didn't adopt the service sooner.

"For me, it's been a profitable addition," says Carter, the owner of Buffalo-based Grassman Lawn and Landscape, which expects to do about \$100,000 in overall sales this year. "My only complaint is I didn't do this sooner."

With a \$22,000 investment for a concrete curbing machine, Grassman Lawn and Landscape initially added landscape curbing on a part-time basis to augment its overall landscape service offerings. The initial positive feedback from clients convinced Carter to invest in booth space at a local home and garden show, and by the end of the show he had commitments for 80 curbing jobs this season.

"Often curbing seems to sell itself," he says. "You install it for one residential client and then you get a call from his neighbor, and so on."

There are a number of solid reasons why curbing is a viable service option for landscape contractors. One enticement is that curbing has the potential for a 60

FOR MORE ONLINE



Check out July's Online Extras at www.lawnandlandscape.com for a pictorial of a curbing installation job and images of finished landscapes.

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USE READER SERVICE # 45

percent profit margin and requires minimum manpower and a single day or less on a job site, says Mark Crosswell, president of Tygar Manufacturing in Atlanta. "Curbing can also be performed in times other than the high season for other landscape activities," he says, "which lessens the seasonality for contractors."

prices are some of the main cost constraints a contractor has to troubleshoot, both in traveling to various job sites and from visiting potential clients to offer quotes. "Probably 40 percent to 50 percent of our fuel costs are for running to do quotes," says Jim Hardin, co-owner of Curban Legends, a \$200,000 landscape curbing firm in

he says. "But it doesn't make financial sense if it ties up our crew all day to put down 100 feet when we could have stayed in town and put down 500 feet."

Material cost is another major issue. It's important to monitor the cost of each key element required for curbing, including sand, colorant, sealer and cement. Gaining a solid understanding of material consumption allows the contractor to not only price the service appropriately, but also more favorably negotiate prices with suppliers.

"If you know you will need 1,000 pounds of brick red colorant you will obtain much better pricing buying it at one time vs. buying it in 25-pound bags," Hardin says.

SELLING THE SERVICE. Part of the appeal for contractors is that it's not a service that has oversaturated the landscape market.

Pricing differs from region to

"A 50-foot job that was marginally profitable may lead to 10 others that are."

— Jim Hardin, Curban Legends

But for contractors thinking about adding curbing as a new profit center, there are some issues they should be aware of to ensure they operate efficiently and profitably.

COSTS. With fuel prices spiking around \$4 per gallon, gas and diesel

Louisville, Ky. "We have had to make some tough decisions as to what jobs we're willing to travel for and how far."

For long-distance jobs, Hardin will pre-qualify clients before heading out to quote, or he may subcontract the job to an installer local to that market. "It's never easy to turn down work,"

What Is Curbing?

Decorative landscape curbing involves a machine that lays extruded concrete to create a solid landscape border.

Appropriate for both commercial and residential settings, curbing adds distinction between landscape beds, lawns, property lines and other topographical boundaries. Unlike unstamped gray curbing, landscape curbing offers clients a wide selection of concrete colors, styles and stamped patterns.

Landscape contractors typically pick up curbing very quickly. Most manufacturers provide training programs that cover the hands-on and technical aspects of curbing, as well as allow for some practice time prior to a live installation. Suppliers also provide curbing-related information on sales and marketing, advertising, material procurement and accounting.



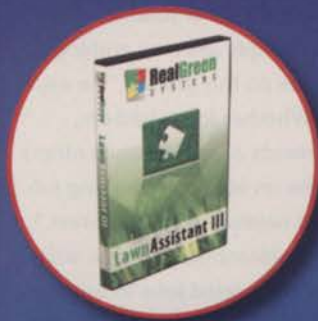
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region, and from market to market. For example, Carter charges \$9.50 per foot, which includes color and pattern, for the average residential or commercial curbing job. If the client wants lights recessed into the curbing, then Carter charges an additional \$4 per foot because the work requires a second day to complete the installation. If the job requires the removal of a landscape feature, such as sod, concrete or other type of curbing, he charges a \$70 disposal fee, which is the minimum to access the local dump. On average, Carter says his profit is about \$6.50 per foot per project.



Hardin recommends contractors resist the temptation to cherry pick large-scale jobs. There is merit to doing smaller-scale work. "A 50-foot job that was marginally profitable may lead to 10 others that are," she says.

A fair amount of marketing – both grass-roots and traditional – is necessary, Crosswell says, including adver-

tising in local periodicals and newspapers, direct mailers, distributing door hangers and exhibiting at home and garden shows. "One of the best forms of marketing is to simply get new curbing jobs on the ground," he says. "Whether for neighbors, friends or family, once others see an attractive curbing job your referral network will do the rest."

Hardin emblazoned his truck with graphics of completed jobs to bring attention to landscape curbing's appeal. "It wasn't cheap, but it garners a lot of name recognition and attention," she says. "We hear all of the time, 'Curban Legends, we've seen your truck.' Now we have a moving billboard." LL

Solid Footing

Jim Hardin, co-owner of Curban Legends, a Louisville, Ky.-based landscape curbing outfit, offers some keys to ensure efficiency and profitability.



SMART SCHEDULING. To reduce travel time and fuel expense, do quotes and schedule jobs in the same area of town and on the same day.



CREW SIZE. Running too small of a crew can be just as detrimental as over-staffing one. Develop the crew number based on average job size and typical workload. If one crew member has a lot of downtime, perhaps the position can be eliminated.



RUN SMOOTHLY. Each crew member should know their role with little direction from the time they arrive on site to when the truck pulls away. A poorly trained crew will stand around the job site waiting for instructions, losing valuable time in completing the present job and moving on to the next.



QUALITY EQUIPMENT. When paid by the foot, the number of feet you can produce in a day is the key to profitability. Invest in machines that extrude the curb quickly and resist clogging and bogging down in the middle of a job.

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With installation work, the successful contractor practices solid strategies to minimize waste and increase efficiency.

LOGISTICS. Success on the job site starts at the company headquarters. For Lawrence Landscape, installation work begins at the Friday morning manager's meeting where the jobs for the next week are reviewed and discussed in

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installation are another efficiency tool. Each Lawrence Landscape job packet includes a material list, color-coded installation plans, directions to the job site, customer contact information and other paperwork. "The whole idea of the job packet is that my salesman for that job could be on vacation and we'd still have all of the information to do that job to the customer's satisfaction," Male says. "There's a lot less stress and we operate much more efficiently because there are a lot less unanswered questions."

A job packet also includes print-outs of digital images with directions for specific tasks, such as identifying certain rocks to be relocated or to leave specific trees undisturbed. The images are useful in crossing language

Photo: Bobcat

\$3.5 million in installation work annually. "You want to get as much done on an installation project as you can that first day. Therefore, you want your first day to be the most successful."

And once an installation project is under way, the production manager and the field staff must communicate daily to address key issues and change orders, Matthews says. "A timely response is key because it doesn't take much to hold a project up," he says. "And it also doesn't take much to begin performing a bunch of work that isn't in the contract."

Project managers must constantly reevaluate schedules to keep them from falling fall behind. "Larger projects are easier to manage because of their duration," Matthews says. "On a

"Once we started doing the manager's meeting a lot of our problems went away because it helped prevent the wrong information from getting spread around to our guys on the job site."

— Frank Male, Lawrence Landscape

For more on methods landscape contractors use to increase productivity and maximize profits when doing installation work, as well as some of the tools and equipment they find helpful on the job site, check out the July Online Extras at www.lawnandlandscape.com

detail so everyone receives the same information at the same time. "We only plan out a week in advance because any longer than that, certain details begin to get fuzzy," says Frank Male, co-owner of the \$4 million landscape service firm in Lawrence, Kan. "Once we started doing the manager's meeting a lot of our problems went away because it helped prevent the wrong information from getting spread around to our guys on the job site."

Detailed job packets for each

barriers with Hispanic laborers, Male says. "With the images, it doesn't matter how bad my Spanish is; I can still get my point across," he says.

The detail and attention devoted to preparation impacts the success of the project's first day, which Kip Matthews believes is the most important. "It sets the tone for the entire installation project," says the construction department operations manager at Gardener's Guild, a Richmond, Calif.-based landscape company that completes about

small project, you don't have as much time to adjust to problems. If you don't have time to make up for your mistakes, it will cost your bottom line."

EQUIPMENT. Contractors are privy to a wide variety of labor-saving tools and equipment. However, the costs savings are negated when equipment breaks down on the job site, stalling the contractor and his crew.

Dan Bishop hired a full-time fleet service mechanic to act as a mobile

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installation

equipment troubleshooter to its 25 trucks, 13 pieces of construction equipment and eight equipment trailers.

"In 2007 we were incurring some hefty costs outsourcing service and repairs," says the chief operating officer of Las Vegas-based D&K Landscape, which did about \$9 million in landscape business last year. "Fixing equipment right on the job site has brought our costs down compared to having to go outside for service and repair." In the first quarter of 2008, the mechanic reduced Bishop's equipment repair cost by 40 percent.

However, not all installation contractors run such a large fleet. Regardless of a contractor's size, Ken Pagurek, the president of HPK

Property Maintenance, a \$2 million full-service landscape firm based in East Norriton, Pa., says immediately addressing equipment issues increases productivity. "What happens is that guys break tools, don't report it to anyone and then leave them on the trucks," he says. "You go to start a new installation job and you find out all of your shovels are broken.

"We've addressed this by painting a spot on the floor of our warehouse that reads: 'Broken Tools Here!'" Pagurek adds. "Now, at the end of the day, workers place any broken tools there and they get replaced. That way we're not trying to track replacement equipment down while crews should be working."

MATERIALS. Rob Garpel reduced material costs by having his project manager order the necessary materials for each of his three installation crews at the start of the work week. "We don't store material," says the president of Garpel Landscaping, a \$1 million firm based in Saginaw, Mich. "Instead, we give crews the materials and say this is what it's going to take to complete the job. It forces whoever is bidding a project to estimate exactly what's needed so the guys on site have what they need to complete the job. That way installation crews don't have to keep going back over and over for more material and it doesn't allow them to waste material unnecessarily. This has helped our bottom line because it

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makes our guys a little more culpable for what they're doing on the job."

Similarly, with fuel over the \$4-per-gallon mark, it has become cost prohibitive for crews to travel to and from vendors for materials. Bishop negotiates with material vendors and nurseries to deliver as much product to the job site as possible. "If we can plan ahead with our bigger jobs, our purchasing department can get everything dropped right to the curb and our guys park the truck and work for eight hours," he says. "We can maximize labor and efficiency by not having our guys running around for material and burning up fuel."

Whether it's mulch, pavers or plant materials, Pagurek won't dispatch an

installation crew until the materials have been delivered to the job site, in some cases a day or two in advance.

"I'm not a big fan of guys sitting around and I want my guys working when I'm paying them," he says. "For example, I'm not going to send 12 guys to a job site to put in 400 yards of mulch and have them standing around because the mulch is late."

CREWS. Like managing materials, equipment and logistics, understanding the extent of your crew's capabilities affects efficiency and profitability. "If you don't have enough guys then your productivity goes down," Pagurek says. "If you have too many, then your profit margins hurt. Evaluate the size

of the crew and know what that crew is capable of accomplishing and what its capabilities are with relation to what is demanded for the project."

Consistency is another critical component, says David Katz, president of Elite Landscaping, a \$1 million firm in Wappingers Falls, N.Y. Crew consistency should stem from skill set, repetition and productivity gauges that can be monitored and compared. "If you can keep the same people doing the same job every day, then there will be efficiency," he says. "If people are doing many different tasks on any given day, then it is nearly impossible to achieve a level of efficiency that someone who only plants or only does stone work is able to achieve." **LL**

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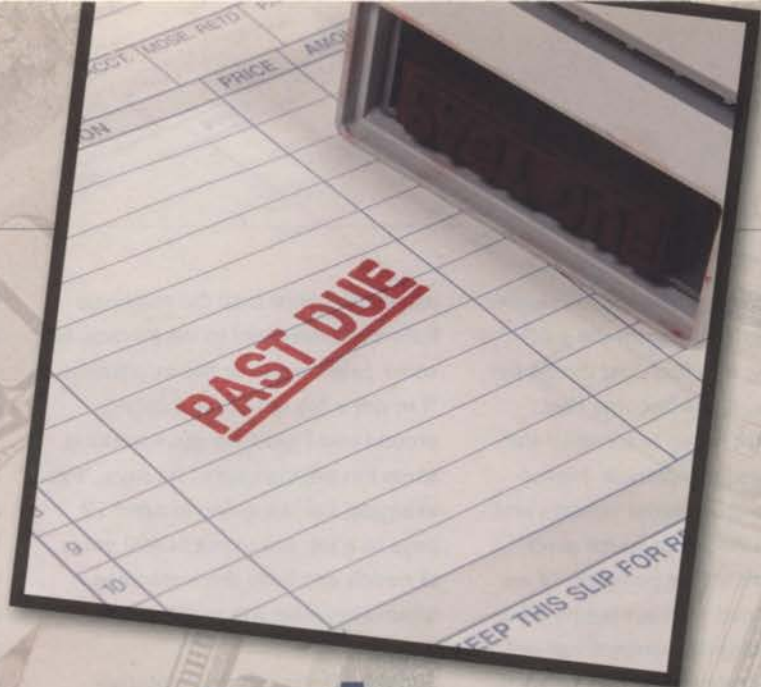
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USE READER SERVICE # 51

operations



Make Them Pay

Don't let unpaid bills cut into your profits.

Pursue delinquent clients the right way.

BY MIKE ZAWACKI/MANAGING EDITOR

It's inevitable. Sooner or later a client must pay.

Landscape contractors typically run on thin profit margins and they rely on a steady stream of cash to operate. Therefore, it's critical to take measures to ensure payment is received in a timely manner.

"Even in the best economy you can anticipate a handful of customers who will not pay," says John Mikorenda, sales and marketing rep for High Tech Landscapes, a \$15 million firm based in Branchburg, N.J. The landscape firm dealt with a dozen delinquent clients in 2007 and Mikorenda expects an impending economic downturn will increase that number this year. "This doesn't make us nervous," he adds. "We just accept that there will be more trips to the courts."

continued on page 75

FOR MORE ONLINE



Check out July's Online Extras to find more contractor techniques to secure payment and avoid delinquent clients. Share your experiences at the online message board.

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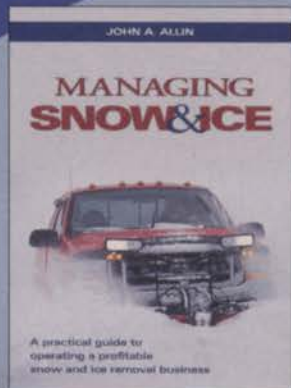
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continued from page 72

Most contractors are well versed in the routine of first making polite phone calls, then sending certified letters and finally filing suit in small claims court, and others are resigned to writing off the debt. However, there are other avenues to ensure payment and recoup unresolved bills.

PROTECTIVE MEASURES. Prevention is the best debt-management strategy. And whether it's a design/build job or mowing, a solid contract is a landscape contractor's first line of protection.

Tim Turner, president of Windswept Landscape Studios, a \$1.2 million design/build firm in Houston, employs a contract that clearly outlines the payment agreement and the penalties for delinquency. Regardless of a contract's strength, these provisions need to be explained to the client at signing. "When you set the boundaries at the beginning it makes it a lot easier to collect at the end, and to remind people if they start to stray because of some sort of financial issue," he says.

Thorough documentation is another

WHAT NOT TO DO

Often the sound course of action is to deal with delinquent clients on a customer-by-customer basis, says Bruce Phillips, a senior economist at the National Federation of Independent Business in Washington, D.C. "I don't think you can have a catch-all policy for every client," he says. "That's what big businesses do, rushing you off to court for \$100."

However, Phillips advises contractors to never...


X THREATEN TO SUE IMMEDIATELY. This is the worst course of action because it antagonizes an already struggling client. "You'll end up at the bottom of their list of people to pay and they're going to gamble that you're not going to sue them for a few hundred dollars."

X IGNORE A CLIENT'S CALLS. They're reaching out to explain their circumstances and come to a compromise. Hear them out and work out a payment plan. "They may just need until the end of the month to pay you. Two-way communication needs to be there to resolve this issue."

X BE INFLEXIBLE. Unlike their corporate brethren, small businesses are known for their flexibility. "The ability to work together will go a long way when it comes to customer loyalty."

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key, contractors say. Clients unable or unwilling to pay will often cite "lack of service" as a reason to renege on a bill. Ross Fletcher, president of Hemlocks Landscaping, a \$2 million full-service firm based in Jasper, Ga., has his maintenance crews leave a property service report after every visit. "It documents exactly what they did that day," he says. "A copy goes to the client and a copy goes into their file back at the office. It's a great way to document that we did the work. We can show that on this date six months ago we did these things. It helps a lot in case you do get

involved in a court case."

To avoid payment problems, Mark Monroe adopted a credit card-only policy. "This has improved our cash flow tremendously and has all but eliminated bad debt and the costs associated with debt recovery," says the president of Nutri Green, an \$800,000 lawn care and tree/shrub care company based in Fort Worth, Texas. "When we get a declined credit card, we pursue that issue immediately, not after 30 to 60 days."

Credit card auto billing is well worth the 2- to 3-percent merchant processing fee, Monroe says, and it outweighs

the resources wasted chasing past-due clients. "We used to spend tremendous resources mailing out overdue statements and making collection calls," he says. "Now we can invest those resources into more profitable pursuits."

Other billing options are available, too. Web savvy contractors can accept payment through online e-commerce services such as PayPal, says Bruce Phillips, a senior economist with the National Federation of Independent Business in Washington, D.C. And for a fee, a contractor can obtain merchant status through a bank

BILL COLLECTING

Chasing after unpaid accounts is an agonizing duty for landscape contractors.

Craig Davidson, president of Landry & Jacobs, a Phoenix-based commercial and consumer debt collection agency, offers landscape contractors some keys to managing, controlling and collecting accounts receivable.

The most effective collectors leave emotion out of the equation. Speak directly, courteously and remain calm. Contact the past-due client and administer new deadlines. Ultimatums will do nothing to resolve the underlying debt.

When dealing with a corporation or an LLC, obtain a personal guarantor. Without it, if the

company should go out of business or dissolve, you generally have no recourse or legally responsible party to pursue.

Any landscape contractor who does not have the capability to accept checks or credit cards by phone has one hand tied behind his back. If you reach a past due customer and have his attention, you must have the ability to secure payment at that instant.

Finally, faced with a non-sufficient funds (NSF) check, one method of securing funds is a little known process called "cashing," where you may present the check to the account holder's bank and have it converted into a cashier's check. This will immediately secure the funds.

to process credit cards through his landscape company's Web site. "This gives contractors a more professional veneer," he says. "And some people like paying on a regular basis online."

COLLECTIONS. Though a popular option, taking a delinquent client to small claims court is not always a feasible pursuit for the landscape contractor.

"In a few instances I consulted with my accountant who advised that it would cost more money to sit in small claims court to collect on \$400 just for the principle of it," Turner says.

Instead, Rennels turned to a collection agency to retrieve unpaid funds. It was an appealing option because it took nearly all of the leg work involved in chasing down payment out of his hands. "We're growing and we don't have a full-time staff yet, and the office stuff takes an enormous amount of time," he says. "While this is only a small percent of our clients, when you have to deal with it yourself it adds up to a significant amount of time."

Collection agencies are compensated in a variety of ways, from flat fees to a percentage of what's collected.

"Even in the best economy you can anticipate a handful of customers who will not pay."

— John Mikorenda, *High Tech Landscapes*

Others were dissatisfied with the legal process. "In the few instances where small claims court was pursued, I found that we wound up with an essentially useless judgment lien against individuals who have no non-exempt assets," Monroe says, adding he has never recovered debt as a result of a small claims court judgment.

This is the reason John Rennels became disenchanted with the court system. "We do most of our work on contract, so from a legal standpoint you'd think we'd have legs to stand on," says the president of A Plus Lawn and Landscape, a \$250,000 firm based in Lawrenceburg, Ky. "We'd take the delinquent clients to court and they still wouldn't pay. It was just a waste of time and money."

Rennels chose a service that bases its fee on a declining scale. For example, the service takes about 6 percent of the total claim it recoups for Rennels, and that percentage is reduced the more he uses the service. The service is also Web-based, which is convenient for Rennels. Once a client is 30 days past due, he enters the delinquency information into the company's Web site and it takes care of mailing late-payment notices and dealing with small claims court.

In some circumstances the threat of collections is enough to motivate a past-due client. "On occasion I will have a client that will go beyond 30 days or more without so much as a phone call," says Greg Gutknecht, president of Earth Balance Organics, a

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\$72,000 lawn care company in Stone Mountain, Ga. "I will call them two or three times leaving messages. The last message I leave is, 'I am forced to turn your account over to collections and your service has been suspended until your account is paid in full.' All of a sudden they call me back telling me how sorry they are and that the check is on the way."

Some landscape contractors take past-due collections into their own hands. "We will make two or three phone calls to the customer," Mikorenda says. "If there is no response to the calls we will send a certified letter asking for payment. If the certified letter fails, we will then take them to small claims court."

"In the few instances where small claims court was pursued, I found that we wound up with an essentially useless judgment lien against individuals who have no non-exempt assets." — Mark Monroe, Nutri Green

Sometimes, pursuing past-due accounts requires some detective work on the contractor's part. For example, with commercial maintenance work problems arise when a management company changes mid-contract.

"With maintenance work you have a hard time finding the person making the decisions of who gets paid and who's not getting paid," says Andy Sherbondy, president of Houston-based Earth Essential, which does about \$400,000 in annual sales. "Three or four months down the road there may be a new manager and it's a whole new ballgame. The next thing

you know, you're not getting paid."

From experience, Sherbondy tracks down the property owner and communicates the situation one-on-one, often appealing as one business owner to another. More times than not, this resolves the situation, he says.

PERSISTENCE. Even under the worst circumstances, many landscape contractors hesitate to use a collections agency or the courts in fear of permanently alienating a client. Often, a solution can be remedied between the contractor and client.

Turner, for example, recently had a client balk about the last 10 percent owed on her \$30,000 design/build job. Instead of getting frazzled with the

client, Turner evaluated the situation and recognized that he'd known the client for some time and she'd referred business to him in the past.

"I told her we needed to collect on this so let's come up with a payment schedule," Turner says. "But by doing this I'm going to charge you 1 percent interest because of the additional paperwork with accounting."

"By doing it this way, as opposed to holding her to the contract and demanding the money, I was able to keep the client and I had my money within four weeks," he says. "And I got two other referral clients from her." **LL**

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USE READER SERVICE # 58



Get Smart with Soil-Moisture Sensors

With considerable savings in water consumption, can your clients afford to ignore adding this technology to their systems?

BY MARISA PALMIERI/SENIOR EDITOR

It's July – Smart Irrigation Month. What better time to consider all of the technologies a contractor can employ to irrigate in the most efficient way possible? The results, no doubt, will be cost and water savings for clients and landscapes with healthy, vibrant plants.

One product category contractors may want to consider, or reconsider, are soil-moisture sensors (SMS). Though SMS have been around for more than 50 years, many contractors have hesitated to use them because the technology was historically unreliable. But industry experts say they deserve another look, as the SMS of today yield average water savings of about 40 percent. In addition, the Environmental Protection Agency's WaterSense program is researching SMS along with weather-based controllers for its product labeling program, which is similar to the EnergyStar program for electrical appliances. With the

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For a detailed chart outlining a client's water savings since installing SMS, visit July's Online Extras at www.lawnandlandscape.com.



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“Soil-moisture sensors are an inexpensive and effective way to conserve water.”

— Michael Dukes, University of Florida

consumer awareness on the rise – and the ever-increasing demands on the nation’s water supply – this is one area contractors can’t afford to ignore.

Dana Lonn, director of Toro Co.’s Center for Advanced Turf Technology, Bloomington, Minn., says SMS deserve another look from contractors. “In the past, many of the soil-moisture sensors used consumable parts like gypsum blocks that would degrade over time,” he says. “Today, most soil-moisture sensors are based upon microelectronics. Properly packaged to protect the electronics, they will last forever and will give us extremely accurate measures of volumetric water content.”

metric water content.”

THE RUNDOWN. There are several types of SMS on the market, says Tom Penning, president of Riverside, Calif.-based Irrrometer Co., a manufacturer of SMS. Some soil-moisture sensors are modules designed to be added on to irrigation controllers, and some irrigation controllers themselves possess soil-moisture sensing capabilities.

The way in which sensors measure soil moisture varies by manufacturer, but it’s generally measured either by the water tension in the soil or from a volumetric standpoint. Typically, the sensors are engaged when a control-

ler sends a signal to irrigate. The sensor checks the water content in the soil and if the measured soil moisture is above the user-entered threshold, the controller will not irrigate. One of the major benefits of SMS is they fully take advantage of any rainfall events, Penning says.

Soil-moisture sensors can save big, manufacturers say. And they’ve been backed up by researchers including the University of Florida’s Michael Dukes, whose 2004 residential study in Florida concluded soil-moisture sensors saved an average of 59 percent more water than a system run by a time clock set according to historical evapotranspiration (ET)-based irrigation schedule with a rain sensor.

Dukes also confirmed a common manufacturer claim: In regions with a relatively high cost of water, property owners who install SMS can see a return on their investment in less than a year because of the water they’ll



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save. "As Florida's population and accompanying residential communities continue to expand, there will be an even greater drain on existing freshwater supplies," Dukes says in a summary report of the study. "Soil-moisture sensors are an inexpensive and effective way to conserve this important resource."

CASE IN POINT. In Las Vegas, Russ Griffin, president of Private Greens of Nevada, is pleased with the results he's seeing in his first year using SMS. Like in Florida, water conservation is top of mind in dusty, arid Las Vegas where population is rising as quickly as Lake Mead, the city's main water supply, is receding. The lake's water

level has dropped approximately 100 feet since January 2000. The Southern Nevada Water Authority promotes a number of programs for saving water, like offering property owners \$1.50 per square foot of grass removed with no cap on the maximum square footage.

That incentive doesn't sit well with everyone, despite the SNWA's estimate that every square foot of grass replaced with xeriscaping saves an average of 55 gallons of water per year. Many of Griffin's clients covet their lush, green yards for their lifestyle and environmental benefits. He believes soil-moisture sensors may be the answer for his turf-loving customers.

In January, Griffin installed three

SMS at a Las Vegas homeowners' association site. In both 2006 and 2007 the HOA consumed nearly 1.9 million gallons of water during the first five months of each year. This year, during the same period, the site has used only a little more than 1.2 million gallons – a 30-percent reduction. The HOA paid about \$350 per installed soil-moisture sensor, Griffin says. The investment will pay for itself by year's end, Griffin says.


SMS VS. ET. Naturally, industry members are considering how SMS work alongside or instead of other "smart" technologies, like ET controllers and rain sensors. Though both ET controllers and SMS automatically




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irrigation

adjust without user intervention, SMS awareness lags behind. "The Center for Irrigation Technology did testing protocols for ET technologies several years ago and are just now finishing the testing protocols for sensor-based systems," says Kingsley Horton, western states sales manager for SMS manufacturer Acclima, Meridian, Idaho. He expects the CIT tests, WaterSense exposure and increased

ing them before I sell them to customers just to make sure I'm confident."

As for the SMS vs. ET debate, Toro's Lonn says both are good technologies that can result in efficiency gains. "ET does a very good job of tracking climate," he says. On the other hand, ET doesn't read rainfall; it estimates how much rainfall may have made it into the soil.

ET controllers also don't account



"I tend to be cautious, so I'm testing soil-moisture sensors before I sell them to customers just to make sure I'm confident." — Joe Nelson, The Nelson Team

contractor testing to improve the use of SMS in years to come.

The Nelson Team, a full-service landscape company in Leeds, Ala., is one company that's in the SMS testing phase. "Until recently, soil-moisture sensors weren't reliable in our opinion," says owner Joe Nelson. "Some manufacturers had them on the market and then pulled them, and there were reliability problems relating to the chemistry in the soil. But in my mind, they're at the point where they're probably going to be reliable. But I tend to be cautious, so I'm test-

for other non-climate issues that create a need for disrupting irrigation says Brian Lennon, sales manager for Irrrometer. "For example if pipes break and lawns are flooded, ET wouldn't know that."

Lonn adds, "Soil-moisture sensors have the advantage that they measure actual soil moisture, so they measure the effectiveness of rainfall and the vigor of the plants," he says.

Nelson, who's a partner in the EPA's WaterSense program, puts it plainly: "I may be wrong, but if I'm a plant and I want someone to know



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when to water me and I feed myself from my roots, then they need to know how much water is in my roots. Soil-moisture sensors are the best way to know that."

SMS do have drawbacks, however. For example, they are limited to measuring only a specific point in the landscape, Lonon says. "ET has the advantage that it is less critical to local issues such as sensor placement which may prove important in the long run," he says.

Nelson has gone over the SMS vs. ET debate himself, and he's leaning toward soil-moisture sensors, though he's testing both.

Nelson says he's been cautious when selling all smart technologies


to his clients. "When you go to your customer base, you have to be confident," Nelson says. "Rain sensors are an easy sell, for example; customers understand those. But with ET, they don't really understand it. So I didn't want to push ET and then come back two years later with soil-moisture sensors or another technology and say 'Wait, I've got something better.' So I'm trying to skip a step and start with soil-moisture sensors."

There's another perception issue contractors have to mitigate when it comes to SMS: irrigating in the rain. "You have to use them in conjunction with rain sensors," Nelson says. "It takes a period of time for the sensors to know it's raining, and you do not

want your systems running in the rain before the soil-moisture sensor knows it's raining."

Nelson expects to begin selling soil-moisture sensors by year's end to his 80-percent residential customer base. He'll start first with new installations and then target existing customers for retrofits. He is not sure yet how his customers will receive the SMS, which will be \$400 to \$600 per upgrade, but Nelson plans to sell them the same way he does drip irrigation. "What you can do is show them the payback," Nelson says. "You say, this will cost you \$500, but you'll save X amount of water and get you payback in one to four years, depending on the client." LL

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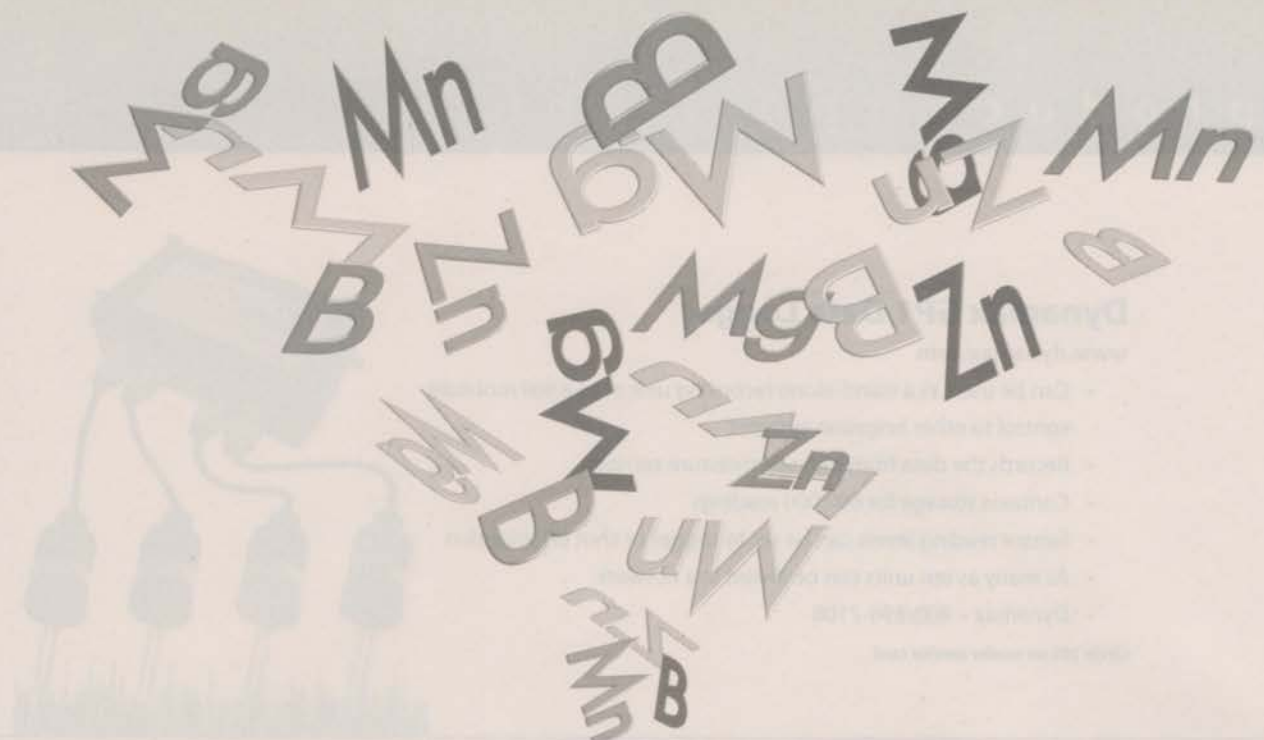
DIG Micro-line Drip Line

www.digcorp.com

- Extruded micro tubing
- Flow labyrinth in line emitters are molded into the inside wall of the tubing
- In line dripper is built with a large filter along the cross section of the dripper to ensure particles on the bottom of the micro tubing do not enter the labyrinth
- DIG Irrigation Products – 800/322-9146

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03448

Dynamax GP1 Data Logger

www.dynamax.com

- Can be used as a stand-alone recording unit or as a soil moisture control to other irrigation systems
- Records the data from four soil moisture sensors
- Contains storage for 600,000 readings
- Sensor reading levels can be set to trigger or shut off irrigation
- As many as ten units can be linked in a network
- Dynamax – 800/896-7108

Circle 203 on reader service card



Hunter Professional Landscape Drip Line

www.hunterindustries.com

- Helps apply water slowly and evenly
- Application rates enable water to soak in gradually below the surface
- Features in-line, pressure-compensating emitters with a built-in check valve
- Available in 250- and 1,000-foot coils
- Kink resistant
- Hunter Industries – 760/744-5240

Circle 204 on reader service card

Hydro-Rain HRZ 100

www.hydrorain.com

- Combines a low-flow valve, filter and pressure regulator into a single unit
- Options range from 0.1 gpm to 5.0 gpm
- Fits inside a 6-inch round valve box
- Preamsembled for speed and ease
- Filter is upright for maintenance access
- Hydro-Rain – 888/493-7672

Circle 205 on reader service card





Irritrol PC Control System

www.irritrol.com

- New controller features an internal transformer and a built-in junction box for permanent connection to a typical residential electrical system
- Features a weather-resistant housing and door
- External antenna allows for wireless communication to the computer within the home
- PC Control software has been upgraded
- Irritrol – 800/883-1234

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Irrrometer Watermark Soil Moisture Sensor 200SS

www.irrometer.com

- Indirect, calibrated method of measuring soil water
- Suited for use with handheld digital meter or data logging equipment
- Features a stainless steel enclosure
- Will not dissolve in soil and not affected by freezing temperatures
- Irrrometer – 951/689-1701



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www.rainbird.com

- Designed for contractor installation and homeowner operation
- Easy to operate
- Available in four-, six- and nine-zone indoor mount models
- Homeowners can customize the schedule for each individual zone
- Includes water-efficient features, including a rain delay option and a seasonal adjust feature
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Circle 208 on reader service card



K-Rain RPS 75 Rotor

www.krain.com

- Designed for basic residential and light commercial applications
- Provides the same features as the Hunter PGP, including the reversing mechanism
- Has a 3/4-inch inlet
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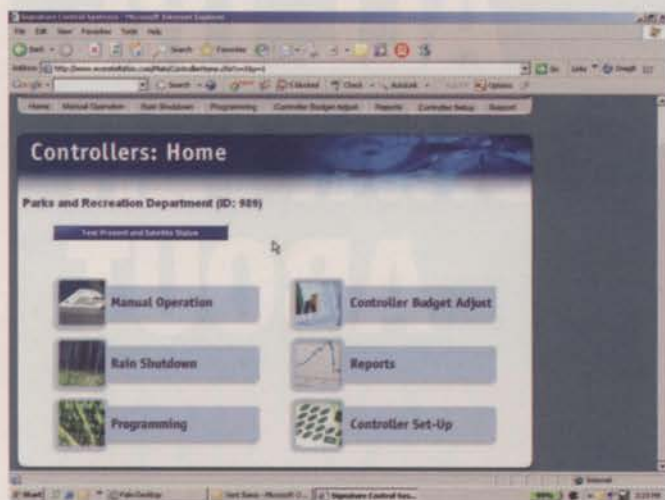
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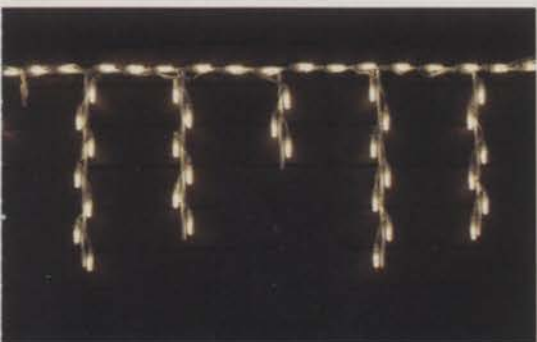
Applications for 2009 H-2B workers are ready now. Don't get left behind. Call or email us today to ensure the best possible results next year.

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- The LED Warm White Icicle Linkable is pictured at left
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- Brite Ideas Decorating – 888/200-5131

Circle 214 on reader service card

Creative Displays LED Mini Lights

www.creativedisplays.com

- Has been tested and improved for nearly a decade
- Pro-Grade LED mini light has a full-wave reflector and a resistor
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- Displays vibrant colors
- Dimmable, waterproof and crush resistant
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www.christmasdecor.net

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- The Décor Group

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- » 11" Pneumatic Tires
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13.5 HP » Features

- » 13.5 hp Subaru Engine
- » 0-4 mph Hydrostatic Drive (FWD & REV)
- » 13" Pneumatic Tires
- » Weight - 400 lbs
- » 60 lb seed hooper
- » Width 40.5"
- » Productivity 52,000 sqft / hr



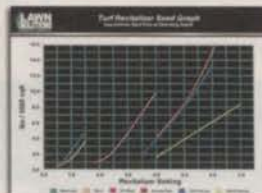
Pistol Grip Control



Hopper Cover



Blades



Seed Graph



Mixer

- » **Pistol Grip Control** - Variable speed pistol grip controls like on commercial mowers
- » **Hopper Cover** - Largest capacity hoppers in the industry, optional hopper cover shown.
- » **Blades** - Solid 11 gauge high carbon spring steel blades. Blade changes in just 5-10 minutes. New patent pending reel design which allows for easy cleaning and protection against plastic netting that can damage other machines.
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- » **Mixer** - Large 4" diameter mixer that mixes the entire hopper and prevents clogging. New patent pending mixer design regulates seed flow based on ground speed for the most accurate seed delivery system at any speed.

USE READER SERVICE # 78

Holiday Bright Lights LED Light Technology

www.holidaybrightlights.com

- Features Flex-Plug, which creates the smooth, bright LED lights
- Flex-Plug eliminates the unwanted flickering and ensures delivery of the truest color possible
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- Light Links easily hang into position with a locking gear system
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- Convenient light tower that removes with the plow
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- Flared 7-1/2-foot moldboard provides increased snow-rolling action
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BOSS Professional-Grade, Super-Duty Snowplow

www.bossplow.com

- Available in steel and poly models
- SmartHitch 2 is a simple and fast attachment system
- SmartLight 2 projects a wide, far-reaching, consistent beam
- Features enclosed high-performance hydraulic package
- SmartTouch 2 hand-held control features several mounting options
- SmartShield, baked-on powder-coat paint finish features a zinc primer
- Features a heavy-duty push frame and reinforced moldboard
- BOSS – 800/286-4155

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Daniels Straight Blade Plow for Skid-Steers

www.danielsplows.com

- Available in 10-, 12- and 14-foot widths
- Can push and stack snow and eliminates the need for multiple pieces of equipment on the job site
- Standard options include double-acting cylinder with maximum stroke of 35 degrees, cushioning valve, two-pin mounting plate, swivel plate and pivoting backing plate
- Options include a pusher kit, alternate mounting plates and curb guard
- Daniels Plows – 847/426-1150

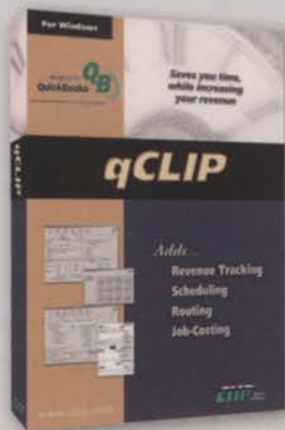
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- Blades are available in 7½-, 8-, 8½- and 9-foot lengths
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Hiniker Convertible C-Plow

www.hiniker.com

- Conventional plow and backdrag plow in a single unit
- Upper ¾ of the moldboard is hydraulically folded over to create backdrag plow
- Converts with the touch of a button
- Available in 8- and 9-foot widths
- Quick-hitch mounting system provides one-lever attachment of plow to the truck
- Hiniker – 507/625-6621

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www.meyerproducts.com

- Features contractor-class moldboard
- 32-inch height and 75 degree attack angle improves clearing performance and back dragging
- Behind the moldboard is the redesigned black iron, a tubular-steel A-frame and push bar for a stronger plow at key points
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- Modular EZ-Mount Plus system attaches and detaches in less than a minute
- Meyer Plows – 216/486-1313

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SnowDogg Medium-Duty Straightplow

www.buyersproducts.com

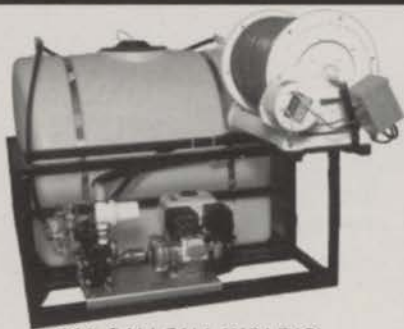
- Medium-duty for homeowners and light commercial applications
- Designed for sport utility vehicles and light-duty trucks
- Stainless steel corrosion-free moldboard
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- Increases turf density, color and quality
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www.morbark.com

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- Optional features are available
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One Tough Decision At A Time

Someone once said, "Hindsight is much more accurate than foresight, but a lot less useful."

Have you ever felt that you didn't have enough information from your accounting system when faced with making a difficult decision or preparing the upcoming year's budget? Perhaps the information from previous years was too inconsistent to identify trends or make a correct analysis of the situation. Maybe you were thinking of buying a new piece of equipment – a mini-excavator or a tracked loader – but you weren't sure if it would pay for itself.

Labor shortages have lessened somewhat as the economy has softened. You may have thought about hiring a new

months as they painstakingly planned the Allies' invasion of France during World War II. In the end, success or failure hinged upon the weather.

Leaders never have enough data and the data they have is either incomplete or not 100 percent reliable. Great leaders understand this and appreciate the value of timely, accurate and reliable data. Still they manage to make good decisions. Somehow they are able to step back, analyze the data they do have and identify patterns. This is a skill that is important to develop.

PARALYSIS OF ANALYSIS. Many leaders (leader may be the wrong term) freeze up when faced with tough deci-

the few times when uncertainty is better than certainty.

Here are some tips when faced with tough decisions.

- Remember, experience is the best teacher – preferably someone else's.
- Collect as much data as you can.
- Use industry benchmarks and your own historical data if available.
- Plan. Remember, if you fail to plan, you are planning to fail.
- Focus on the big picture and develop your end-game strategy.
- Read. Leaders are readers.
- Network. Be proactive. Join associations. Participate. Take the initiative to seek out people who are valuable resources.

"Leaders never have enough data and the data that they have is either incomplete or not 100 percent reliable. Great leaders understand this and appreciate the value of timely, accurate and reliable data." — Jim Huston

supervisor, but then thought, "What if the bottom falls out of the economy?" Could you justify a new position? Should you take the risk? If you aspire to be an entrepreneur, then welcome to the club. You pay your dues one tough decision at a time.

IDENTIFYING PATTERNS. Generals rarely have enough information when making tough decisions. Often, they make life or death decisions with minimal information to work with. I'm reminded of Dwight D. Eisenhower and D-Day. Gen. Eisenhower and his staff agonized for

sions. Others, like Gen. George McClellan, one-time head of the Union Army during the Civil War, get caught up in endless analysis. I call this the "paralysis of analysis." The worst offenders simply procrastinate. Often, any decision is better than no decision at all. While training as a 2nd lieutenant in the U.S. Marine Corps, our instructors taught us that if we were ever caught in an ambush, not to "hunker down." That was certain death and what the enemy had counted on. It was better to immediately counter-attack – that was "un" certain death. I guess this is one of

PULL THE TRIGGER. Being an entrepreneur is not for the faint of heart. You will have to make some tough decisions. This may be especially true during the current economic cycle. Many of my clients are currently making unpleasant decisions regarding personnel, pricing and cutbacks.

Remember, you will never have complete or perfect data (hindsight) to help you make decisions. But don't let that stop you. Entrepreneurs are rewarded for seeing patterns and opportunities that no one else sees (foresight) and taking action accordingly. **LL**

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<p>1. What is your primary business at this location? (choose only one)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 1. Landscape Contractor</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 2. Chemical Lawn Care Company (excluding mowing maintenance service)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 3. Lawn Maintenance Contractor</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 4. Ornamental Shrub & Tree Service</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 5. Irrigation Contractor</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 6. Landscape Architect</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 7. Other Contract Services (please describe) _____</p> <hr/> <p>2. What services does your business offer?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 1. Landscape Design</p> <p>Landscape Installation</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 2. Seeding or Sodding</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 3. Turf & Ornamental Installation</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 4. Bedding Plants & Color Installation</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 5. Irrigation Installation</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 6. Landscape Lighting</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 7. Hardscape Installation</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 8. Water Features</p> <p>Landscape Maintenance</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 9. Landscape Renovation <input type="checkbox"/> 13. Tree & Stump Removal</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 10. Turf Fertilization <input type="checkbox"/> 14. Irrigation Maintenance</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 11. Turf Aeration <input type="checkbox"/> 15. Erosion Control</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 12. Tree & Ornamental Care</p> <p>Pesticide Application</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 16. Turf Disease Control</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 17. Turf Insect Control</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 18. Turf Weed Control</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 19. Tree & Ornamental Pesticide Application</p> <p>Other</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 20. Mowing</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 21. Hydroseeding</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 22. Snow Removal</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 23. Interior Landscape Services</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 24. Structural Pest Control</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 25. Holiday Lighting</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 26. Other _____</p>	<p>3. What is the service mix %?</p> <p>Mowing/Maint _____</p> <p>Design/Build _____</p> <p>Chemical Application _____</p> <p>4. How many full-time (year-round) employees do you employ?</p> <p>_____</p> <p>5. Is Chemical Application work</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 1. Outsourced <input type="checkbox"/> 2. Done by own employees</p> <p>6. What are your company's approximate annual gross revenues?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 1. Less than \$50,000</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 2. \$50,000 to \$99,999</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 3. \$100,000 to \$199,999</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 4. \$200,000 to \$299,999</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 5. \$300,000 to \$499,999</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 6. \$500,000 to \$699,999</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 7. \$700,000 to \$999,999</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 8. \$1,000,000 to \$1,999,999</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 9. \$2,000,000 to \$3,999,999</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 10. \$4,000,000 to \$6,999,999</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 11. \$7,000,000 or more</p> <p>7. What percentage of growth do you anticipate this year?</p> <p>_____</p> <p>8. What year was your business founded?</p> <p>_____</p> <p>9. What is your business mix? (%)</p> <p>Residential _____ Commercial _____</p> <p>Other _____</p> <p>10. Is this a Headquarters or Branch location?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 1. Headquarters</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 2. Branch</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 3. Single Office</p>	<p>11. What best describes your title?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 1. Owner <input type="checkbox"/> 11. Argonomist</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 2. President <input type="checkbox"/> 12. Entomologist</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 3. Vice-President <input type="checkbox"/> 13. Horticulturist</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 4. Corporate Officer <input type="checkbox"/> 14. Plant Pathologist</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 5. Partner <input type="checkbox"/> 15. Consultant</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 6. Managers <input type="checkbox"/> 16. Technician</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 7. Director <input type="checkbox"/> 17. Serviceman</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 8. Superintendents <input type="checkbox"/> 18. Other (please describe) _____</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 9. Foreman</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 10. Specialist</p> <p>12. Which of the following types of products and/or services are you considering adding/upgrading in the next 12 months? (CHECK ALL THAT APPLY)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 1. Construction Equipment (attachments, skid steers, loaders, tractors, etc)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 2. Mowers</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 3. Chemical Equipment (pumps, tanks, hoses, reels)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 4. Hand Held Equipment (trimmers, edgers, blowers, chain saws)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 5. Engines</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 6. Tree Equipment</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 7. Chippers / Shredders</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 8. Fertilizers</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 9. Chemicals (insecticides, herbicides, fungicides)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 10. Grass Seed</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 11. Nursery / Flowers</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 12. Irrigation Equipment</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 13. Financial Services (insurance, payroll, finance)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 14. Uniforms (including hats and gloves)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 15. Business Software / Hardware</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 16. Design Software</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 17. H2B Services</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 18. Hardscape Products (lighting, pavers, water features)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 19. Renovation Equipment (seeders, aerators, dethatchers, spreaders, hydroseeders)</p>	<p>13. Which of the following subjects would you be interested in learning more about? (CHECK ALL THAT APPLY)</p> <p>BUSINESS MANAGEMENT</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 1. Technology solutions for your business</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 2. Employee recruitment/retention</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 3. Ergonomics</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 4. How to set up a safety program</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 5. Immigration/H2B</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 6. Major growth areas for contractors: Up and coming add on services</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 7. Alternative fuel/keeping fuel costs down</p> <p>MOWING MAINTENANCE</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 8. Mowing — labor savers</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 9. Quoting jobs/services</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 10. How to add an enhancement crew/division</p> <p>PESTICIDES & CHEMICALS</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 11. Generating revenue by adding lawn care services</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 12. Best practices: chemical applications</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 13. Hydroseeding versus turf</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 14. Fertiligation</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 15. Organic/eco-friendly lawn care options</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 16. Chemical lawn care as add on services</p> <p>CONSTRUCTION & INSTALLATION & DESIGN</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 17. Simplifying installation jobs</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 18. Installing pave stone</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 19. Software solutions for design projects—designing with technology</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 20. Design "how to's": Best practices for proper installation</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 21. Design/build/install as add on service</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 22. Water features</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 23. Tips on selling design/build projects to home owners</p> <p>IRRIGATION</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 24. Basics of irrigation installation & maintenance</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 25. Weather — based controllers</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 26. Dealing with water restrictions</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 27. How to become a WaterSense Partner</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 28. Irrigation as add on service</p> <p>HORTICULTURE</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 29. Best practices for dealing with drought</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 30. Soil treatments for best plants</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 31. PGR's</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 32. Software for planning</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 33. Seasonal planting guidelines</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 34. Bedding & installation</p> <p>OTHER</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 35. None of the above</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 36. Other (please specify) _____</p>
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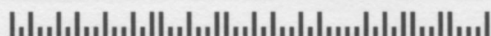
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Can You Use This Technology?

My assistant, Nancy, laughs at my infatuation with gadgets. If there's something that will make life easier or save time, in most cases I will get it. If you can find ways to save time, think about how many more clients you can call on. And it goes without saying that the more clients you call on, the more sales you'll make and sales is something we can all use.

Quietunes are available from the Duluth Trading Co. (www.duluthtrading.com). They are ear muffs that protect your ears from loud noise like mowers, weed eaters and chainsaws. The neat thing about this product is you can plug them into your iPod. By doing this you can actually hear whatever you are playing on your iPod without blowing out your eardrums. Think about all the lessons your team could glean from these. Ask them to listen to one of John Maxwell's lessons on leadership, or a *Lawn & Landscape* podcast? Maybe you offer up a test and

already have one, but what about your drivers? If you have a Spanish-speaking work force and they seem to get lost often, maybe installing these would help? Think about the cost of gasoline and it's pretty easy to see why \$200 for a device that saves \$4-per-gallon fuel is money well spent. I realize GPS is something most of you have. I just want you to think about getting them for others in your company in hopes of saving money, and maybe making them feel important in the process?

I just ordered a Ford Hybrid Escape for my wife. It will be a while before it comes in, but I believe it will be money well spent. The technology behind the Escape Hybrid is nothing new. It's an SUV that runs on batteries at speeds of 25 mph or less. The gasoline engine kicks in above that and when the air conditioning is put on the "max" setting, so it's not perfect. But, it gets over 30 mpg in the city, which is the type of driving my wife mostly does. With

give you about a \$3,000 credit for purchasing one when I wrote this column. This is a great deal. I encourage you to look into this vehicle and research with your accountant the tax credits available. Learn more about hybrid vehicles at www.hybridcars.com and learn more about the tax credits at www.savefuel.gov. This vehicle might be one you or your company wants to consider.

Finally, I've saved the best for last. There's an incredible program called ooVoo that I use to stay in touch with clients, friends and family. ooVoo is available for a free download at www.ooVoo.com and you need to check it out today. ooVoo allows you to talk with anyone who has Internet access and a camera as if they were sitting in front of you. My brother lives in Seattle and my sister lives in Washington, D.C. I live in Dayton, Ohio, but a few times a month I talk to them for free from the comforts of my favorite chair. It's amazing and there are many other types of applica-

**"When you take an interest in your people,
they'll take an interest in you."**

— Marty Grunder

those who pass get lunch? When you take an interest in your people, they'll take an interest in you. And listening to music or an educational program on something that also serves as ear protection is a win-win, and it might be the reason someone works for you instead of a competitor.

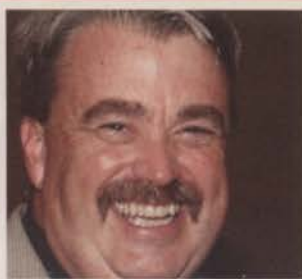
Next is a GPS device mounted in your truck – maybe all of your trucks. I know they are expensive and you may

four children, she can haul them to school, to sports and the like and we can save a ton of money on gas and feel good in the process. To be honest, I still have one of those full-sized SUV's in my garage as that's all that can hold my entire family when we need to travel together. But I spent a lot of time running the math on the Ford Escape purchase and it makes sense. Throw in the fact that the government will

tions you can use it for. I've introduced it to hundreds of landscape contractors and the common response when they see what it does is "this is incredible." I hope you'll look into this tool as a way to save money, time and improve relationships with family, friends and even clients. I have sold thousands of dollars worth of work to my clients while talking to them on ooVoo, so this is also a sales tool. **LL**

Bill Arman

is a 32-year veteran of the landscape maintenance industry and is a founder of The Harvest Group, a national landscape business consultancy. He can be reached at 949/466-8837 or people@glie.net.



12 Sources For Finding Good People

Knowing and nurturing your recruiting sources will pay big dividends with your recruiting program. Here are some additional resources to bolster your talent pool.

SCOUTING SYSTEM. Enlist strategic partners who share in your success. In other words, when you are successful these folks will benefit from your success. These can include vendors, local schools, vocational training centers, churches, community organizations and yes, even friendly competitors. Let these folks know you are looking for people. Be specific with what you are looking for like title, experience, pay range and performance expectations. I've used many sources over the years and if handled correctly they will really want to help with your search. By being very specific with your needs you can avoid many false-alarm leads from your sources.

THE COMMUNITY. Get involved with the communities you hire from. Once you have identified your target learn where they socialize, relax, go to learn, where they shop, eat, worship, recreate and get gas. Are you getting the picture? It sounds a bit like stalking, but hey, this is serious business and we need to be very resourceful.

VOLUNTEER. I often do volunteer work in my community and the communities where my business operates. When you volunteer you have a great network that loves to help others, like you with your recruiting needs.

BECOME FRIENDLY. Get to know companies with a similar workforce. I have engaged with janitorial, restaurants and hotels that have a similar workforce.

These companies can serve as sources for people, new ideas for recruiting tactics and referrals. If you are feeling really confident then engage some friendly competitors. Yes, even your competitor can be a source. Remember it is a two-way street here - give and get leads.

ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE. These classes are for those people learning to speak English. Learn where these are being conducted in your community and let them know your need and the available opportunities.

LOCAL PARKS: Check out local parks in the community you operate. On weekends these are great family gathering spots. And if you have a good scout, then they can get the word out about your company.

CHURCHES: These often have job boards and job fairs with companies listing their open positions. Is your company on this job board?

JOB FAIRS. Have a job fair at your facility or at a nice location with free food and nice giveaways. Make sure these are well thought out with your facility looking its best and your best people available to host. Allow time to meet one-on-one and in small groups. Have your job outlines and benefit overviews ready for handing out. Remember, people want to work in a positive, friendly and encouraging environment. Have employees involved who represent the targeted positions you are seeking.

ADVERTISING. Run a creative ad in targeted newspapers. Try a billboard, signs on trucks, signs in front of your facility, banners and church job boards. Track

your results on these to make sure you are getting a return on your costs. The best advertising I have used was running radio spots on the local Hispanic radio stations. *Muy Bueno!*

CONFERENCES. Be present and attentive at industry conferences. Network and scout for talent. I have had great success when giving talks and presentations at industry events.

TEMP-TO-PERM SERVICES. This is effective for administrative and staff positions because it gives you the ability to try out several candidates with little risk. If they don't meet your needs, then you get a new person. If they impress, then convert them into an employee after a given period of time, usually 90 days. Negotiate the conversion fee up front. As for the field positions, I have had very little success with this source, but I have tried it in extreme-need situations with marginal results at best. I have heard of entire organizations using contracted-out employees but have not had first-hand experience with this process.

PLACEMENT AGENCIES. I have used placement agencies with good results. Use a contingency vs. a retainer for most positions. You pay a contingency if they find a person for you. A retainer is paid, in part or in whole, up front to retain a search for a position. When looking for an executive-level person, a retainer might be best. For a supervisor, sales and manager position, I suggest you find a reputable agency and build a solid working relationship.

Remember, with all of these methods it's important to keep them "warm" and on standby. This will save you time when you start searching for talent. **LL**

Deterring Deer

Protecting clients' plants from deer damage is a potential profit center for landscape and lawn care companies.



»» **M**any landscape professionals have heard an earful or two from clients who've experienced deer damage on their properties. White-tailed deer, found in nearly every state in the United States, and mule deer, common throughout the western U.S. and Canada, can wreak havoc on perennial gardens in the spring and ornamental trees and shrubs in the fall and winter.

In regions with a lot of deer pressure, landscape professionals typically do their best to avoid installing deer-attracting plants like rhododendrons, yews and arborvitae, but many find their do-not-plant lists are as variable as the weather. Severe drought and extensive hard-packed snow coverage are two factors that can cause deer to feed aggressively, moving to plants they wouldn't otherwise touch or going to greater lengths to access food sources.

These variables and the fact that deer pressure appears to be increasing in many regions as development contin-

DEER FACTS

- **TYPES AND RANGE** – Deer are one of the most widely distributed mammals in North America. The white-tailed deer is found in just about every state except Alaska and Utah. The mule deer is primarily a western species; the black-tailed deer is a subspecies of the mule deer.
- **HABITAT** – Deer live in the forest edge. They thrive in agricultural areas interspersed with woodlots and riparian habitats. They favor early successional stages which keep brush and sapling browse within reach. Dense cover is used for winter shelter and protection.
- **FOOD HABITS** – Leaves, stems and buds of woody plants are a staple food for deer. Preferred plant species vary considerably in quality and regional availability. Nutrient requirements and the amount of food consumed vary with age of the animal, season and the reproductive cycle, but daily dry matter consumption averages 2 percent to 4 percent of live body weight. For adult bucks, daily consumption is greatest in spring and averages 4.4 to 6.4 pounds of air-dry food per day. Consumption is about half that during winter. For does, greatest daily food consumption occurs in early fall, just prior to the breeding season.

Source: Internet Center for Wildlife Damage Management (<http://icwdm.org/handbook/mammals/Deer.asp>)

Photo: Robert Pernel | dreamstime.com

business opportunities

ues, mean landscape customers are looking for reliable solutions to keep deer from damaging their properties.

In response, landscape firms seeking additional revenue may want to consider adding some type of deer control program to their service mix.

There are generally two ways companies add deer control – by repelling them with spray applications or excluding them with fence installations.

"Deer control is a multi-faceted service," says Guy Keon, managing



While deer fencing is one of the most effective methods for keeping deer at bay, many property owners hesitate to install fencing for aesthetic reasons. Installers say there are some "virtually invisible" options on the market. Photo: Benners Gardens

partner of Deer Fencers, an installation firm based in Phoenixville, Pa. "It's a good way to drive additional

revenue; plus it's good for building overall customer relationships."

Deer Fencers, sister company to fencing supplier Benners Gardens, installs between 150 to 250 deer fences annually with its own crews in Philadelphia and Connecticut and through its satellite partners along the East Coast, some of which are landscape companies.

Andy Felix, president of Tree-Tech in Foxboro, Mass., sought to emphasize his company's expertise in protecting plants when he added a deer control spray service to his \$7.5 million firm's

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mix. "Being arborists, we specialize in the care of trees and shrubs," he says. "Since a number of our clients were having problems with deer damaging their plants, I thought 'This has to become a part of what we do.'"

Tree-Tech began offering deer control two years ago. Despite slow growth due to two seasons of minimal deer damage, Felix is convinced deer control is a good fit for his firm and a potential revenue stream for any company that takes care of landscapes. Not only does it show a commitment to protecting clients' outdoor investments, deer control generally doesn't require any major new equipment.

plied directly to the plant. They repel by taste and are most effective when applied to trees and shrubs during the dormant season, which is one of the reasons this product was attractive to Felix. "I thought a push to our clients in areas with deer issues would help keep my spray equipment going later into the season," he says.

Also, firms adding deer applications don't need large-scale equipment; backpack sprayers will do, Felix says. "The great thing is you only need to spray six feet high and under - that's as high as they can graze."

In terms of repellent product choice, there's a wide variety on the market. Felix has tested several, but

cide he uses: "It leaves an orange-colored residual on the leaves." Though some clients have hesitations about the color, Felix sees it as an opportunity to educate clients on the safety of the applications. "It's usually not a stumbling block to a sale," he says. "It also allows the client to see that we've made an application - there truly is material on the plants."

Because reapplication may be necessary in the winter or early spring, pricing can be tricky. Tree Tech's deer control applications start at \$200, and go up depending on the amount of deer-susceptible plants on a property. When pricing, it's always best to visit a property, Felix says.

"We specialize in the care of trees and shrubs.

Since a number of our clients were having problems with deer damaging their plants, I thought 'This has to become a part of what we do.'" — Andy Felix, Tree-Tech

SPRAY APPLICATIONS. Lawn care or tree care companies likely already own the spray equipment required for repellent applications, Felix says, adding that's one of the reasons he pursued this service. Plus, "It's a good opportunity to get on a property and see a client you may not have otherwise seen," Felix says. "You can sell winter work and it's a good add-on service, especially if you're in the business of protecting their plants."

There are generally two types of repellents, according to the non-profit Internet Center for Wildlife Damage Management (ICWDM). Area repellents are applied around the plants (often in perimeter applications) and repel deer by odor alone. Contact repellents, the second type, are ap-

plied directly to the plant. They repel by taste and are most effective when applied to trees and shrubs during the dormant season, which is one of the reasons this product was attractive to Felix. "I thought a push to our clients in areas with deer issues would help keep my spray equipment going later into the season," he says. "It also allows the client to see that we've made an application - there truly is material on the plants."

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"You have to get a good look at the type of plants they have, plus you may notice others sales opportunities," he says.

FENCING INSTALLATION. There are a number of fencing options for controlling deer, including temporary and permanent electric fences, but the most common deer fences for residential and commercial landscapes are permanent woven wire or plastic fences. Though experts say they're the most reliable and effective way to manage deer damage, they have some drawbacks and aren't right for every client.

For example, many homeowners experience deer damage in their front foundation plantings. Not only do cus-

business opportunities

tomers balk at installing permanent fencing in this area, local codes often restrict fence heights. The standard height for deer fences is 7 to 8 feet. "The main drawback is that consumers think of typical deer fences as a utilitarian-looking product," he says of the woven wire or plastic fences. Another consideration is cost. Depending on property scale and type of system, permanent deer fencing installations range between \$1,500 and \$50,000, Keon says.

Because of the issues with permanent deer fences, Keon has seen an interest in temporary, winter-only fences. "During the winter, people aren't as concerned about the overall look of their property," he

says. They're more open to the idea of a temporary fence that's installed in the fall, taken down in the spring and stored off-site by the contractor during the rest of the year. The benefit to the contractor is temporary fences provide a recurring-revenue stream.

Prices for temporary fences depend on property size and the service options, Keon says. He estimates the materials cost about \$4 per linear foot and that installation usually figures to three-quarters the cost of materials.

Like deer spray services, one of the greatest attributes of a deer fence installation business is it requires little start-up investment, Keon says. A typical deer fence for a residential or commercial application is installed

using only hand tools. Larger commercial or agricultural deer fences may require basic landscape installation equipment such as a skid-steer loader, but that's generally not the market landscape contractors who do fencing target, Keon says.

Installation crews typically consist of two or three men. "A two- or three-man crew should be able to knock out a one-acre project in two to three days," Keon says. As deer fence installation is typically a "light" side service for green industry firms, Keon says landscape contractors generally appoint and train one lead foreman. After that, the balance of the labor generally floats from other available installation crewmembers. LL

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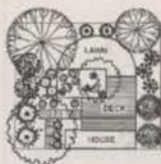
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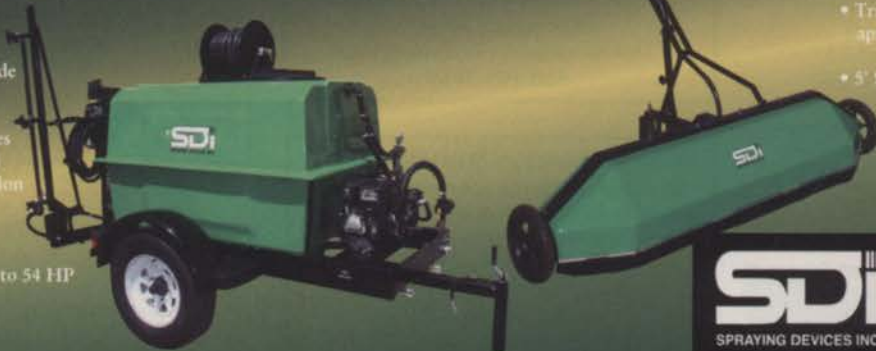
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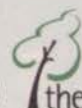
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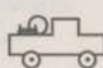
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employees to be accountable for their actions. This not only applies to the company's management team, but to every individual who wears the Denison Landscaping moniker.

For example, in the past there was no accountability when it came to a worker's safety gear. If a laborer lost his helmet or forgot his safety glasses at home, he'd simply go to the tool room and secure a replacement. Lackadaisical attitudes toward equipment accountability cost Denison Landscaping about \$30,000 per year.

replenishing these items."

To get the necessary buy-in from its labor force, Denison's management team sought out their opinions on how to best affect change within the company. For example, when it restructured its equipment shop and tool room according to lean principles, the company solicited the input from those directly involved in that area.

"It was a great exercise," Duane Denison says. "Together, we looked at areas and how to improve things to make them more efficient. During this process, lean

Sometimes acceptance involves conveying lean principles to people without emphasizing that it's part of a business management philosophy, Josh Denison says. "During our summer kick off meeting we stressed that it's not business as usual at Denison Landscaping," he says. "Times are tough and we need to pay attention to the little things."

For example, the price of fertilizer has nearly doubled, Josh Denison says, and it's important for field crews to understand the costs associated with not accounting for the proper use of that material. In today's business climate there is a direct cause and effect to everyone's actions, he adds, and it's up to each individual to decide whether that outcome improves or hinders the company's bottom line.

So far, the impact lean manage-



"It's not easy to sell me on certain things. I guess I'm an old-school person. This seemed like more of the same old stuff. But they had enough oomph in their convictions to convince me lean was something we should do." — John Denison, Denison Landscaping

"Through lean management, we went out and purchased lockers for about \$3,000 and assigned everyone hard hats, vest and safety glasses," John Denison says. "Now workers have somewhere to put these things at night and they don't have to worry about bringing them in the next day. If it breaks, then we'll replace it. But if they lose it, then they have to buy another one. They are accountable for these items everyday and it has significantly cut back on the expense of constantly

management was the driving force to improve the conditions in the equipment shop and in the tool room."

LEAN FUTURE. Lean is a state of mind, not a business exercise that has a start and a finish, John Denison says. As a whole, his company is still learning the lean process. It's training the rest of the staff in lean management principals and reprogramming long-established mind sets to now focus on time accountability and time management.

ment has had on Denison Landscaping has been positive and significant, John Denison says. And while the process has presented some eureka moments for his management team, it also has served to remind them of the value inherent in solid business practices, those principles that he built Denison Landscaping on over the last 34 years.

"We're still the good company that we were," John Denison says. "We're just practicing lean management to make us better." **LL**

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