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**Mole Guard**
Mole Guard introduces an affordable and convenient solution to dirt, debris and pest-filled valve boxes. Mole Guard is a patented polypropylene bottom for underground valve boxes with side guards, where pipe enters and exits. Together, these provide a barrier preventing dirt and unwanted pests from entering the enclosure through the bottom or along the piping. Mole Guard is easy to install and is available in four sizes that are designed to fit the most popular-sized enclosures. Mole Guard was designed with service personnel in mind, making the maintenance and repairs of equipment in valve boxes as fast, safe and easy as possible. MoleGuard.net

**The Toro Co.**
The new Toro Precision Soil Sensor continuously measures moisture levels in the soil and determines when to allow the irrigation controller to water, maximizing the efficiency of your irrigation system. There are two wireless components: a receiver that hooks up to the irrigation controller, and a sensor that installs in the ground. Once installed, the sensor calibrates itself automatically to determine the soil type. When the moisture level exceeds the user-defined optimum level for the plant material, the controller is prevented from running any irrigation programs. This prevents unnecessary watering and provides the possibility for significant water savings. The unit also is the first soil sensor to offer freeze detection, which prevents irrigation when temperatures approach freezing. Toro.com

**WaterOptimizer Inc.**
The WaterOptimizer, a smart irrigation system, was named Innovation of the Year at the recent BizTech Innovation Summit Awards & Expo. Sensor nodes designed to measure the amount of water in the soil are placed in the ground. Sprinklers only turn on when the ground is dry, and then only long enough to reach the desired moisture level. The system is controlled remotely through an Internet connection. The wireless mesh network relays information back to the user, giving instant data and immediate control. WaterOptimizer.com
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Control major sedges along with 40 other weeds, including the top five* lawn weeds with Monument® 75WG herbicide. Its convenient, single-dose package was specially designed for your operation. Two application options, broadcast or spot treatment, one attractive price. All of which makes the battle against weeds, a lopsided contest. Fight for every yard.

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Firestone Specialty Products

The new Water Management Solutions customizable product line includes the Firestone EPIC Chamber, a drainage and irrigation system that uses a natural passive process to manage and direct water resources; the Firestone EPIC Pan Sheet, corrugated plastic flat sheets that are assembled on-site for ease of installation; the Firestone EPIC Pan, an alternative to the pan sheet; the Firestone EPDM Geo-membrane, a cured, single-ply liner used to capture water for reuse in subsurface irrigation; the Firestone Netlon Advanced Turf System (ATS), a polypropylene mesh blended into the soil profile to increase bearing capacity and root stability; the Firestone NetPave 50, a permeable, recycled thermoplastic paver; the Firestone NetPave 25, a lightweight permeable paving system installed atop existing grass surfaces to improve bearing capacity for lightweight vehicular traffic; the TurfGuard Paver, an extruded polyethylene mesh roll that is tough, flexible, long lasting and suitable for occasional vehicular access on soft subgrades; and more.

FirestoneSP.com

Hypro

Hypro Express wet boom fittings feature a connection that is quick and easy to assemble and provide a quality leak-proof seal for stainless steel or polypropylene pipes. They lock the alignment of pipe sections, barbs, tees or nozzle bodies for always-right assembly. Utilizing the proven O-ring sealed joints used for nozzle bodies, Express wet boom fittings eliminate the need for leak-prone threaded joints or expensive welded fittings. They efficiently install using the same hardware and mounting methods as Hypro ProFlo wet boom nozzle bodies. They also leverage the same simple drilling and cutting operations used to prepare pipes for final assembly. Express wet boom fittings are currently available for 1-in. nominal pipe with universal flange, hose barb and cam lock connection options. HyproPumps.com

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A herbicide for control of certain broadleaf, sedge, and grass weeds in turf

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**You must live in a state where Monument is labeled for use. Only for use on label-approved warm-season turf.
MAINTENANCE: TRENCHERS

Ditch Witch
Fast, powerful, simple to operate and easy to steer, the Ditch Witch RT24 compact trencher offers a choice of high-flotation tires or heavy-duty tracks, plus an optional Roto Witch boring attachment that helps you install utilities beneath driveways, sidewalks and other surface improvements with minimal turf disturbance. The fully hydrostatic, 22.3-hp unit was designed with more weight on the digging chain, so it can put more product in the ground faster. A special trail wheel supports the oscillating tracks to help reduce breakover and increase stability over uneven and rough terrain; tracks “walk” or oscillate 12° for extra stability. Its trenching capacity is 48 in. deep and 8 in. wide, and easy hand controls are grouped conveniently at the operator’s station. The optional backfill blade, available only from the Ditch Witch organization, eliminates the need for shovels and manual labor. DitchWitch.com

Land Pride
New for 2012, the Land Pride DT35 Ditcher features an adjustable depth shoe, 1-in. ripper shank, #80 drive chain and 2-in. main shafts as standard features. With an adjustable cutting diameter of 16 or 18 in., the cutting edges are reversible/replaceable and manufactured from AR400 material. The impeller leaves a clean and sculptured trough to keep water flowing freely. Perfect for your 30-hp to 60-hp tractor, the DT35 quickly creates channels up to 9-in. depth for small irrigation ditches or for efficiently diverting water from unwanted areas. LandPride.com

Little Beaver
Kwik-Trench mini-trencher is offered in two models, the KT200B and KT2400B, both able to trench up to 30 ft. per minute. The Kwik-Trench works quickly and efficiently to create clean, narrow trenches. Featuring a triple V-belt drive system, it achieves rotation speed up to 800 rpm. Precise cutting depth is achieved with a manual crank, while each trencher’s locking swivel wheel guides the unit, ensuring straight trenches. In addition to producing clean, precise results, the Kwik-Trench is designed to minimize backfill and cleanup time by depositing soil beside the trench. Powered by a 5.5-hp Honda engine, the KT 200B is capable of achieving depths up to 8 in., while the KT 2400B unleashes 8 hp through its Honda engine and achieves depths up to 12 in. For added convenience, Little Beaver offers an optional trailer to make transporting the Kwik-Trench a snap. LittleBeaver.com
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Jim Agabedis offers an organic solution to tick and mosquito control.

WHEN JIM AGABEDIS moved to a home in the suburbs, he soon discovered he had a tick and mosquito problem. An organic gardener and landscaper, Agabedis researched his options and decided this sort of bug control would be a useful add-on service for his Massachusetts-based organic lawn care company. That was in 2005. Agabedis says the service has grown since then.

“When I moved to the suburbs, I realized what a problem this was for a lot of homeowners,” says Agabedis, president and owner of Minuteman Landscaping Inc. in Brighton, MA.

“The first spring day that we went out to use the lawn we found nine ticks between our three kids and dog,” he continues. “And there were a lot of mosquitoes, too. I wanted the kids to be able to play in the yard and as an organic gardener, I wanted to find a product that would be safe. So I started trying out various products and found one that gave pretty immediate results.”

After seeing such success on his property, Agabedis pitched the idea to his clients and the service took off from there. In the first season of offering the service Agabedis went from zero to 130 clients. He attributes that growth to regional demand.

“The communities we work in tend to be a little more suburban, with wetlands and some boggy areas that require maintenance,” says Agabedis.

As time went on, Agabedis found that his organic mosquito and tick control program not only was effective, but also appealed to customers.

“We’ve found that this is a service that people really do find value in because it’s allowing them to enjoy their property and the results are almost instantaneous,” says Agabedis. “We haven’t had any calls with customers complaining it didn’t work, but we get quite a lot of calls from customers that are really happy because they were able to have that outdoor party they wanted to have after we sprayed. Giving people instant results makes them satisfied customers, and the fact that it’s organic and safe is even better.”

Agabedis says organic mosquito and tick control has also been an excellent way to differentiate his business from the competition. “It’s like snow plowing in that some landscapers do it and some don’t,” he says. “But those that don’t are occasionally let go based on the fact that their services aren’t as complete as another company,” he says. “This service allows us to be more complete. Homeowners see us as more of a one-stop solution, and that keeps them happy.”

The author is a freelance writer with seven years of experience covering landscaping.
Want to know the focus of Southwest Landscape Management, a 22-year-old firm based in Columbia Station, OH? A line in President Steve Rak II’s email signature sums it up: “We put maintenance first.”

The company, which Rak runs with his father, Steve Rak Sr., specializes in commercial maintenance (and snow removal), although it has been increasing its enhancements business over the past few years, marketing mulching and cleanups to homeowners in developments where it has the master homeowners’ association contracts.

Rak recently shared his outlook on the maintenance side of the landscape industry with LM.

**TOP TRENDS**

› **Expanding services.** Everybody is ramping up enhancements, trying to be the service provider that can do everything. We consider extras like this to be the gravy, so to speak. We’ve also been pushing snowplowing services and multi-year contracts across all our services.

› **Pricing stability.** It finally seems like pricing is starting to level out. It’s still very competitive, but at least people aren’t asking us to lower our prices like the last few years. Customers had been saying, “If you can’t keep prices the same or give us a 5% to 10% reduction, we’re going to put it out for bid.” And if it’s out for bid you may be looking at a 20% reduction. We didn’t lose any clients, but we had to do some negotiating. We had to cut some services — maybe we didn’t mulch as much or fertilize everything. This year I didn’t see hardly any of that.

› **Subcontracting for national companies.** Right now we’re working with the property management divisions of a few national companies, Affiliated Grounds Maintenance Group and Brickman Facility Solutions. They’re bidding some national accounts and subbing it out to us. The jury’s still out on how that’s going to pan out for the national companies, but it’s keeping us busy.

**TOP OBSTACLES**

› **Getting used to the new economy.** Becoming lean is huge and so is thinking about the way you do everything. For example, we generally buy all Ford trucks. Before I didn’t care if Ford cost a little more, but we just bought our first Chevy because it was a better price. You definitely have to change the way you do things.

› **Finding the right people is always a challenge.** Even with the bad economy and high unemployment the past few years, we still have trouble hiring employees. Our foremen work year round, but there are still 10 to 15 people we need only April through November.

› **Increased competition.** In Cleveland there are so many more companies out there than when we started 22 years ago.

Design/build guys used to say, “I don’t know how you make any money cutting grass,” but now they’re getting into maintenance for cash flow and stability. There are 90-some legitimate landscape companies within a 20-mile radius of us. And they’re good companies, too, with websites, logos on their trucks and uniforms. It’s an obstacle, but it’s a good obstacle.

**TOP OPPORTUNITIES**

› **Acquiring smaller companies.** For longer-term growth, an opportunity for my company would be to pick up a small company with a nice book of work that may need some support. We did an acquisition a long time ago and I’ve talked to three other companies over the years, but none of them had their books in order.

› **Partnering with the national companies.** Subcontracting has been good for us so far, but I wouldn’t go too heavy with one company. Our rule of thumb is not to go more than 10% or 15% with any one customer, and that would be the same for subcontracting. Even though the property maintenance divisions are separate from their own companies’ maintenance branches, what if, God forbid, one day they decided to take all the work in-house?
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A landscape business owner says he should have embraced taking risks.

Risk taking often is a necessity when business owners want to get ahead. But for Franz Witte, owner of Franz Witte Landscape Contracting Inc., a rocky market in 1980 and 1981 paralyzed his business. He was afraid to take a risk, and that cost him.

“I was struggling to get over the mental experience of some difficult times, and I let my fear stagnate the business,” Witte recalls. “I kept things small and did a lot of the work myself. Ultimately, that held the company back from growing. I lost about five years of growth and possible expansion into other markets or segments of business because I was scared.”

In his 40 years of business, Witte considers his fear of risk his biggest and most costly mistake. While it’s hard to put a number on the loss, Witte says he could have lost as much as a few million dollars in profits from it. He missed out on promising opportunities, all because he held back. By the time the 2008 recession hit, Witte had learned from his mistake. He knew to do three important things.

**Hire the best — even in the worst of times**

A rocky market typically inspires business owners to consider firing more than hiring. But, Witte says, it should be the other way around. “In a tough economy there ends up being a lot of good quality employees on unemployment. That’s the time to snatch them up,” he advises.

Witte’s daughter, company president Seneca Hull, says that’s exactly what the company did in 2009. “It was an awful time for business and a scary time to be hiring a new manager for the commercial division of our company. But we knew if we waited until the economy turned around that he wouldn’t be available anymore,” she says. “We stuck our neck out and knew the risk involved, but it advanced our business and helped us become one of the last men standing in the market.”

**Let go of the fear**

Even when times are tough, Witte says he’s focused on keeping the fear behind him. “Fear can be controlling and it makes it hard to see opportunities that are out there,” he says. “You have to maintain a positive attitude, keep your head up and keep looking around for the next job.”

Hull adds that it’s critical not to get overwhelmed by bad news. “It’s easy to get caught up in the doom and gloom when it’s all bad news on TV, but if you’re able to cut through that, you realize there are still opportunities out there,” she says.

**Always concentrate on moving forward**

Similar to cutting through the bad news, Witte says it’s always important to look ahead and keep the business moving forward. It’s also the reason he doesn’t harp on his mistake. “There’s no point in looking back on it now,” he says. “That’s just another way to get caught up in failure instead of looking to the future.”

Witte says the most important lesson he’s learned is to keep moving forward. “In 2009 when the recession was at its worst, everyone hunkered down,” says Witte. “They pulled back and didn’t do anything. But that’s what I did back in the early ’80s, and I wasn’t about to do it again.

“I worked through it this time and produced good sales,” he continues. “Another thing I’ve learned is that employees want to keep moving forward, too. As scary as it may be in tough times, my best advice is to forge ahead.”

Payton is a freelance writer with seven years of experience covering landscaping.