# Computers, are they right for you?

*by Rhys Arthur, MAAGCS*

Obviously there have been tremendous technological strides in personal computers during the past ten years. It seems like yesterday that the general conception of a computer was a cumbersome, difficult, and expensive machine. Their use by the general population was limited at best.

Over the years, somewhat like the phenomenon of electronic calculators, personal computers have become faster, cheaper, and easier to use. Easy to understand Operating Systems like IBM's DOS were developed, and programmers wrote software that did specific jobs and was user friendly.

The result of all this technology? Now we finally have an economical machine that will run truly advanced software that almost anyone can master.

As we know, companies like Buckner, Rainbird and Toro have worked incredibly hard to develop computerized irrigation that not only works well, but is easy to use. And why not use a personal computer as a central control for irrigation? Often, it is reasonably priced, does a better job managing water, and then offers all the abilities that a computer has to complement the Superintendent in his office.

**Writing letters** with a word processor is probably one of the finest benefits of having a computer in the office. With a word processor, correspondence becomes a pleasure rather than a true burden. Typing letters on the screen, with the ability to correct mistakes, check spelling, and revise content, makes the word processor a real asset. In addition, documents can be saved, retrieved, edited and printed as many times as necessary. Therefore, the word processor makes the computer work like a typewriter, file cabinet, and photocopier.

**Preparing operating budgets** is the annual nightmare all superintendents face. Using spreadsheet software, computers can also make this job much easier. Spreadsheet software works the same way as an accounting journal sheet does. Typically, each line in the spreadsheet represents a line item in the budget. Then each column contains the amount budgeted for each month throughout the year. Given the many line items in a regular budget, the computer can automate all the arithmetic on all these rows and columns. And, the same benefits apply as in the word processor; all these spreadsheets can be saved, retrieved, edited and printed as many times as necessary.

**The data base** is another great computer tool. This type of software program allows you to store and track information about specific events that you define. For example, I keep track of all the invoices I approve for payment. The information I choose to store is: the date of the invoice, the invoice number, the vendor, what it is for, where it was used and the cost. Therefore, at any given time, I can retrieve all the invoices that were for one specific piece of equipment, or charged to fertilizer, or any given line item during any given period of time. This a great way to monitor your spending. Case in point: How many times have you wondered how much you have spent on repairs half way through the month? Or on a construction project? All this information can be kept in a data base.

**Specialty software** is becoming more popular as the computer market expands. Some of these programs, like TRIMS, are already prepared to keep records like the data base. In addition, more agronomically specific software, like the Superintendents Spray Program, is being developed to help us grow our grass better. Over time, we will see many more programs specifically tailored to our industry, especially as regulatory compliance becomes more of an issue.

**Best of all**, not only is it easier to prepare these items with the computer, but it also presents a more professional image of you and our profession. More often than not, the people who review our written work are professionals in their own right. The board of directors at your club, the budget committee, or outside regulatory agencies all develop their own perception of your management abilities based on professional communications skills.

**How does a novice get started? First**, seek advice from those superintendents around you who know computers. Find out what they use. There is a wealth of free information available from your associates. Ask around. Phone calls are cheap.

**Secondly**, when shopping for a computer, don't over buy. Personal computers are reasonably priced as long as you don't let a salesman talk you into buying a computer that can run the Pentagon. For golf course use, computers driven with IBM operating systems are the only way to go. All irrigation and specialty software programs are written for the IBM. When actually purchasing a specific computer, brand names are fine, but generally cost more. A prudent

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shopper can do very well purchasing an IBM compatible machine that basically does the same job as brand name units, but costs less. A typical 286 (type of processor) with a 40 megabyte hard drive (permanent memory) and VGA graphics (enhanced color) machine will provide excellent performance for the average superintendent. If you ever intend to use your computer as an irrigation central, ask your irrigation supplier what special equipment, like extended memory, may be necessary to run his software.

Third, be conservative. As a novice, don't buy complex, and very expensive software. Often, these software packages exceed both your pocketbook and your needs. Start with simple, cheap multipurpose software that is easy to learn and does almost every-

thing you need to do. *PFS First* is a very popular program that many superintendents use. It offers a word processor, a spreadsheet program and a small database at a reasonable cost. Once you exceed the limits of the simple software packages, then you know it's time to invest in a more complex and expensive package.

Lastly, stick with it. Many first-time computer users expect too much too soon. Stick to simple assignments that provide immediate results for your efforts. Writing letters, posting maintenance schedules, and making signs are all examples of little routines that make your job easier with the computer.

To determine if a computer is truly right for you, you really must consider the perception you wish to convey to those who evaluate you. Do you write letters and memos frequently? Do you

ever plan to modernize your irrigation control? Will your organization benefit from tracking records, or preparing a better budget?

Perhaps the real question to ask when considering a computer is: Will I be a better golf course superintendent *without* one?

## 1992 MTC Conference to honor Angelo Cammarotta

The annual conference of the Maryland Turfgrass Council, to be held in Baltimore on January 6-7, will be dedicated to Angelo Cammarotta, former president of the MAAGCS and one of the founding members of MTC.

Mr. Cammarotta, 75, retired from Hobbits Glen in 1983, after serving at a number of other clubs in the Mid-Atlantic and in New Jersey.