

# LAWN CARE INDUSTRY

## Tips on recognizing opportunity when next faced with a drought

### Develop the strategy before an emergency to give your company focus and direction while competitors struggle.

■ Your customers' lawns and landscapes will probably be damaged by the next drought. Chances are they will survive; they can be repaired. Will you be able to say the same about your company?

Ask that question now. Develop a drought-survival/opportunity plan. It doesn't have to be intricate. It can be as simple as a checklist. It will be your roadmap and guide your company through the next drought and deliver it intact, and allow you to offer profitable repair or renovation services at emergency's end.

Build your plan optimistically, with an eye to harvesting opportunities.

There's often good news at the end of a drought. The 1988 Midwest drought led to unprecedented customer demand for property reseeding and renovation later that fall and throughout 1989.

Develop the strategy before an emergency begins. This will give your company focus and direction while competitors struggle. After all, drought and water shortages (bans) are recurring problems.

Realize that aiding customers' lawns/landscapes is just one aspect of a water emergency.

Your plan must focus on the bigger picture:

- 1) keeping your company functioning,
- 2) retaining customers, and
- 3) sustaining employee morale.

Here are some drought survival/ suggestions to address these concerns:

**Customer education**—Do you have literature ready to give to your customers as the next water emergency approaches? Handouts? Brochures? Can your technicians speak convincingly to your clients about:

- ✓turfgrass dormancy,

✓proper lawn/landscape watering practices,

✓higher mowing heights in summer,  
✓limiting traffic on stressed turfgrasses, and/or

✓your company's role in building the overall vigor of the customer's lawns/landscapes to survive a water shortage (using more slow-release nitrogen sources, or fertilizers with less nitrogen and more potassium in summer)?

**Customer retention**—Some customers won't allow you to put anything on their lawns during a drought. Sometimes it's better that you don't.

That doesn't mean you can't inspect customers' properties anyway. Remember, your customers aren't paying you to make applications even though that's how you bill them. They're paying for results, healthy and attractive lawns/landscapes. Perhaps you can offer spot seeding later in the season at a reduced rate, provided they stay on your program. Be flexible.

**Employee retention**—While you fret over lost applications and lost revenue, your employees fret over the possibility of lost wages. If conditions won't allow them to

make applications, can they provide clients with flower bed weed control and turf aeration? When

**A drought or watering ban can brown a customer's turfgrass, but it doesn't mean you lose that customer.**

the emergency is over, you and your customers will need experienced technicians to repair the damage.

**Leadership**—Equipped with your knowledge of lawns/landscapes and armed with your plan, garner a reputation as a problem solver by speaking at local service or garden club meetings. Or, if you're comfortable with it, become a source for the media.

Keep your message positive. Emphasize how your company and the industry can help customers during and after the drought emergency.

**Cooperative effort**—Water boards ban lawn and landscape irrigation because they can get away with it. Usually, the green industry doesn't respond as a group until it starts to hurt, even though it has solid information that lawns/landscapes aren't water wasters. Lawns prevent runoff and erosion; landscapes enhance the environment.

Your plan should recognize the need to cooperate with other green industry professionals so that water boards and, hopefully, the public gets the facts.

—Ron Hall



# Mole control can be profitable

**This professional mole trapper works all year long and gets many of his referrals from lawn care companies.**

■ As a landscape or lawn care business owner, technicians often see mole damage on clients' properties. Customers sometimes ask what can be done. If we could solve their mole problems, we could certainly charge enough to make it worthwhile.

But few of us offer mole control. Either (a) we don't know enough about moles to even attempt to control them; or (b) we don't think we can make money doing it.

There is, however, one big reason why



**Eastern mole: insectivore, extremely wary, doesn't hibernate.**

we should have some basic information about moles: our customers. They look to us for information about any aspect of their landscapes or lawns, including the appearance of mole ridges or mounds.

If we can't help solve their problems, we should, at least, be able to direct them to someone who can.

Tom Schmidt of Cincinnati is one of just a handful of expert mole trappers in the United States. His company name is Mole Systems. His business card reads: *The Mole-Man*.

Several lawn care companies refer customers to him.

His services are always welcomed, particularly after a property owner has already tried and failed with the bubble-gum-down-the-hole routine. Or, by pok-



**Tom Schmidt says trapping moles is simple once you know about the Eastern mole's habits and where to put traps.**

ing poisoned grain into their tunnels.

These efforts never work. Moles are insectivores. They won't eat either chewing gum or grain.

Or sometimes the homeowner has

# KVOOS

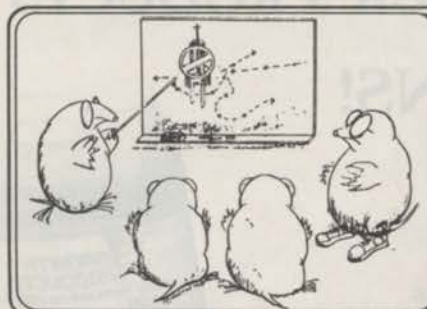


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Schmidt's  
mole  
cartoons in  
Cincinnati  
newspaper  
attracted  
attention.

tried to drown the mole by sticking a garden hose into its tunnel. Moles just move to another part of their underground system.

"People usually just don't know what they're dealing with," says Schmidt. He describes most home remedies for getting rid of moles as "kind of like drilling a hole in the floor of your flooded bathroom and thinking you've solved your problem."

Moles aren't rodents; they're more closely related to shrews. They feed on

**Mole control can generate  
additional revenues.**

soil insects and invertebrates, particularly earthworms. Often the victims just wander or fall into their tunnels. The mole comes along and gobbles them up. An adult Eastern (or common) mole eats about 50 pounds of soil invertebrates a year.

Although moles eat many turf-damaging insects, they can survive without grubs. It's unlikely a property owner can rid his property of moles by just killing the grubs on his property. "When you're trying to treat a single yard, you're just dealing with the tip of the iceberg," says Schmidt.

That's because moles have both surface tunnels (the noticeable raised ridges), and deeper tunnels which they more commonly use as main runways.

Working in incredible bursts of energy, a mole can open 18 feet of new surface tunnel in an hour. It's not uncommon for a male mole to develop tunnels over a four-acre area, a female over about an acre of property. If disturbed, a mole can scoot through about 80 feet of tunnel in a minute. They're extremely wary.

Schmidt is a fulltime mole trapper. He works year-round because moles work year-round. They don't hibernate. They're patching and adding onto their tunnels, and searching for meals even in winter.

Most of the cold weather movement relates to final dispersal or migration of yearlings preparing home ranges that will support new litters in spring. The timing varies with climate.

Schmidt says nobody's been able to convince him there's a more efficient or humane way to rid a landscape of moles than trapping. He uses both harpoon and scissors-type traps, both of which kill instantly.



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**LAWN CARE INDUSTRY**

"Knowing where to set traps is probably 90 percent of the job," believes Schmidt.

It's unlikely he'll ever get rich trapping moles, Schmidt admits, but he's busier than you might think. He has about 200 regular customers. In 1992 he answered just over 200 calls, with about 30 percent of these contacts resulting in jobs.

"A lot of my new calls are just the curious," admits Schmidt. "Personal referrals from clients are the most reliable."

When he spoke at the Ohio Turfgrass Conference this past December, the room was packed. When he offered to help anyone in the audience start (for a fee) their own mole trapping operation, several attendees scheduled later meetings with him.

Schmidt believes any fair-sized metropolitan area with suburbs and populations of the Eastern mole can generate additional revenue in mole control.

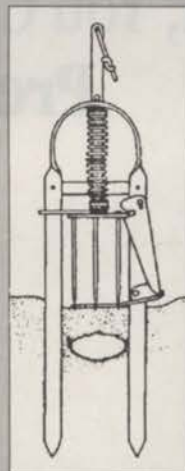
"I don't know why any fair-sized lawn care company wouldn't have somebody to do this work," he says.

**How to trap a mole**

■ Dr. Robert M. Corrigan, animal damage control specialist at Purdue University, says trapping is the most reliable method of mole control. "The key to success is patience, practice and persistence."

Generally, trapping is easiest and most effective during the spring and fall. Usually, the more traps the better.

Corrigan recommends the harpoon trap for beginners. It's available from most hardware and garden shops. He offers these suggestions for using the trap.



There are several types of harpoon traps.

1) Using the side of your hand, lightly press down a narrow section (about 1 inch in length) of an active runway so that the runway is collapsed to 1/2 of its original dimension.

2) Push the supporting spikes of the trap into the ground, one on either side of the runway, until the trigger pan just barely touches the depressed tunnel. Be sure the trap is centered over the runway and the supporting spikes do not cut into the tunnel below.

3) Set the trap and leave it, taking care not to tread on or disturb any other portion of the runway system.

4) Check the trap every day or two. If a trap fails to produce a mole within four or five days, move the trap to another portion of a main runway system.

5) Plastic pails can be placed over traps to prevent animals or children from tampering with them.

—R.H.

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