

SUMMER OF THE WEED

Bad weather can be good for business. Lawn care is one of the few bright spots in a down economy. **BY DAN JACOBS** EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

It's been a rough season. In many parts of the country, spring began with a huge amount of wet weather. That was followed by a very hot, dry summer — ideal conditions for the weeds that lawn care companies battle to make a living. And it seems, in a down economy and a depressed Green Industry, lawn care is the one bit of sunshine peaking through the rainclouds.

Weather

An executive at a mower manufacturer company once commented he didn't care what condition the economy was in. As long as it was raining, the grass would grow and people always need their grass cut. Apparently the early wet weather, followed by high temps and a lack of rain, led to increased business for lawn care professionals as well. "Crabgrass is becoming more and more of an issue because we're having soil cracking," says Tom Knopsnyder, vice president of operations for southeastern PAs Green Lawn Fertilizing. "Because of that, crabgrass is becoming more and more of a problem along with nutsedge. Before you would never really notice it in the month of July. We've been spraying it pretty much since the fourth."

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LAWN CARE'S SHINING STARS

Lawn Dawg (No. 12) and Green Lawn Fertilizing (No. 16) are among the companies with the highest lawn care revenue in the Green Industry according to data provided for the LM150.

1	TruGreen Lawncare and LandCare	\$1,335,175,000
2	Scotts Lawn Service	\$261,000,000
3	Weed Man	\$105,000,000
4	Lawn Doctor	\$78,850,000
5	NaturaLawn of America	\$37,372,500
6	Spring-Green Lawn Care Corp.	\$29,767,050
7	USM	\$13,330,590
8	Naturescape	\$12,482,090
9	Ryan Lawn & Tree	\$10,417,200
10	SavATree	\$9,366,600
11	Senske Lawn & Tree Care	\$7,600,000
12	Lawn Dawg	\$6,822,841
13	ProGrass	\$6,500,000
14	U.S. Lawns	\$6,120,000
15	DLC Resources Inc.	\$5,500,273
16	Green Lawn Fertilizing Inc.	\$5,000,273
17	Underwood Bros Inc. dba AAA Landscape	\$4,500,000
18	Moyer Indoor/Outdoor	\$4,483,415
19	Christy Webber Landscapes	\$4,093,562
20	Swingle Lawn, Tree & Landscape Care	\$3,740,974
21	Mainscape	\$2,793,000
22	Clintar Landscape Management	\$2,310,000
23	Lipinski Outdoor Services	\$2,127,811
24	Acres Group	\$2,057,594
25	Moore Landscapes Inc.	\$2,000,000



Weather conditions have been perfect for goosegrass and crabgrass, requiring many lawn care companies to do spot treatments.

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And it's not just southeast Pennsylvania that's having problems.

"It's got hot in many parts of the country," says Kyle Miller, senior technical specialist for BASF. "All of our sales reps are talking about how much weed control is being done now."

Even companies that were able to put down treatments in the spring have had issues.

"Most of the herbicides that we traditionally used in landscapes are gone," says Jason Fausey, field development manager, Valent Professional Products. "They broke down faster; they got moved through the soil profile and now we're getting a lot of weeds."

The early wet weather might have led to lush lawns, but that can only take a homeowner so far.

"Even though your lawn was thick this spring, which we all would equate with an ability to compete with weeds during the summer, you've got very little herbicide left," Miller says. "It's not able to compete with these weeds, now that the hot weather has hit. Those summer weeds are more competitive than the turf."

Of course, weather isn't the only factor. Products and practice play a role in weed

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COVER STORY

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control, too.

“There are some subtle differences in some of the preemergent products,” Fausey says. “And a split application over a single application — it’s a philosophy. Sometimes it works for people and sometimes they just don’t take the time to go back to the same landscape to make two applications. It’s a better way to get more out of the same amount of product.”

With strong outbreaks of crabgrass and sedges there are a lot of spot treatments going on.

“In a normal year they might have to go to a client’s property and spot treat here and there or some years not too much at all,” Miller says. “This year they’re finding they’re having to go after it full tilt because they’ve got so many weeds pushing through.”



Crabgrass is one of the tougher challenges this year (left). Overly edged curbs and sidewalks help weeds invade more easily.

Challenges

Weather is not the only concern for contractors.

“There are growing restrictions and regulations in different counties and states (primarily along the East Coast),” says Patrick Bell, product manager, US Turf and Ornamental with Dow AgroSciences. “Lawn care professionals are facing a lot more regulations.”

Increased regulation might be the

natural order for politicians, but it creates huge problems for contractors when those laws are created with few facts.

“Very little of the legislation that is introduced is based on hard science at all,” says Jim Campanella, president of Lawn Dawg, Nashua, NH. “It’s emotion; it’s symbolism over substance. It’s an emotional subject for some people, but you can’t legislate on emotion.”

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That's very dangerous."

Campanella, a former president of the Professional Landcare Network (PLANET) has spent a great deal of time at committee meetings and hearings, meeting with representatives and battling that very issue.

"What was frightening for me when I got up there and started dealing with this was that I was the only person from the lawn care industry," he says. Many peers attended the committee hearings in January, but the real work, Campanella says, takes place in spring and summer when most of the owners are out working.

"We don't have the ability to defend ourselves," he says. "Fortunately I was in a position where I could, and did. RISE (Responsible Industry for a Sound Environment) was helpful as were some local pest control companies, and we were able to ward off that legislation."

Trends

Weather, not in the seasonal sense, but from a climate change point of view, seems to be slowly influencing the industry as well.

Part of the challenge has been the change in weather during the past decade. Whether it's global warming or simply a temporary anomaly is a topic others can debate.

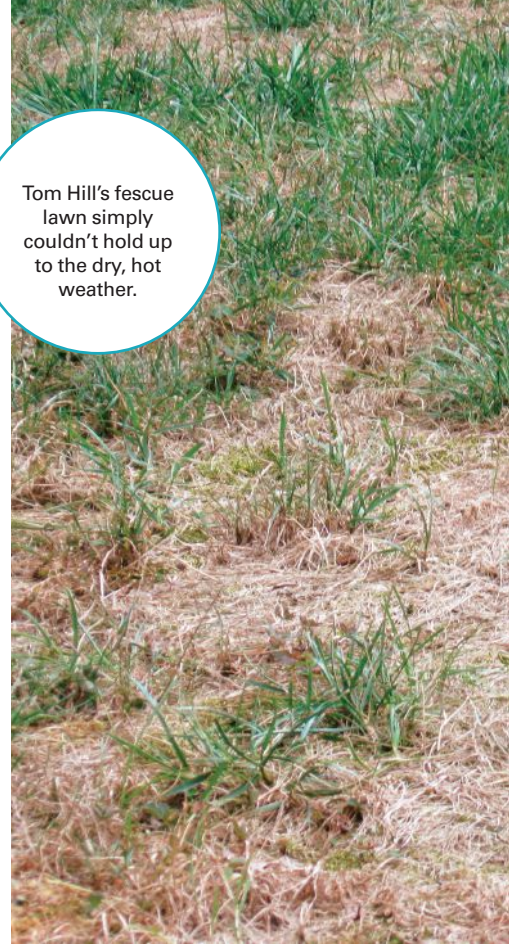
Knopsnyder knows there's been a change. For the past 10 years the temperature has reached the high 80s in April.

"It didn't used to be like that," Knopsnyder says. "Because of that we've had to change our process to make sure we're putting down the right products along with seeding the lawns with the best heat stress (tolerant) turfgrass."

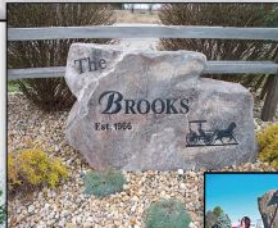
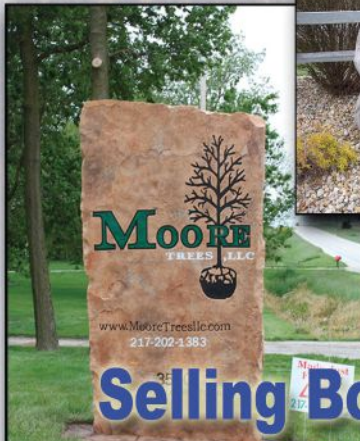
Warm season grasses are more drought tolerant and require less water than cool season alternatives.

Even guys with direct access to lawn

Tom Hill's fescue lawn simply couldn't hold up to the dry, hot weather.



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That's a sentiment shared by many. "Lawn care and landscape is what we consider the bright spot," says Bryan Gooch, marketing manager for Agrium Advanced Technologies. "The golf economy is still (challenged). The horticulture, nurseries and green houses, they're not where they should be because commercial and residential real

estate development is not back where it needs to be.

"We feel like we're growing in lawn-care," Gooch says.

It's one area the company will continue to invest in, he says.

"If consumer spending is down, people aren't traveling as much," Gooch says. "There's a belief that people



care products can have problems.

Tom Hill, communications manager — Specialty Products for BASF, isn't immune from the challenges of cool season turf in a market seemingly better suited for warm season grass.

"I went from fescue to zoysia in the last 12 months for that very reason," Hill says. "Because it was so hot the fescue was burning up. No matter how much water I was able to put on — even though I had irrigation — I had spots that were burning up. I decided to save money and put in turf that was going to be easier to manage during these hot periods of time in the transition zone."

The bright spot

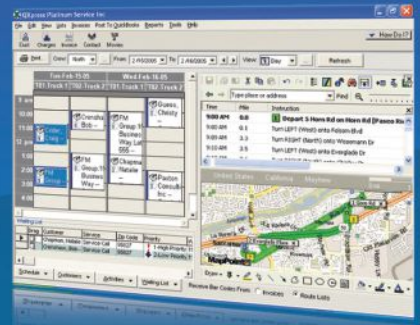
So, what does this all mean for lawn care professionals? For one they've been busy this summer and many are cashing in.

"What I have seen is an increase in activity — sales activity," Campanella says. "People are buying lawn care this year. I'm seeing that not only in my own organization, but among my peers I'm hearing the same thing. Everybody seems to be up a little bit after having some flat years."



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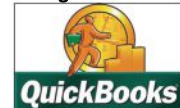
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IS RESISTANCE AN ISSUE?

While there are numerous reports of weed resistance cropping up in agriculture and some in the golf market, it looks like the turf and ornamental (T&O) segment is safe...for now.

"There shouldn't be any glyphosate resistance to speak of in the T&O business," says Russ Mitchell, director of marketing and southern regional sales manager for Quali-Pro. "It's not like ag. The problem with ag is everything is about the absolute cheapest everything. And they tend to use really low rates of glyphosate. They're out there spraying at this

glyphosate resistance stuff at a pint to a quart of glyphosate per acre."

That doesn't mean there's not some concern.

"We do have weed resistance, for sure, but it's more with pre-emergence and post-emergence where people have used the same family of chemistry over and over and over," Mitchell says. "Just like fungicides, if you don't rotate, you're guaranteed to have resistance."

There are many products that are good at killing poa and rye grass out of bermuda, Mitchell says. "The problem is, if you use them enough years you get to all

of a sudden you can't kill the poa. You've got to rotate to other chemistries.

"People need to look at herbicides like they do fungicides," he continues. "They know they have to rotate classes and families of chemistry. People have not paid that much attention because it's not that big a deal in herbicides."

Bobby Walls, Manager of Product Development for Professional Solutions Group on the T&O side for FMC doesn't believe resistance is a concern either.

"You hear people every now and then say, 'I've used product X and I'm now not getting control of a certain weed.'" Walls says. "I'm not sure they're always resistant issues. There could be

some other things there."

But like Mitchell, Walls encourages lawn care professionals to rotate their products.

"They need to be aware of their use of herbicides," he says. "Anytime we continually use one mode of action on the same weed, down the road potentially that's how resistance can be developed. First we identify the weed properly so we know what we're targeting to control. Then we use the proper herbicide that will control that weed and then we use it according to the label rate to make sure we get the control. We don't under dose it; we don't overdose it. That will help us avoid having problems in the future."

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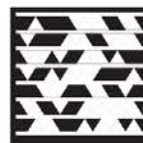


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want their homes at least to be nice. If people are spending more time at home, they're spending more time in their yards. That translates over to the professional market."

Campanella has seen the same thing at Lawn Dawg.

"It's still doom and gloom on all the radio and TV (programs)," Campanella says. "It seems people are starting to free up the cash a little bit for services like ours that aren't really a necessity.

"Talking to customers, the response I get is, 'the lawn's going to grow, and if it's not fed, it's going to die. If I do it myself, it will cost about the same as having you do it. If I'm going to put in a patio, a deck, a new brick walkway, a new landscape bed, now you're into thousands of dollars. That's what we'll cut back on, but having the lawn fertilized. It just has to be done. Somebody has to do it.'"

And that seems to be showing up in his numbers. From 2009 to 2010 Lawn Dawg's revenue was up about 12%; this year Campanella expects a 20% bump.

"That was our plan of attack to grow the business. The original plan was (to grow) 17-18%," Campanella says. "It's a little bit better than what we expected, but we were gunning for some growth this year anyway. It was really based on last year's positive trend. The previous year we were flat."

VERY LITTLE **LEGISLATION** THAT IS INTRODUCED IS **BASED ON HARD SCIENCE** AT ALL.

— JIM CAMPANELLA, PRESIDENT



Flat might be the new reality for some markets, but lawn care isn't one of them.

"The bright spot that we're hearing, the optimism is very high right now," Bell says. "The assumption is the worst is behind us in our market. The expectation is that things will get better." **LM**

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