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Conservation-minded landscapers are turning to rainwater harvesting and graywater systems to recycle water.

BY BETH GERACI

LM MARKET MATCH We've made your life a little easier by supplying icons that direct you to stories targeting your core business.

B – Business, **D/B** – Design/Build, **I** – Irrigation, **LC** – Lawn Care, **M** – Maintenance



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Art Director Carrie Parkhill Wallace worked with this water droplet image from iStock International Inc.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

MARISA PALMIERI EDITOR

Contact Marisa at 216/706-3764 or via email at mpalmieri@northcoastmedia.net.

Boomerang boom

Last month when I started as editor of *Landscape Management* I traded notes with many people I'd met during my first time around in the landscape market. (Two years ago, after reporting on the Green Industry for four years, I switched markets to work as editor of *Paperboard Packaging*. Yes, there is a trade magazine for everything.)

One of the people I reconnected with was Chuck Carr. I knew him five years ago as owner and operator of Carr Landscape Management, a company he founded after leaving ValleyCrest in 2000. I was surprised to see he's now working in business development for ValleyCrest Landscape Maintenance in the Conejo and Simi Valley area of California.

Carr is what HR experts refer to as a boomerang employee. These days many firms are looking to recruit these comeback kids, the *Wall Street Journal* and other news outlets report, dubbing them "alumni" and creating online networking groups to keep them connected.

Why did Carr go back? "I stayed on good terms with them, didn't burn any bridges, and when I decided I wanted something other than

what I could get from running my own business, they were the natural choice," he says.

It was smart of him to stay friendly with his former employer — and just as savvy for ValleyCrest to be willing to welcome him back.

Employees leave businesses for many reasons — more money, better flexibility, a perceived lack of opportunity for advancement. Some, like Carr, may be happy with the organization but leave to try something new. Many business owners or managers wouldn't consider taking back former employees, but there are a few good reasons to resist this instinct.

No. 1, there are savings in recruitment and training; some recruiters estimate the cost to hire a boomerang employee is one-third to two-thirds the cost of hiring a "virgin" worker. Another reason is the skills, experience and ideas the person will have picked up that could enrich your organization. Not to mention the potential morale boost that could come from the boomeranger sharing with others that the grass isn't always greener on the other side.

If you're someone who understands these benefits, experts say one of the most powerful things you can do to foster boomerang opportunities is to listen closely to top-performing workers' reasons for leaving (maybe it's something that could change over time, like a family situation) and let them know you'd be willing to welcome them back someday. Then, stay in touch.

I guess you could call me a boomerang member of the landscape industry. When the opportunity to work again in the landscape market came about, I was thrilled to join the *LM* team. I missed the candor, passion and willingness to share among the professionals who call the Green Industry their home, and I look forward to covering topics that will help you do your job more efficiently and improve profitability.

I'm happy to be back and I can confirm the grass *is* greener here.

Some recruiters estimate **the cost to hire a boomerang employee** is one-third to two-thirds the cost of hiring a "virgin" worker.



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PROGRESS



Business in a box

Franchises have advanced, but franchisors aren't too eager to mess with what's long been a winning formula.

With the advent of technology, increased emphasis on branding and better equipment, franchising has changed a lot over the years. But even with all its advances, its core has not budged.

"The concept of franchising is the same now as it always has been — proven systems that allow someone to start a business and be successful in a very short period of time," says Ron Madera, president of The Grounds Guys, Waco, TX.

Franchisors and franchisees are "strategic partners," Madera says. "We share a brand, and we have to build the brand together."

Like Madera, Nutri-Lawn Chief Operating Officer Jordan Lavin says his company seeks franchisees who share Nutri-Lawn's attitude.

"They have to fit the culture of the company so they can take advantage of our system properly," Lavin says.

According to U.S. Lawns Vice President Paul Wolbert, property managers in the franchise business used to manage properties within 60 miles of them, and "now they're managing buildings anywhere from coast to coast. That lends itself to the franchise model, because you're able to meet customers' expectations no matter where

they are. A Big Mac tastes the same in Cleveland as it does in Orlando." The level of service is the same from city to city as well, Wolbert says, because the franchisor ensures it.

Technological advances

The development of new technologies has changed franchising most dramatically, Madera says, including GPS, iPhones and text messaging. "We can move at light speed now," he says. "We can do much more business faster and better now."

The Grounds Guys uses something called Geo Fencing, in which a GPS system is under the hood of the vehicle, so remotely the franchisor can evaluate his trucks, see how fast trucks are moving and assess whether the engine is running or not.

Technology has played a critical role at Nutri-Lawn over the past five or six years, Lavin says, helping in benchmarking and best practices.

"Now we can actually share best practices from data, and it's hard data," he says. "Here are the facts on what location X is producing and how they're doing it.' It really changes the game for us."

Thanks to technology, Wolbert says, it's now easier to meet the needs of the customer than ever before — and to do it quickly.

Have a clear message

The core concepts of any franchise are the same, whether it be a lawn care franchise or restaurant franchise, says

NaturaLawn President Phillip Catron. "But you have inherent differences based on company culture and internal corporate philosophy," he says.

Having a clear message and distinct identity is vital to a franchise's success, Catron says. "The focus is very pin-pointed," he explains. "In any business you can integrate many things into it, but the less focused you become on your core business, the more likely it is that your brand will be diluted and fail."

Treating your people right

Franchise execs know their companies are only as good as their people. So rewarding franchisees and staff is integral to growth. Catron's been known to shut down NaturaLawn mid-week to host a pizza party or have film screenings.

"We have fun, we really do — everybody, the franchisees too," Catron says. "We try to take care of the family."

Nutri-Lawn too, has a close relationship with its franchisees, hosting a one-week trip with them every year.

Catron, Madera and Lavin all stress that an import success factor in this business is your people. "A true entrepreneur will not make a good franchisee," Catron says. "They want to do everything their own way. You want someone who understands the

benefits of a business system. You follow the system, I can grow your business with you, but if you start deviating, I don't know. I haven't checked that one out yet."

"Everybody's in business for different reasons," Lavin adds. "And unless you know why they're in business it's very difficult to understand them."

NaturaLawn staff trains some of its franchisees in the field.



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— **Todd McCabe**, Landscape Unlimited



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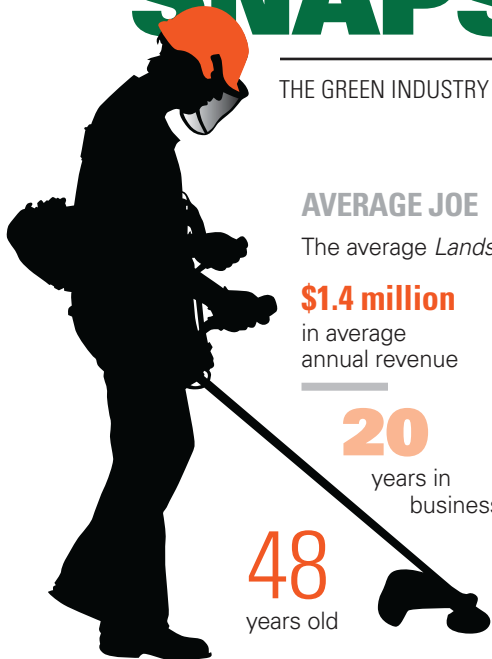
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INDUSTRY SNAPSHOT

THE GREEN INDUSTRY AT A GLANCE



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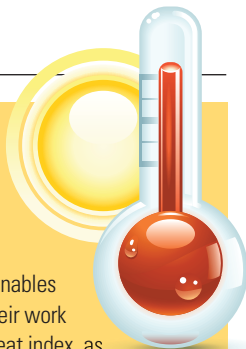
Owens { **19** trucks
13 mowers
6 trailers

48
years old

Source: *Accelera Research*

BEAT THE HEAT

Heat stroke has killed – on average – more than 30 workers annually since 2003, according to the U.S. Department of Labor's Occupational Safety and Health Administration. As part of OSHA's outreach campaign it has released a free mobile device app that enables workers and supervisors to monitor the heat index at their work sites. It displays a risk level for workers based on the heat index, as well as reminders about protective measures that should be taken at that risk level. Available for Android-based platforms and the iPhone, the app can be downloaded in both English and Spanish at <http://s.dol.gov/RI>.



GOING OUT

Outdoor living spaces have become the new 'great room' in terms of must-have items for homeowners, according to the American Institute of Architects (AIA) Home Design Trends Survey for the first quarter of 2012.

"As people are more interested in adapting their property to their long-term needs rather than readying it for sale, we are seeing more attention paid to landscaping and features that have some return on investment like rainwater catchment systems," says AIA Chief Economist Kermit Baker.



Outdoor Living & Landscaping Trends

% of respondents that reported increases

RESIDENTIAL ELEMENTS	2012	2011
Low-irrigation landscaping	26%	63%
Outdoor living space	64%	60%
Blended indoor/outdoor living	53%	46%
Rainwater catchment	48%	49%
Exterior/security lighting	33%	30%

Source: *AIA Home Design Trends Survey*

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By Corbett Schnatmeyer | FMC

Today's market offers a wide range of pesticide options with various Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) requirements. Fortunately, the Environmental Protection Agency requires that all pesticide product labels contain instructions regarding the necessary PPE to be worn when handling, preparing, mixing and applying pesticides. While pesticides can come into contact with the human body several different ways, most exposure comes via contact with the skin. Wearing the proper PPE for each and every interaction with pesticides not only helps to guarantee individual safety and protection, it's required by law. At the end of each workday, ensure continued protection by discarding disposable gloves and washing PPE while verifying that it is in good condition.



Corbett Schnatmeyer is the Market Specialist for FMC Professional Solutions in Arizona, California, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Washington, Wyoming and Utah.

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DROP BY

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With the heat wave that engulfed the country this month, no doubt many Americans have taken the liberty of letting the sprinkler run a tad bit longer than usual.

We hope people have been paying as much attention to the calendar as they have to the weather, because July also happens to be Smart Irrigation Month.

In honor of the occasion, *Landscape Management* takes a look at the recycled water movement that's emerging in the U.S., especially in the dry West.

WATER-MINDED PEOPLE

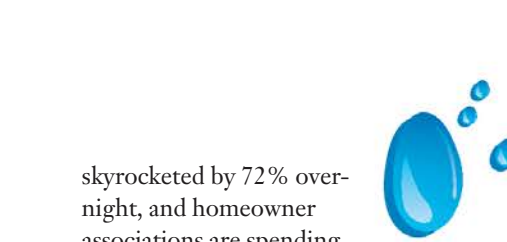
"Sustainability seems to be such a strong buzz word today," says Richard Restuccia, director for water management solutions at ValleyCrest Cos. "I'm talking to a lot of commercial building owners and managers. I try to show them the benefits of what's happening in this global movement right now toward sustainability."

That movement, Restuccia says, is gaining momentum. "There's starting to be some water awareness that we haven't seen before," Restuccia says.

He points to the water blog he started in June 2011. The day he launched it, it received 185 hits. One year later, Restuccia's receiving about 5,000 hits a day. That's no coincidence.


Higher water prices in the U.S. largely are responsible for increased water awareness, Restuccia says. In Arizona alone, he adds, water prices

Conservation-minded landscape professionals are turning to **rainwater harvesting** and **graywater systems** to recycle water. BY **BETH GERACI** SENIOR EDITOR



skyrocketed by 72% overnight, and homeowner associations are spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on water annually.

Water awareness is building among Heads Up Landscaping's clientele as a result of higher prices, too, says Andrew Key, president of the Albuquerque, NM, company. Key's customers more frequently are inquiring about rainwater catchment on their properties, and it's a service he is proud to provide.



"Water is expensive and getting more expensive," he says. "In the Southwest and more arid regions, the cost of water is probably not going to go down."

On top of that, he says, many water utility companies have aging infrastructure that they'll have to replace soon, which will drive rates up even more.

DEMAND CLIMBING FOR RAINWATER HARVESTING

Jud Griggs, director of garden development for Dallas-based Lambert Landscape Co., which installs and maintains rainwater harvesting systems on residential properties, says demand for rainwater harvesting in the region is high thanks to a pervasive water consciousness among residents and businesses in the area.

"They're trying to preserve natural resources and not overburden what will become more and more a limited water supply," he says.

Consider that Texas is among the fastest-growing states in the country "and that's going to put a real dent in our water supply," he says. "It's inevitable that the growth will outstrip our water resources."

Consequently, more clients are asking

about Lambert Landscape Co.'s rainwater harvesting services, whether they are small rain barrels or 200-gallon cisterns.

"The long and short of it is that there may come a day in the Dallas area where there is no water to water your landscapes, but it's always going to rain," says Griggs' counterpart, Lambert Director of Garden Services Jodi Joseph. "If you have that rainwater harvesting tank and you've made that investment, it's going to rain eventually, and it will fill up."

The interest in water conservation in the Southwest can be seen in the number of rainwater catchment systems that have popped up in the region during the last six years, Key says.

He attributes that growth to commercial construction businesses striving to achieve LEED certification. "That really opened the door for rainwater catchment systems," he says. "Almost

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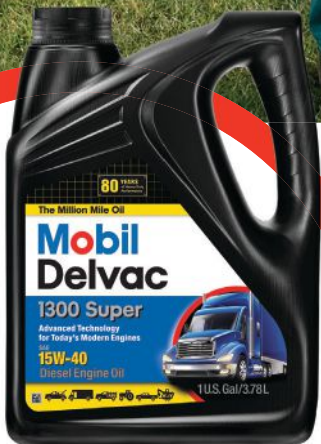
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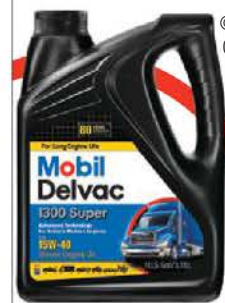
- **Coolant** – Drain your coolant and have your radiator inspected at least once a year.
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Heads Up Landscaping workers construct two rainwater harvesting tanks in the courtyard of the Silver Gardens Apartments in Albuquerque, NM (left). The finished photo (above) shows the same area after landscaping, from a slightly different perspective.

continued from page 9

any project that is going for LEED certification is going to consider installing a rainwater catchment system.”

GRAYWATER DEFINED

Not as widely used, but gaining momentum, is the emerging graywater movement. Graywater is wastewater from dishwashers, laundry machines, sinks and bathtubs, which is then flowed through pipes to the exterior landscape, where it irrigates plants, shrubs, grass and trees.

“I really believe it’s the future,” says Leigh Jerrard, principal of Greywater Corps, a Los Angeles-based company

specializing in installing residential graywater systems.

Washing machine water has ample nitrogen and phosphates. And though both create harmful algae blooms in water, they’re beneficial to plants on land, Jerrard says. Graywater, therefore, he adds, “keeps chemicals out of liquid ecosystems and keeps them in the earth, which is a lot better.”

Jeremiah Kidd is the director of San Isidro Permaculture in Santa Fe, NM, specializing in designing and creating sustainable landscapes. The company focuses on services such as edible gardens, rainwater catchment systems and graywater reuse systems.

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COVER STORY

SULFENTRAZONE: Protection that goes deep.

continued from page 11

“Graywater has a lot of nutrients for plants,” Kidd says. “It’s almost like a fertilizer for a lot of plants.” Many of Kidd’s clients reuse graywater and harvest rainwater in tandem together. “It’s a good balance,” he says. “It might not rain here for a month, but you’re always going to be producing graywater in your home. Graywater is the perennial resource, and the rainwater might be just in certain seasons.”

But use of graywater for irrigation often is controversial; the dirt and particles in it can grow and multiply bacteria if graywater is stored. That’s why it needs to be reused right away.

“If you use graywater as you produce it and drain it out to the trees, then the trees and plants use those

nutrients and actually clean the water,” Kidd explains. “It’s very safe. You just don’t want to store it.”

Graywater reuse in irrigation was green lighted in New Mexico and California within the last few years. Kidd would like it to become standard operating procedure for new construction and hopes it will become a normal building practice in the next 15 or 20 years.

“More places are going to be catching on,” he says. “I would encourage people to explore it more. It can be a very safe and effective method for irrigating property.”

For residential properties, perhaps. But ValleyCrest’s Restuccia makes an important point. “You’d be hard pressed to find a commercial landscape contrac-

continued on page 15



Leigh Jerrard, principal of Greywater Corps, points to one residential graywater system his company installed.



Greywater Corps occasionally leads workshops on how to install graywater systems, such as the lesson shown below.



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Ewing Irrigation Sign up for Ewing's e-mail list to receive different weekly specials throughout the month. The company is offering deals on smart controllers, efficient nozzles, rain sensors and more. Sign up at www.ewingirrigation.com.

Rain Bird The company is hosting a sweepstakes on its Facebook page throughout July, and different fans each week will win smart controllers. To be eligible to win, "like" Rain Bird on Facebook and complete the contact form, www.facebook.com/RainBirdCorp.

COVER STORY

continued from page 13

tor who's actively reusing graywater," he says. "From a commercial standpoint, I have to say I don't see very much of it at all. I really haven't seen any of it. I think it's still in the process of being figured out. It can be very costly."

Kidd says in his experience, the average price for installing a graywater reuse system on a home ranges from \$2,000 for a retrofit to \$5,000 for new construction.

Smart controllers are a much more viable alternative to graywater reuse, Restuccia says, because they're more affordable and have an average return on investment of two years.

A SPECIAL PROJECT

Roscoe Klausing is doing his part for the water conservation movement. The president of Klausing Group, a landscaping company in Lexington,

KY, recently received a \$320,000 grant from the City of Lexington to work on a water-efficient parking lot project at Klausing Group's headquarters.

The grant came to be after the Environmental Protection Agency sued the City of Lexington to clean up polluted streams. The \$320,000 grant awarded Klausing Group was among the highest the city awarded.

The project, set to begin next month and end in October, centers on the restoration of two Klausing employee parking lots using permeable pavers. Among the project's features: stormwater storage beneath the parking lots, rainwater harvesting and an oil and water separator.

The grant's purpose was twofold: Clean the water before it leaves the property and reduce the amount of stormwater runoff produced on the property.

"Because of the way these permeable pavers are built, you're actually getting better quality stormwater that's

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water to their site, so right now we buy treated water and use it in our work.”

Klausing says as few as 25% of commercial properties and 5% of residential properties in Lexington have any type of irrigation system. “It’s not a big deal around here,” he says. “I don’t know why it’s not. We need it.”

VALUE MEASURED NOT JUST BY THE DOLLAR

Hey! Tanks LA installs and plans rainwater harvesting and graywater systems on

residential and commercial properties in Los Angeles. Owner Scott Mathers stresses that before investing in rainwater harvesting or graywater systems, clients must assess their needs.

“Some people do it to save money, others just want to feel good about it,” Mathers observes. “So whatever their goals are, graywater might be better for them, or rainwater might be better for them, or they might benefit from both.”

It depends on how clients intend to

use the water and how large their properties are, Mathers explains. “Don’t spend the money on a rainwater tank unless you have efficient landscaping,” he warns. “You can’t have a huge lawn and have a rain tank. It doesn’t make sense. Forget it.”

Rainwater harvesting cisterns are more expensive to install and maintain than graywater systems, but they produce better quality water, Mathers adds.

“It’s not a cheap investment,” says Joseph. “Sometimes you don’t see the investment returned for many years to come.” I think it’s a commendable effort that these individuals are making.”

Key agrees rainwater catchment isn’t cheap. Small commercial rainwater catchment systems can run from \$20,000 to \$30,000, while large commercial systems usually cost between \$100,000 and \$150,000.

The bottom line, says Mathers, is that to be cost effective, both graywater and rainwater systems need to be looked at based on use.

“There’s not a one-size fits all,” he says. “It’s what’s the design, what’s the demand, is it a business or is it a family? You have to look at the supply and demand.” **LM**

cleaner,” Klausing says.

Klausing Group will also install a 12,000-gallon rainwater harvesting tank on its property. About 13 feet around and 13 feet tall, the tank will have a large pump system. The company will pump the water out of the cistern into water tanks, load them onto its trucks and haul them to one of its many jobsites that don’t have irrigation systems.

“In our market, most properties are not irrigated,” Klausing explains. “Customers have to pay people to transport

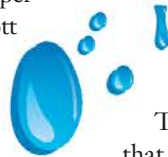


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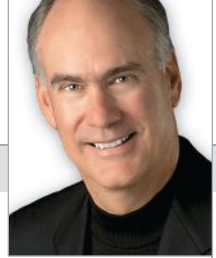
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Time for the 90-day scrub

The absolute best management planning document on the planet is the rolling budget. Managed properly, there is no better management tool ever invented. *Ever.*

In my January column (goo.gl/gSqQ1), we spoke of the benefits of creating a budget for your year — documenting that budget, spreading it by month and focusing your management team’s energies to achieving those anticipated results. You did that, right?

Now we are a bit past mid-year, and it is time to update our anticipated results for 2012 with the latest, greatest information as to how things are progressing — and to re-evaluate the anticipated results for the remainder of the year.

At the beginning of the year, we built a budget, spread it by month and laid out all of our benchmarks with which to evaluate our progress as we move through the year. (To see or download the following example, see the Excel chart at goo.gl/FOLj8.) Looking at the report, the first two columns on the left are the original budget. These were the columns we divided up and spread monthly when we initiated the budget at the beginning of the year. These columns will never change.

The next two columns are the sum of the months January through December. These columns will change as you change the numbers in the monthly spread to the right.

Starting with January, we need to enter in the actual data for each month that is completed. Yep, simply write over the budgeted information with the actual information.

The rolling budget columns will change to reflect *actual* activity so that you can compare the rolling budget activity to the original budget. Highlight the variances and discuss them with your team.

The next level

You have updated the rolling budget with actual data. Now, there is one more thing you can do. This is what I call the 90-day scrub. Look ahead to the

next 90 days and change the budgeted values to better represent how you are performing.

Why would you want to do this? Principally because wherever you are in your year’s activity, you are that much smarter than you were when the budget was created however many months ago. Put those smarts down on paper.

It is not so hard, either. For example, if we just closed June, we are looking at our updated rolling budget numbers and it is the second week of July. If we don’t know how July is performing when we are halfway through the month, something’s wrong. So, update July’s numbers. We also know what the month of August should be, as we already have August’s schedule in place. The same can probably be said for September as well.

If you can see variances in revenues or any of the cost categories, change them. Simply write over the budgeted values. *Horrors! We are writing over the budget? Changing the goals midstream?* You bet we are. If we are changing the numbers, the monthly budgets are outdated anyway. And remember, we have the first two columns to remind us what we were thinking when we created the original values.

We want this document to tell us, with the most accurate, up-to-date information, where we are going to end up the year.

Imagine if you could get your management team’s collective heads around goal setting at this level. Talk about owning the numbers! Talk about accountability! Talk about power!

Wherever you are in your year’s activity,
you are that much smarter than
you were when the budget was created.

When errors occur

YOU CAN'T ALWAYS PREVENT MISTAKES, BUT YOU CAN LESSEN THE BLOW OF PAYING FOR THEM.

A LANDSCAPE DESIGNER/CONTRACTOR DESIGNS a plan that doesn't take into consideration the septic tank field lying just beyond the property — and then selects trees with invasive roots. It's a liability situation that doesn't happen overnight. Several years down the road, when those roots grow into the field, damaging the septic system and wreaking havoc, the designer is still liable. And it wouldn't be covered by a general liability insurance policy.

That's just one of many possible scenarios where errors and omissions (E&O) insurance is so important, says John Hodapp, CPCU, Hortica Insurance & Employee Benefits.

"Errors and omissions insurance is a form of business liability coverage for those who provide professional services for a fee," says Hodapp. "It's different from general liability. Professional liability errors, such as design errors like the septic tank example, require E&O coverage."

Hodapp says that E&O insurance is a specialized form of coverage that protects the business owners against losses that would not be covered by traditional general liability insurance. These include claims for negligent acts, errors or omissions.

"If someone was injured during the installation of those trees, that would be covered by general liability," Hodapp explains. "But the fact that the design was faulty and the trees grew into the septic system is an error with the design, and that's where E&O comes into play. If the contractor isn't covered, the cost is going to have to come out of their pocket."

Up until recently, many landscape contractors and designers have been more concerned about general liability coverage, which is certainly also important. But Hodapp says that businesses

and property owners are becoming savvier about insurance types — and may now require E&O as well.

"If you're working for a school district or a general contractor, general liability is almost always universally required," says Hodapp. "But in the past, E&O coverage hadn't always been required, and landscapers either didn't know about it or chose not to pay for it. Nowadays, more and more businesses are starting to make it a requirement, and we're seeing an increase in coverage. General contractors or property owners are becoming better educated, and they want their landscape contractor to have full coverage."

Even if it's not required for a job, Hodapp says, you may still have the risk of exposure.

"Sometimes it takes that requirement to push contractors to buy the extra insurance," he says, "but the truth is that you have the risk of claims no matter what."

It's important for landscape contractors and designers to remember that the exposure is almost always much bigger than the size of the job, says Hodapp.

"Don't think about the size of the job. Think about the assets you want to protect," he adds. "You could lose your assets on one small job if things go poorly. For example, you may have made \$2,000 for the design and installation of those trees. But it may cost over \$20,000 to repair the septic tank system that was damaged. Regardless of the job size, you need to be fully covered."

Hodapp says that if injuries were involved with a faulty design, those costs could skyrocket even higher. When E&O coverage can be affordable, he says, he doesn't know why anyone would chance it.

"For example, if people are injured by a patio or retaining wall that had a faulty design, those injuries could cost far, far more than the job was ever worth," he says. "It's simply not worth the risk."

Casey Payton is a freelance writer who has covered the landscape industry for seven years.



ERRORS AND OMISSIONS, AT A GLANCE

► **What?** E&O is professional liability insurance that provides coverage for any errors or omissions that may occur from a professional service you provided.

► **Why?** Because mistakes happen. Whether you're an experienced landscape contractor or just starting out, human error is always a factor.

► **When?** Secure E&O coverage before the risk has any possibility of happening. Too many contractors wait until they've had to pay out of pocket for an error that wasn't covered by general liability before deciding to buy E&O for future work.

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“You don’t want to offer too many services and turn into this big Chinese menu, you know?” says **Matt Noon**, 32, president of Boston-based Noon Turf Care. “Really, the core of our business is lawn, tree and shrub care.”

Noon, a Boston College graduate, runs Noon Turf Care with his brother, Chris, 35. He talks about how he and Chris spun a burgeoning summer job into a \$5 million business and switched their focus from landscaping to lawn care.

How did your business get started? I started the business when I was 17, my senior year in high school, for just some side income. I started it just as a maintenance service. It grew pretty fast, and by my third year in college I was doing about \$400,000 a year in revenue. It was big. I contacted my brother and asked him to take it over while I finished school. Little did I know we’d turn this into a career.

How has your business evolved? In ’02, when I graduated from college, we did mowing, blowing, all the maintenance services. In ’05 we added the fertilizing segment, and in 2008 we sold the landscaping side of the business. That was a tough decision, because we were essentially starting over. We went from \$2.5 million in revenue to \$500,000. And at that point we really started to grow.

What’s been challenging? When you’re growing that fast you’ve got to be careful with a lot of things. But the biggest thing is quality and being able to quickly standardize things within your business to attract experienced employees. A lot of things we weren’t used to doing. We really had to get focused and start treating it more like a business.

How do you attract quality employees? We need good people, and we pay more for them. I try to recruit people. There’s usually three interviews, and we have a personality profile. It’s important, because at the end of the day, if you don’t have the right people it’s going to become a generic product. You need to have that personal touch.

What’s an important lesson you’ve learned? The thing I wish someone had told me years ago is, find a mentor that you want to emulate. That’s been a huge part of our success. We did not have a mentor until we got into the lawn care business. Paul Wagner of Fit Turf in Denver really gave us a lot of that industry benchmarking. I read about him years ago and I just reached out to him. I called him. A lot of people never make that call.

Where is Noon Turf Care’s focus today? We’re focusing now on fertilization and trees and shrubs. That segment of our business is growing. And insect control is a big service for us right now. Applying more of a business approach to our company has given us a

AT A GLANCE

NAME: Matt Noon

COMPANY: Noon Turf Care

YEAR INCORPORATED: 2002

INDUSTRY INVOLVEMENT: Massachusetts Association of Lawn Care Professionals (MALCP)

BUSINESS PHILOSOPHY: Think of yourself as a customer.

FAMILY: I’m a bachelor. I like spending time with my nieces, whom I spoil.

DREAM VACATION: I’m living it every day. I’ve been around the world. If I want to get away, I go to Aruba.

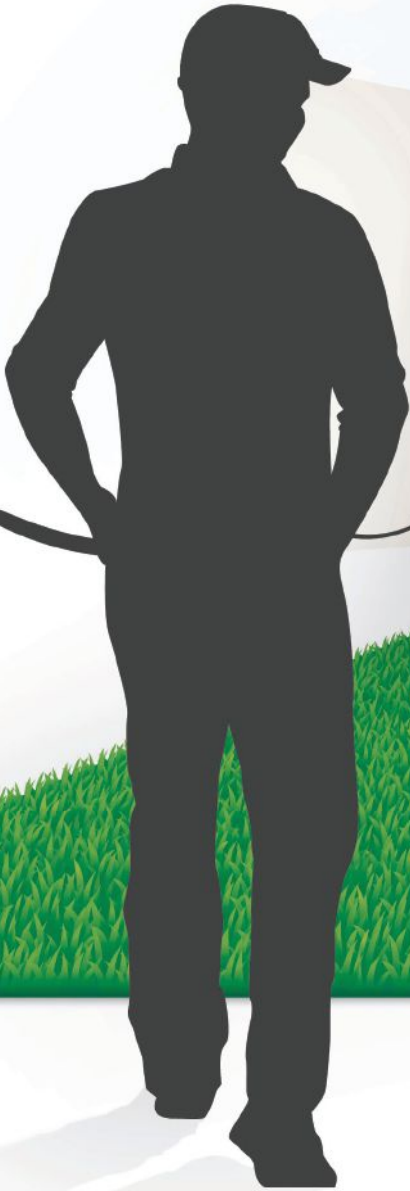
WEBSITE: www.nooonturfcare.com

clearer vision. We have goals now. And those goals don’t go away like a New Year’s resolution or something.

What does tomorrow hold? The last four years have been spent perfecting our formulas. The next three or four will be focused on expanding our markets — and always, always perfecting all the processes we have and staying focused on service.

“AT THE END OF THE DAY, IF YOU DON’T HAVE THE RIGHT PEOPLE IT’S GOING TO BECOME A GENERIC PRODUCT.”

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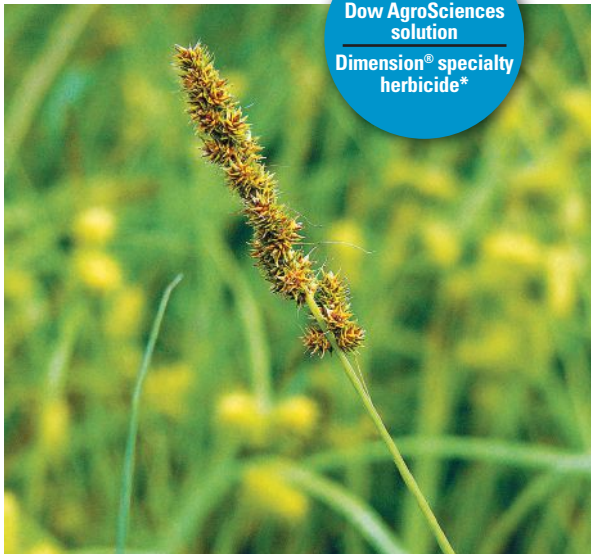


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Cenchrus incertus

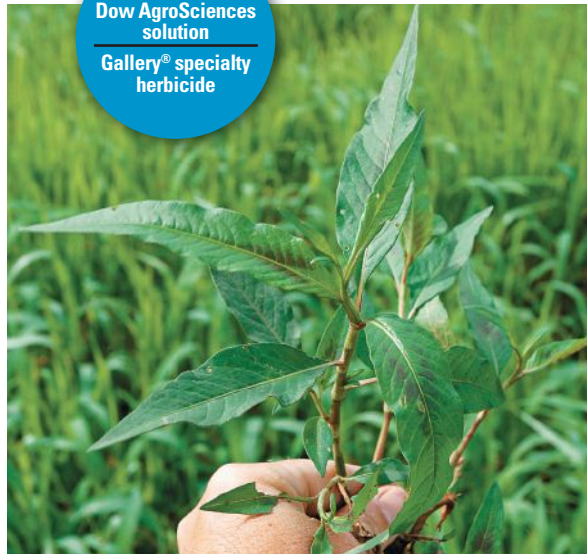
IDENTIFICATION TIPS

- ▶ This summer annual grass is commonly found in the Midwest and southeastern United States.
- ▶ Easily identified by the seedhead, which is a spike of tiny burs, it thrives in low-fertility, sandy soils.
- ▶ Sandbur forms in clumps because of a lack of rhizomes and stolons.
- ▶ Leaves are folded in the bud, and the ligule is a fringe of hairs.

CONTROL TIPS

- ▶ A pre-emergence herbicide program should be used where sandbur is a known problem. Many pre-emergence herbicides used for crabgrass or goosegrass control also will control sandbur. Check the label.
- ▶ Sequential applications, 60 days apart, of a pre-emergence graminicide will ensure early- and late-germinating control of sandbur. Be sure to get your first application down prior to crabgrass germination.

* State restrictions on the sale and use of Dimension specialty herbicide products apply.



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PENNSYLVANIA SMARTWEED

Polygonum pensylvanicum

IDENTIFICATION TIPS

- ▶ As a member of the buckwheat family, this summer annual can grow up to 4 ft. tall, with multiple branching.
- ▶ Its stems are smooth and reddish purple with swollen nodes.
- ▶ The leaves alternate and are lance-shaped with a red watermark. Bristleless sheaths wrap around the stem at the base of the petioles.
- ▶ Small, bright pink flowers form dense, spike-like clusters on the stems from July through October.

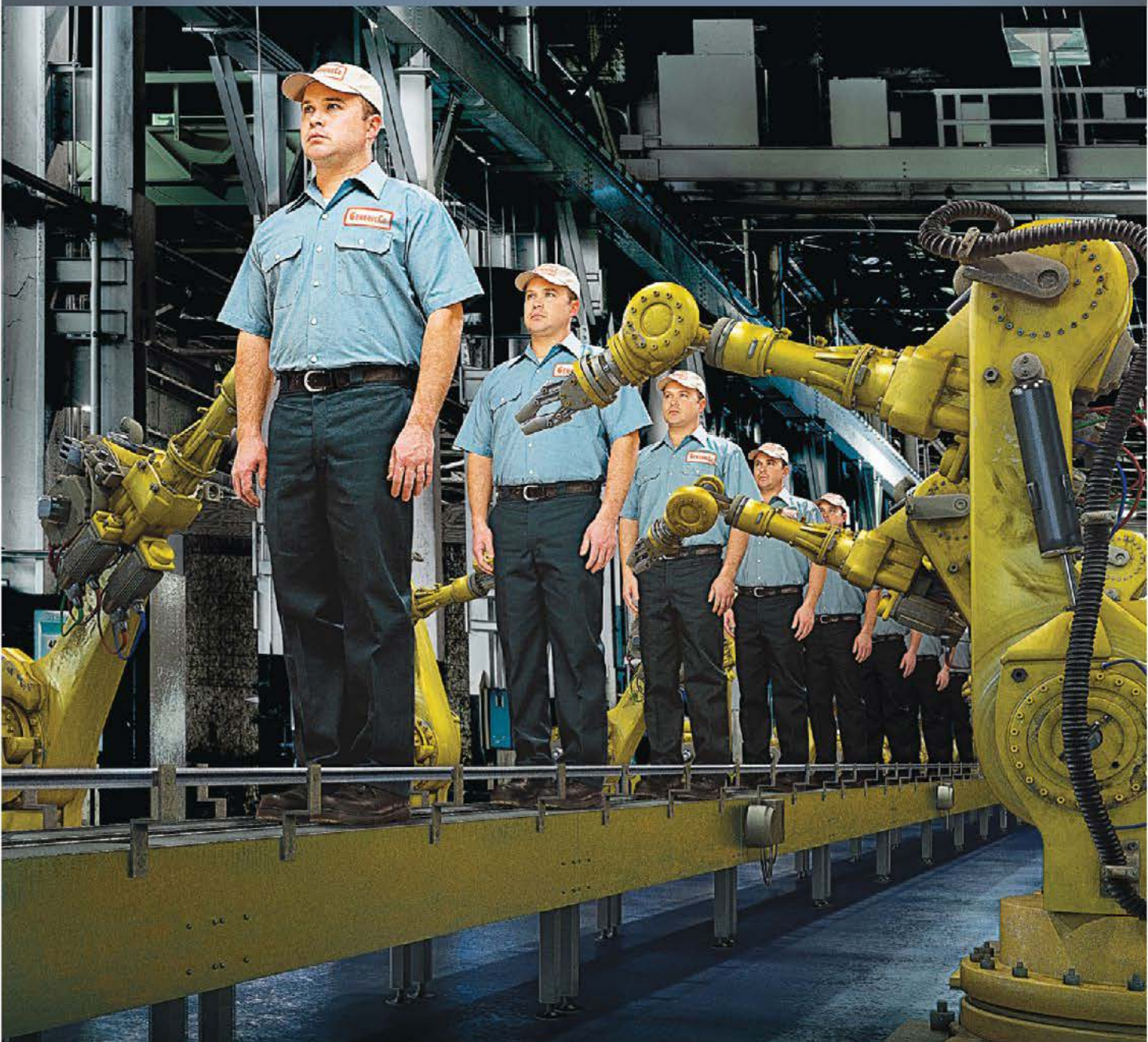
- ▶ Its seeds are encased in glossy black achenes.

CONTROL TIPS

- ▶ Smartweed prefers disturbed areas, and tends to grow in moist soil. Ensure good drainage. Correct mowing height and fertility also can help prevent smartweed establishment.
- ▶ Apply a pre-emergence herbicide in early spring, prior to germination of summer annuals.

For more information regarding these and other turf weeds — and related control technologies and tips — please visit www.DowProvesIt.com or call 800/255-3726.

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BEST PRACTICES

BRUCE WILSON

The author, of the Wilson-Oyler Group, is a 30-year industry veteran. Reach him at editor@northcoastmedia.net.

It's good if your head's in the clouds

You cannot do today's business with yesterday's tools or yesterday's thinking.

If the last few years have not convinced you that landscape maintenance services are a commodity and differentiated primarily by price, you are in the minority. If, in that same period of time, you have not reconsidered the tools you use to do business, you also are in the minority and it's time to catch up.

One way the business of our industry can reinvent itself is to embrace new technologies that are changing the way we work.

As mobile computing and Internet-based technology knock down walls, the cloud has replaced the cubicle. The dynamics of working, meeting, selling and interacting online have created new behaviors and job descriptions as well as new business models and expectations for performance and success.

The problem is there is a staggering amount of new tools, gadgets, applications, programs and downloadable must-haves available every day; trying to figure out which ones are best and how they work in unison can be overwhelming.

Do not do it yourself. Bring in the skill to make it happen. Even if you are cutting overhead, hire a professional who can tie it together and assist you and your team with identifying and integrating the right technologies to run your business and ensure they work together seamlessly.

In my consulting practice, I see some companies making up rules as they go along. They are experimenting with various applications for paperless time entry, property measurement, real-time proposals, plant ID, remote-controlled irrigation, vehicle tracking, and, in general, adopting and testing different solutions to see which ones fit.

This ad hoc effort — combined with strategies for interactive marketing and communication platforms, virtual meeting and conferencing programs, and asset management solutions — sets in motion a frustrating end-user dynamic where it often seems

as if nothing is working the way it should.

A recent study by IBM reported that over the next three years, the number of businesses that will adopt cloud technologies is expected to more than double as business leaders look to capitalize on the rapid availability of data and the growing popularity of social media. The study's co-author said the cloud "isn't just about gaining efficiencies and cost savings; it's about driving and providing lasting market advantage."

I agree. The ability to identify and leverage technology resources is becoming critical to running a business. Here are five best practices to leverage technology to drive your business value:

1. Invest: Make technology management a critical component of your operational infrastructure and planning process. Consider hiring an on-site/in-house integration specialist or other tech specialist(s) who can provide expertise, security and troubleshooting and collaborate with staff to ensure best practices are applied.

2. Learn: Become informed. What are your competitors, customers and vendors doing today to improve their operational efficiency and services? Get insight from peer groups and growth-minded organizations.

3. Train: Increase the challenge level and get employees involved in learning. Offer regular technology training as part of your commitment to professional development. Require skill in using specific technologies as a measurable performance review metric.

4. Budget: Fund technology training, upgrades and relevant support every year. The more adept your team is at understanding and adopting new technologies, and the more nimble your systems, the faster you will increase the speed and agility of doing business.

5. Integrate: Have the right technology for the right task and ensure they work together. Introduce technology into all of your business operations to gain productivity and make doing business easier.

TRIALS

by Fire

PROVING PLANTS CAN TAKE THE HEAT

BY JAMIE J. GOOCH

Senorita Rosalita cleome was selected as a Louisiana Super Plant because it can take summer's heat beautifully and is drought tolerant.

JUST LIKE THE top auto manufacturers test their cars in extreme conditions to see how much heat they can take, so too do plant breeders. If you want to know how much sun a plant can stand, you have to head South. From the dry heat of Texas to the muggy dog days of Georgia, plant trials separate the stalwarts from the wilters.

Landscapers who want to know how annuals will withstand the heat should

explore the trial sites below. If annuals can make it in the southern heat, they're more likely to perform well this summer in your clients' landscapes.

Georgia heat

The Trial Gardens at the University of Georgia has been putting cultivars to the test in Athens, GA, for 30 years. It trials plants that come from breeding companies around the world and from perennial

plant nurseries, growers and gardeners.

Each cultivar is evaluated semi-monthly for number of flowers; leaf color; uniformity of habit and flower; resistance to insects and diseases; and overall appearance. The regular evaluation is useful for tracking the plant through its lifecycle.

The data is combined into a performance rating, based on a scale of 1-5, with 5 being exceptional and 1 being nearly dead, according to the Trial

EMERALD COAST GROWERS VARIETY FOCUS: *STOKESIA LAEVIS* 'DIVINITY'

An exclusive introduction from Emerald Coast Growers, *Stokesia laevis* 'Divinity' features large flowers that open with a coy hint of yellow in the center, then mature to pure, celestial, long-lasting white. Blooms stand serenely over neat mounds of broad, rich green, strap-like leaves. 'Divinity' prefers sun to part shade and grows just 12 to 14 inches tall. It is hardy to Zones 5 to 9. 'Divinity' is available in 50-plant trays.



Gardens at UGA. The performance is graphed over time via updates after each evaluation, which is posted online. That allows landscapers to view performance in real time to see how plants perform over the growing season.

The graphs can be found at <http://goo.gl/blpl3>.

To make it easy to discover the best performers, the trial gardens name "The Best of the Bunch" for annuals, as well as the best cultivars for each color in each type of annual. They are listed as "Best of the Best" at <http://goo.gl/6C6bc>.

In addition to its useful online databases, the Trial Gardens at UGA also are open to the public.

Even the sun's bigger in Texas

The Lone Star State sets itself apart in many ways, not the least of which is by its weather. Summer droughts and extreme temperatures are the norm, which makes growing plants in Texas a challenge. Several trial gardens have taken on

the task of finding plants that can thrive in the state's heat.

The Dallas Arboretum Trial Gardens, for instance, collects weekly data on more than 3,000 entries each year. It then makes that data available via an Excel spreadsheet for download at dallasplanttrials.org. The arboretum also hosts an annual field day for growers, landscapers and breeders.

The arboretum usually gets more than 60 days of 100-degree temperatures annually. It bestows "FlameProof" awards to plants that have been proven to excel in such conditions.

The Dallas Arboretum works with Texas A&M University (TAMU) to help grow and evaluate its Texas Superstar and North Texas Winner's Circle plants. TAMU also maintains trial gardens at the Texas AgriLife Research Center at Overton, TX.

The Texas Superstar marketing program (texassuperstar.com) includes top-performing bedding plants that are well suited to the state's conditions. The North



Fireworks gomphrena is tall and works well toward the back of the border. Here, it is complemented by the spiky blue blooms of Velocity salvia and the lime green leaves of ornamental sweet potato.



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Texas Winners Circle awards showcase the trials' top performers each year at flowers.tamu.edu.

States of sunshine

The University of Florida (UF) Fort Lauderdale Research & Education Center Trial Gar-



Echinacea 'Pow Wow Wild Berry' from PanAmerican Seed was named a Plant of Distinction by The Trial Gardens at UGA. It was also a 2010 All-America Selections Flower Award winner.

den site works to provide unbiased evaluations of bedding plant cultivar performance in South Florida via monthly evaluations. The trial garden posts its data and images of each cultivar at <http://goo.gl/WeyJx>.

UF also has conducted trials in Gainesville, FL: one for the cool season from December to May and one for the warm season from April to August. However, due to budget cuts, trials have been discontinued there. You can still see 2008's "Best of Trial" winners here: <http://goo.gl/x9TgB>.

Louisiana also trials color for landscape plantings. It's known for putting caladiums and other sun garden varieties to the test

at the Louisiana State University (LSU) Ag Center in Hammond, LA. (<http://goo.gl/99Fbd>). And every year, it names the best-performing plants to its Louisiana Super Plants marketing program.

Likewise, the Mississippi Nursery & Landscape Association names plants to its Mississippi Medallion Program every year. The plants are chosen for their ability to thrive in the state, but many of them have excellent heat tolerance characteristics that landscapers may want to investigate at <http://goo.gl/ULNgv>.

By doing a little bit of homework, you can make sure the plants you install for your clients look great all season long. **LM**

Gooch is a freelance writer and editor based in Northeast Ohio.

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Fun in the sun

Bred by **Seeds By Design**, the Ornamental Pepper 'Black Olive' plant is a 2012 All-America Selections winner. Judges said this entry was a standout, especially in southern gardens where heat was a major presence during the 2011 trials. All season long, this plant kept its upright habit with draping leaves and dark purple/black fruit, which appeared in small clusters along the stems. As summer progresses, the fruits mature to red, giving contrast against the dark purple foliage and bright purple flowers. It's great as a 20-in. border plant or a color splash for containers.

SeedsByDesign.com

Stop traffic

'Brakelights Red Yucca' is **Monrovia's** semi-exclusive compact new color selection of *Hesperaloe parviflora*.

With vibrant red flowers and gray-green foliage, this compact grower reaches 2 ft. tall. It's hardy in USDA Zones 6 through 10 and requires good drainage. Because it does not set seed, it offers a longer bloom period. Monrovia.com



Pleasure cruise

The repeat-flowering *Rosa* 'The Endeavour' (Ausdisco) from **David Austin Roses** features approximately 50 petals. With dark green leaves, the upper side of the petals is salmon-tinted, while the reverse is soft yellow. The growth remains compact even in the hotter areas — in fact, this is a variety best suited to the warmer U.S. regions (zones 5 through 9). It reaches 4 by 3.5 ft. as a garden bush or up to 8 ft. as a climber. The flower is named for the

HMS Endeavour, commanded by Lt. James Cook. It carried the famous explorer on his first voyage to the Pacific Ocean, where he discovered and claimed New Zealand (1769), Australia (1770) and a multitude of Pacific islands for the British crown. DavidAustinRoses.com

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Silver lining

Well-suited to cool-season containers and landscapes, **Ball's** new '3D Silver' osteospermum features blooms that stay open all day and night. The mounded African daisy plant grows between 10 and 14 in. tall and 18 to 24 in. wide. Other new varieties in the 3D line include 'Berry White' and 'Coral Sand,' joining the existing pink and purple colorways. BallHort.com



Easy-care evergreen

Giokumo Cryptomeria is a dwarf *Cryptomeria japonica* selection with year-round interest introduced by **Garden Debut** late last year. This compact, densely pyramidal Japanese cedar has a vigorous growth rate. Early growth in the first three to four years is mounding and spreading, but it matures at a height between 8 and 10 ft. and a width of about 6 to 8 ft. after 20 to 30 years. For added interest, Giokumo sports persistent, cinnamon-colored decorative female cones about 3/4-in. long. It has deep green coloration and 3/8-in.-long, spirally arranged, awl-shaped needles that curve inward with a thick, dense habit. Branchlets are eventually deciduous, typically lasting three to four years.

GreenleafNursery.com

Dilly of a dahlia

Taking second place at the American Garden Awards in 2011, **Fides Oro's** 'Dahlinova Hypnotica Lavender' flowers over and over, even in a partial sun environment, according to the company. Other colors in the Hypnotica series include red, orange, yellow, white, pink, light pink and coral; bi-colors in bronze, rose and purple; "Dark Night" and new "Cherish Pink."

Dahlinova.com



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Aquascape Inc.

The new Aquascape smartphone app offers water gardening tips and information, divided into five easy-to-use sections. It features hundreds of high-quality water photos; the latest news on Aquascape pond products and events; how-to videos on pond installation, maintenance, fish and plant care; water gardening articles; and an online store that showcases a variety of pond supplies. The Aquascape App is available for Apple's iPhone and Google Android-based smartphones. To preview and download the app, visit the iTunes Store or Android Market, then search for Aquascape Pond app. Aquascapeinc.com



Cleveland Tubing Inc.

As part of the complete drainage solution system from FLEX-Drain, this new Flexible T/Y fitting recently won the Best New Specialty Product Award at the national Irrigation Show. The new T/Y fitting increases efficiency by eliminating the need for rigid wyes and tees, flexing to become either one. It fits nearly any angle and is compatible with 3- and 4-in. corrugated pipe and 4-in. PVC. FLEX-Drain.com





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. Water-Optimizer.com

continued on page 33

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continued from page 31

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 Geomembrane, 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 light-weight 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.

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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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A business with bite

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.

>> SERVICE SNAPSHOT

WHY TICK AND MOSQUITO CONTROL? Our initial interest in it was for personal reasons. I had moved to the suburbs and had a mosquito and tick problem. But when we found a product that worked, it made sense to offer it as a service through my business.

WHY ORGANIC? I've been an organic gardener since 1984. Organic and all-natural lawn care is where we've always hung our hat. So I was definitely looking for an organic product when it came to tick and mosquito control. Customers do appreciate that it's safe for their kids, pets and themselves, as well as for the environment.

WHAT WAS YOUR INVESTMENT? We already had some of the equipment we needed through our compost division, but there would certainly be an investment for those that don't have spray tanks or another way to distribute the product. The product we use and have found works the best is cedar oil. There's also a granular version that works as a repellent, so once we eliminate the population by spraying we go in and do the granular treatment to keep up.

HOW PROFITABLE IS THE SERVICE? It's definitely a profitable service for us but not something that's bringing in a tremendous amount of revenue. It's definitely a nice add-on service if you have the equipment and the right people to do it, though. It keeps customers happy and that's a good thing for the rest of your business, too.



Jim Agabedis first considered his add-on service after moving to the suburbs.

"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*.



Steve Rak II says pricing has become more stable as of late.

INSIDE INFO

Company: Southwest Landscape Management

Headquarters: Columbia Station, OH

Employees: 20

2011 revenue: \$1.1 million

Key to being a maintenance leader: This might sound simple, but keeping up with the industry trends and staying on top of the education. Go to PLANET's Green Industry Conference, get involved with local associations or attend the SIMA symposium. That's where you see the leaders.

When I got to these meetings, I see Frank Mariani [of Lake Bluff, Ill.'s Mariani Landscapes, a \$35 million firm] taking notes. If he's taking notes, I should be taking notes! Continuing your education and being a part of the industry is one of the things that's going to help set you apart and be a leader.

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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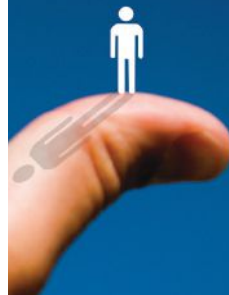
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What's in a name?

[Coming in August]

Landscape and lawn care businesses often start small — with names that reflect their humble roots. As companies grow,

owners may feel that their original names no longer reflect their brands, and a name change may be in order. In August, we look at the anatomy of a landscape company's name and the marketing and legal implications of changing it.

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LESSONS LEARNED THE HARD WAY » BY CASEY PAYTON



A landscape business owner says he should have embraced taking risks.



Franz Witte (third from left) with his family.

COMPANY: Franz Witte Landscape Contracting Inc.

HEADQUARTERS: Boise, ID

EMPLOYEES: 25 year-round, 85-100 in peak season

SERVICE BREAKDOWN: 34% commercial; 27% residential design/build; 14% maintenance; 25% nursery

CLIENT BREAKDOWN: 75% residential; 25% commercial

2011 REVENUE: \$6.5 million

PROJECTED 2012 REVENUE: \$7.5 million

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.

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