

MARKET WATCH

IRRIGATION

Locking out backflow device theft

With backflow device theft on the rise, protecting this equipment keeps customers happy and has a positive social impact.

By JONATHAN KATZ

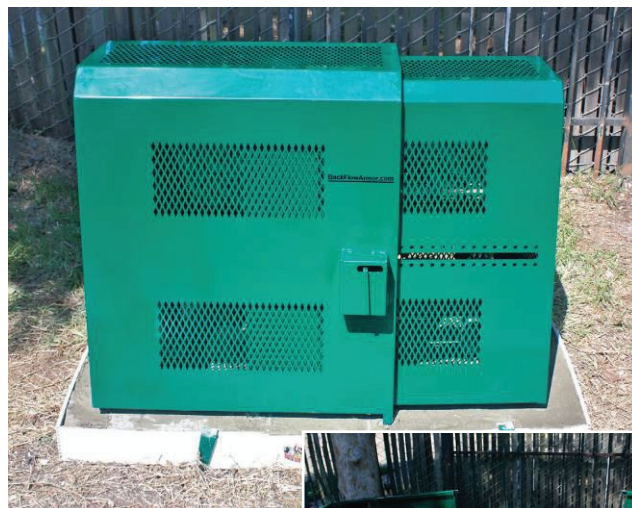
In the summer of 2009, a Memorial Landscaping and Irrigation technician received a call from a client stating that a backflow preventer had been stolen and that somebody needed to install a new device immediately, recalls Chad Touchet, CEO of the Houston-based company. The customer asked the technician not only to replace the stolen device but to install a cage around it to prevent future theft.

The technician installed the new device but had to measure the backflow preventer and order a cage to fit around the unit, since no adjustable cages were available at the time. Between the time the technician installed the new device and ordered the security cage, thieves struck the property again and stole the newly installed backflow preventer, Touchet says.

The incident prompted Touchet to form another company in 2011 called Backflow Armor that manufactures adjustable security cages for backflow devices. Security cages, along with other preventive measures, can alleviate the headaches associated with backflow device theft for both contractors and their clients.

With the cost of scrap metal, particularly brass, rising in his area, Touchet has become accustomed to receiving such frantic phone calls from clients. He first noticed the problem in the early 1990s, but in recent years he's seen a steady increase in the number of incidents. In 2000, Memorial fielded maybe two calls a month related to backflow device theft. Now the company receives anywhere from 12 to 15 calls per month, Touchet says.

Backflow device theft is a problem contractors are dealing with nationwide. In fact, in September California Gov. Jerry Brown signed into law a bill specifically aimed at curbing irrigation-related metals theft. Thieves targeting backflow devices are netting between \$15 and \$70 per device, depend-



Security cages protect clients' irrigation backflow devices from thieves, who steal the equipment to sell it as scrap metal.



ing on the size. Reduced pressure zone backflow preventers used in environments where chemical contamination is possible, such as hospitals, typically yield the highest dollar amount because of their size, Touchet says.

While theft is the most prevalent problem associated with backflow device tampering, the potential for a more sinister problem exists, he says. Irrigation systems could be bioterrorism targets. So protecting a backflow device could have a societal impact that's much greater than saving customers money.

"When you have someone stealing things like this and selling it, it's not people who are employed and working," Touchet says. "These are people who are using the money to buy drugs and things the average person would never dream of doing. So if we could stop this from happening, we could stop a lot of other things going on in society."

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On average, the problem costs customers \$1,100 to replace each stolen backflow device, Touchet says. Thefts often occur on Friday or Saturday evening, so by the time a client realizes the device is missing as much as 100,000 gallons of water could be lost.

“So they want us out there right away,” he says. “If you’re a contractor, you need to stop whatever you’re doing and take care of the problem for your client, so everything else is put on the back burner until you get this situation resolved.”

Upfront communication with customers is one of the keys to preventing future thefts, Touchet says. He recommends contractors include information with their invoices that describes the current problem and potential solutions, including the installation of cages. These words of caution can prevent testy exchanges with customers if thefts occur.

“I think it lessens the sting because the contractor gets in front of the response,” Touchet says. “They’re more likely to say, ‘I know you told me and sent me a letter stating that this is happening, and I should have acted on it.’ At that point they’re more apologetic rather than saying, ‘Why didn’t you tell me?’”

The installed price for backflow device cage is about \$800, Touchet says. Distributors list the product around \$549. He says contractors should seek cages with locks that are housed inside a steel box rather than those secured by a padlock and eye bolt. Eye bolts are weak and easy to cut, which does not provide good protection.

In addition to cages, strategic placement of the backflow devices themselves can reduce the likelihood of theft. Contractors should try to install the backflow preventer in shrubbery so the device is not visible from the street, Touchet says. Another potential protective measure is installing the device in a pump room so it’s not accessible from the outside.

“That’s the best way to protect it from everything,” Touchet says.

While an indoor installation may be the safest bet, it’s not always practical. Indoor installations often require copper or other more expensive materials, costing between \$1,000 and \$2,000 more to install than standard outdoor jobs.

Katz is a freelance writer based in Cleveland.

Cash flow woes?

Flexible equipment payment options provide relief when money’s tight.

By MARISA PALMIERI

Cash flow concerns? Consider flexible payment options such as skip payments or seasonal payments, which are offered by several landscape equipment manufacturers. For Jerry Roberts, owner of Roberts Brothers Lawn Care & Landscaping in Sparta, Tenn., experience with flexible payment options in his cattle farming business led him down the road toward a skip-payment option for his landscape maintenance business. In farming, he manages cash flow by financing equipment with semi-annual and annual payment plans. “When the money comes in, that’s when you make your payment,” Roberts says.

The mower skip-payment option is similar. He purchased three John Deere Z960As in November 2011 with skip payments. His no-pay months are January, February and March, which are the slowest months in Tennessee, where mowing season typically runs March 1 to Dec. 1. “The big thing is while those mowers are sitting in the shop not being

used, I’m not making any payments on them,” Roberts says. The other nine months out of the year, the monthly payment is about \$100 higher, Roberts says.

That’s the idea, says Dan Gundacker, product marketing manager for John Deere Financial. “No matter what area of



Contractors should work with their dealers on flexible financing options.

the country you’re in, contractors’ expenses jump in certain months and the income doesn’t necessarily do the same,” he says.

In addition to skip payments, there’s a seasonal payment option, which offers up to six consecutive months of relief, lowering payments to 1 percent of the amount financed. Over the course of the year the interest and payment amounts are the same, but payments are arranged to match cash flow. “In Wisconsin, for example, there are six months where contractors don’t mow,” Gundacker says. “Just being able to skip payments for three months isn’t enough.”

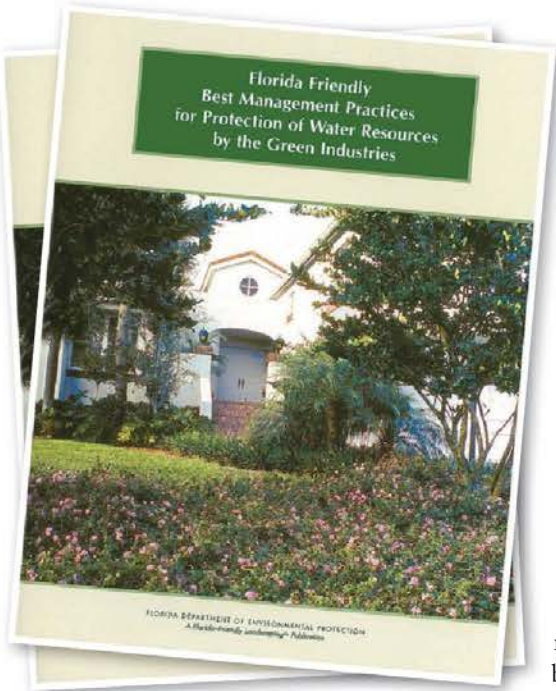
Additionally, manufacturers may offer revolving lines of credit that can be used at dealers for parts and service, which can be beneficial just before the busy season.

“If you’re not mowing yet, and you’re not making money, your dealer could give you 60 or 90 days to pay, rather than paying with cash or credit card,” he says. “Very few contractors don’t have time periods where expenses are stressed.”

LAWN/TREE CARE

Learning from Florida

Five tips for dealing with state and local fertilizer regulations. *By* MARISA PALMIERI



During the last few decades, Florida’s water quality has worsened due to a variety of factors like urbanization, development and population growth. According to the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, the state’s surface and ground waters have faced excessive nutrient loading due to nonpoint source pollution. This issue has turned Florida into a hotbed of fertilizer regulatory activities, says Don Rainey, the state coordinator for the Florida-Friendly Landscaping Green Industries Best Management Practices Program (GI-BMPs).

“It is far easier and less expensive to minimize the amount of nutrients that get into our waters than it is to treat stormwater and other nonpoint sources of pollution to remove nutrients,” Rainey says.

Rainey spoke at *Landscape Management’s* inaugural Lawn Care Forum, held early last month at Reunion Resort near Orlando (for more on this event, see page 6). His talk relayed to the national audience of lawn care operators the importance of taking a proactive stance toward working with officials and the public when fertilizer regulations pop up in other states.

In Florida, fertilizer rules vary widely by jurisdiction; they include restrictions on the use of fertilizers containing nitrogen and phosphorus during certain times of the year, requirements for non-fertilized buffer zones and mandates for education and certification. For landscape companies, the restrictions pose challenges, such as keeping up to date on the patchwork of rules and policies, meeting training requirements and more.

“It’s still too early to tell if fertilization ordinances have a direct effect on water quality,” Rainey says. “But local ordinances continue to pop up, and from what I gather, they’re going to continue.”

With that in mind, he offered the following tips for the lawn care industry to remember when it’s facing regulatory burdens.

1 The industry must be organized. In Florida, for example, when the public outcry over nutrient loading began pointing fingers at the landscape industry, an ad hoc group of professionals got together and said, “We’re

not going to be the problem.” They put together a manual (pictured) for Green Industry professionals to use voluntarily as a guideline to minimize nonpoint source pollution when establishing new landscapes and caring for existing ones.

2 Informed decisions must be based on science. On the local level, it’s easy for the loudest voices to draw the most attention, whether or not their claims are based on facts and research. That’s why when Florida Green Industry professionals partnered with state agencies and The University of Florida’s Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences to write their best practices manual, they based recommendations on common sense, science and research only.

3 A holistic educational approach is required. Education is a necessary component, and in Florida there is a three-pronged approach that reaches out to homeowners and builders/developers through the Florida-Friendly Landscaping, Florida Yards & Neighborhoods program and to Green Industry professionals through the GI-BMPs training program. Additionally, starting Jan. 1, 2014, Florida law will require all commercial fertilizer applicators to have limited commercial fertilizer applicator certificates that they’ll have to renew every four years.

4 Include measurable outcomes and impacts. It’s difficult for officials to measure improvements, Rainey says, noting it took decades of gradual water quality degradation to get to where it is today. Still, Rainey says, baselines are important to measure effectiveness. Otherwise, there’s no way to know whether restrictions are doing any good.

5 Include follow-up “sunset” provisions. Landscape professionals with a seat at the table on regulatory discussions should recommend that state and local officials revisit certain regulations several years down the road to refine or remove provisions based on new research.

DESIGN/BUILD

Night light

At PLANET's DBI Symposium, landscape lighting expert Jan Moyer tells design/build pros there's more to lighting the landscape than meets the eye. *By BETH GERACI*

Jan Moyer stood at the front of the room, asking for the lights to be turned off. "All the way off, please," she said when the lights dimmed.

There was a certain irony in her request. That's because Moyer was the featured speaker on landscape lighting at the Professional Landcare Network's (PLANET's) DBI Symposium in Dallas in November.

Moyer is the founder of The Landscape Lighting Resource, Inc., a non-profit organization that disseminates and preserves information about landscape lighting. She came armed with ample advice for her audience, covering everything from effective wattage to adjusting to the day's evolving light.

Landscape lighting professionals must think a project all the way through before they get started, Moyer cautioned her audience of 50 design/build professionals from around the country. They must consider how the landscape will change through the seasons, throughout the day or even over the years.

"The view from a window changes from morning to night and season to season," she said. "Also, plants grow. So how will the plant's role change in the whole composition—how will it affect the landscape lighting in the future?"

Moyer also emphasized the importance of considering how the interior of the home relates to its exterior landscape, and how lights that are on indoors at night will impact the effects of landscape lighting outside.

WHEN IT COMES TO WATTAGE, LESS IS MORE

Just as homeowners and designers must consider how landscape lighting will be affected by these factors, they also must consider something equally as important—the homeowner's relationship with the neighbors and how the neighbors will react to the new lighting scheme.

Lighting professionals tempted to use high-wattage bulbs should think again, Moyer said, not only because high-wattage bulbs may upset people who live nearby, but also because "it doesn't take much wattage to have effective lighting. It really doesn't take much."

Moyer said she often uses MR16 20-watt

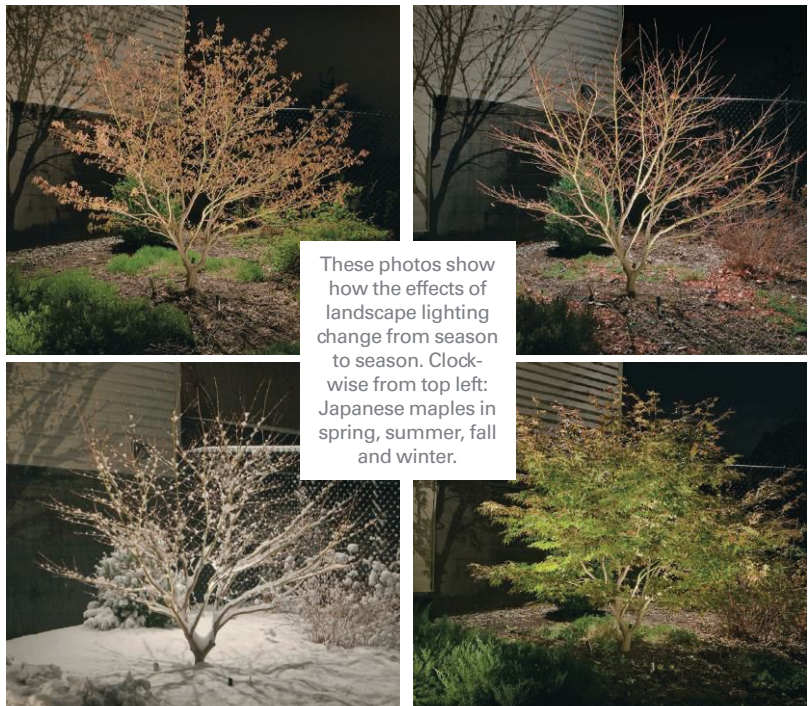
bulbs in her lighting displays, preferring to use more fixtures and lower wattage. In so doing, the landscape appears more natural.

But the industry is moving away from MR16 halogens to LEDs, Moyer said. "The landscape lighting industry is chaos right now because of this change to LED. Things are changing so fast, what was true last year is not true this year."

Moyer is about to complete the third edition of her "The Landscape Lighting Book." When she started the revision in 2009, she met with an LED manufacturer. She had a question for him—when will LED lighting finally settle down? "His answer was 10 to 20 years!" Moyer said. "And we're two years into it. So we're nowhere near settling down."

By "settling down", Moyer was referring to establishing uniform standards for LEDs. Right now, LEDs are not standardized. That's problematic, Moyer said, because for owners and designers, that means that there is no compatibility among bulbs from different manufacturers.

Nonetheless, LED is a big step up from halogen, Moyer said. "Will it be the end game? I have no idea. Will there something that's better than this? I just really don't know." **LM**



These photos show how the effects of landscape lighting change from season to season. Clockwise from top left: Japanese maples in spring, summer, fall and winter.