

MARKET WATCH

MAINTENANCE

Blade runners

Handling mower blades with care preserves quality and productivity at Mainscape.

By MARISA PALMIERI

At Mainscape's Naples, Fla., branch, the staff handles mower blades with care to give its military, homeowner association and commercial clients the best quality of cut without any dreaded "streaking."

If quality is subpar and callbacks occur, Branch Manager Jim Spano cringes at the thought of lost time.

"If there are streaks, we have to go back out and re-mow if it's a priority customer," he says. "Then we're just wasting gross margin dollars by going back out to an area that should have been treated correctly the first time."

To prevent such an instance the company is picky about its mower blade selection and maintenance to ensure success when handling blades for the 60 to 80 John Deere and Exmark mowers it runs daily.

RIGHT BLADES FOR THE RIGHT GRASS

Most of the turf Mainscape handles is St. Augustine grass, as well as Bahia and other varieties of *paspalum*. "Currently we like the high-lift Gator Mulcher blades," he says, noting the blade thickness is superior to many other aftermarket blades, resulting in a good quality of cut for the Mainscape clients' turf. "If we

PG 35

MAINTENANCE How to handle mower blades with care

PG 36

IRRIGATION Adding value with irrigation audits

PG 38

DESIGN/BUILD Co-op showroom concept presents opportunity

PG 42

LAWN/TREE CARE Some LCOs turn to organic soil amendments



Mainscape mechanics store extra sets of mower blades on racks (left) and disinfect them daily in a wash station.

don't order new mowers with the high-lift mulching blade, I'm willing to pay to have get them instead of trying out whatever they're putting on."

Spano notes it's a premium product—sets of three cost about \$50—but it's worth it not to have to have blades that cause "streaking."

MAINTAIN WITH CARE

Sharp blades are key. "Every day our mechanics get underneath, take off and put on new blades," Spano says, noting there are two sets of blades for every mower, which buys the mechanics some time with the sharpening process. "When we buy a new mower we just go ahead and order the second set of blades so it goes into our inventory."

Each mower has slot on a rack where its spare blades are stored before they're rotated back onto the mower. In addition to being sharpened daily, the mechanics disinfect them with a bleach-water mixture.

"That way we don't run the risk of spreading diseases from one property to another," he says.



Mainscape's Naples, Fla., branch upgrades its mower blades to improve its quality of cut.

Finding 'liquid assets'

Contractors can add value to their irrigation services by identifying cost-saving opportunities for clients.

By JONATHAN KATZ

Over the past century, advancements in irrigation technology have created more efficient and accurate systems. Still, many irrigation system users are unaware their systems are outdated or inefficient.

For irrigation contractors, this presents an opportunity for upgrades, replacements and other maintenance needs.

The challenge is identifying these needs and then communicating them to customers. Irrigation audits can be an effective way to upsell customers on solutions for irrigation systems.

Turftenders Landscape Services, based in Raleigh, N.C., began offering commercial customers irrigation audits more than two years ago as a money-saving service.

While the audits haven't become a major revenue generator for Turftenders, the company views the offering as a potential market differentiator, says Chase Erwin, Turftenders' business development manager.

"Our company tries to be a solutions provider," Erwin says. "It's very competitive in Raleigh, and there are a lot of companies that are great at landscape maintenance. They try to maintain what's existing. For us, we try to take more of an outside-the-box approach."

Being a solutions provider means helping customers find long-term savings in an environmentally friendly way through water conservation, Erwin says. Turftenders

President Steve Hill created the irrigation auditing program after attending an annual water symposium in North Carolina about two years ago. One of the main conference topics was the subject of irrigation-related water conservation. The discussion touched on water scarcity in the region and the rising cost of water. Seeing an opportunity to help customers reduce costs and save water resources, Turftenders decided to offer irrigation auditing services, Erwin says.

Turftenders markets the irrigation audits primarily to homeowner associations, condominiums and other commercial clients rather than smaller residential properties. That's because a property with few irrigation zones will likely find less value in an audit that can cost between \$500 and \$2,000, based on the number of zones, Erwin says. Turftenders charges separately for the audit and any additional work related to the audit findings.

HOW IT WORKS

Turftenders markets the program by mailing a cover letter explaining the audit portion of its irrigation efficiency program, which it calls Liquid Assets, to select customers. This year, the company plans to send the letter to

continued on page 38



At left: Josh DeMoll, irrigation technician, sets an irrigation head. Below: A Turftenders' account undergoes an irrigation audit.



To download a Liquid Assets case study and a sample of the irrigation audit letter Turftenders sends to commercial clients, visit the Web Extras section of [Landscape Management.net](http://LandscapeManagement.net)

continued from page 36

approximately 200 commercial clients. Turftenders conducts the audit to map the irrigation system to pinpoint design flaws and identify leaks or broken heads.

The company begins the audit process by turning on every zone and then observing the system in operation to identify performance problems. The technicians look for obvious signs of malfunction, including sunken sprinkler heads, misaligned spray patterns (identified by brown spots in certain areas) and misting or fogging, which can be a sign of overpressure.

From there, Turftenders conducts performance testing to calculate the precipitation rate, so the company can determine uniformity of the application. The process helps Turftenders technicians know how long the system should operate. Measuring the precipitation rate is less sophisticated than it may sound. Turftenders conducts the process by placing red plastic cups along a mapped-out grid system in the landscape. After allowing the system to run for several minutes, a technician measures how much water was collected in the cups. Using this data, the company

can determine how much water per hour each area is receiving, Erwin says.

Turftenders enters the data, including usage information from the client's water bills, into a spreadsheet provided by Rain Bird. The spreadsheet calculates savings and the payback time frame. With the audit complete, Turftenders follows up with a report detailing a plan to potentially save water at the property. The letter includes estimates of potential gallons and money saved if the customer follows through with the suggested actions. Some of the recommendations may include retrofits, capping off certain heads or eliminating zones, as well as ensuring the controller is properly scheduled.

THE RESULTS

One housing development already has realized significant savings from the program. The housing community encompasses 71 homes on 11.5 acres, including nearly 74,000 square feet of fescue turf. After the first full year in 2011, the Turftenders' client realized a decline in landscape water consumption of 638,792 gallons from the previous

year and a water cost savings of \$5,950.

Turftenders installed new pressure-regulating heads to improve water distribution and eliminate misting.

The company also cut the total number of heads from more than 1,000 to 880. Turftenders expects the client to recover its initial capital investment in three-and-a-half years and save more than \$71,000 over the system's lifespan.

So far, Turftenders has achieved some success with the audit program, including a client who agreed to a \$20,000 retrofit. Typical projects in the current economic climate have been a few thousand dollars, Erwin says. He's optimistic that as water prices continue to rise, more customers will recognize the value of irrigation audits.

"It's something that differentiates us from our competition, and everybody wants to save some money, Erwin says. "It's also good for the environment. Here in North Carolina water rates are going up, and these irrigation systems are too valuable to these properties to just abandon them."

Katz is a freelance writer based in Cleveland.

DESIGN/BUILD

One-stop shop

A Florida outdoor living co-op presents opportunities and challenges.

By JONATHAN KATZ

Some homeowners envision their backyard as a secluded paradise with a pool, patio and fire pit. Others seek a Zen experience with koi ponds and water gardens. Yet sometimes these dream

backyards are beyond the capabilities of a single landscape designer or company.

In November, a group of businesses opened a showroom in Ellenton, Fla., less than 20 miles north of Sarasota, as a type of one-stop shop for outdoor living. The four companies that make up the co-op called Backyards N More joined together to create synergies that would lead to better landscape designs and more referral-based business.

Backyards N More includes a landscape design/build company, a pest control and lawn care firm, a pool and spa installer and a heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) firm. The building is owned by Backyards N More founder Philip Yetzer, who's the president and CEO of the pool and spa

installation firm Drips 'n' Puddles. The partnership has increased revenue by approximately 20 percent to 40 percent for Prime Environmental Landscaping (PEL), says owner and founder Chris Lockhart. PEL is a design/build contractor that partnered with Drips 'n' Puddles last spring to form the co-op.

PEL already has benefited from job leads generated by Drips 'n' Puddles. In some cases, the partnership has reduced installation times for PEL, resulting in more satisfied customers, Lockhart says. Before joining Backyards N More, PEL often faced design, timing and budget challenges because the company didn't have the opportunity to coordinate with the pool contractor.

continued on page 40



continued from page 38

“When we can sit down with the client from the get-go and have an overall idea of the design and not just pieces of it as it comes,” Lockhart says, “the whole project is much easier to tie together, construction is smoother and the design goals are easier to achieve by pre-planning.”

The collaboration with Drips ‘n’ Puddles has cut the amount of time it takes to complete some projects, Lockhart says. In addition, when the Backyards N More affiliates refer business to each other, they receive a commission for the referral, Lockhart says. He eventually expects to generate 60 percent to 70 percent of his sales through Backyards N More.

PEL’s involvement with Backyards N More began about eight years ago after a client introduced Lockhart to Yetzer. Yetzer was seeking a landscape designer to help him establish a full outdoor design operation, Lockhart recalls. After Yetzer reviewed Lockhart’s work with PEL, the two discussed creating a one-stop shop that could handle multiple backyard needs.

PEL and Drips ‘n’ Puddles together invested approximately \$100,000 into the Backyards N More showroom, which Lockhart characterizes as a type of village setting with sidewalks and meandering paver walkways. Some of

the features include a pondless waterfall near the showroom entrance and outdoor fireplaces and kitchens. Eventually, Yetzer added a pest control and lawn care company and HVAC firm to round out Backyards N More’s offerings.

The showroom provides the co-op companies with marketing opportunities they may have missed, Lockhart says.

“There are a lot more elements to the outdoor landscape than just plants,” Lockhart explains. “It’s stone, wood, water, topography, sound—all kinds of things other than just plant material, and it’s helping us get all those other services out there and get our name out there as clients are coming in to see one of the other businesses.”

THINGS TO CONSIDER

Being associated with multiple businesses has its advantages, but companies considering similar ventures should exercise caution, Lockhart says. Make sure potential partners have solid reputations, Lockhart says.

“It can be a good thing to have your name behind another company, and it can be a bad thing if they’re not doing their job,” Lockhart says. “As long as you’re partnering with a company that’s equal or better than you are, then you can’t go wrong.”

Backyards N More, a co-op of several different outdoor-related service businesses, operates a showroom featuring aspects of all its members’ offerings.

PEL only associates itself with Backyards N More partner Drips ‘n’ Puddles, Lockhart says. The other companies are primarily building renters Yetzer brought on board as a source of rental income, according to Lockhart. That presents another potential drawback that companies interested in a co-op should consider, Lockhart says.

“Another challenge is making sure you’re not too associated with those companies that you don’t really know about,” Lockhart says.

For instance, organic landscaping is a major part of PEL’s offerings. The lawn care company in Backyards N More provides chemical pest treatments, Lockhart explains. That could send a confusing message to clients if they begin associating PEL with a chemical-treatment provider, Lockhart says.

“You don’t always agree with every idea that the other contractors have,” he explains. “When that happens, you have to make sure you can separate yourself and keep your company identity unique. That’s really the challenge.”

Katz is a freelance writer based in Cleveland.

LAWN/TREE CARE

Going organic

Several lawn care pros using organic soil amendments say they'll never go back to their old ways.

By BETH GERACI

At a time when organic lawn care products are gaining buzz in the Green Industry, one product in particular is making a strong push in the market. And the lawn care professionals using it say they're seeing results.

The product is called Holganix. It's a 100-percent organic soil amendment that functions as a biostimulant, enabling plants to efficiently take up nutrients and pesticides.

Some companies are hesitant to use Holganix, a type of compost tea, because it must be refrigerated in special refrigeration units at 33 to 44 degrees. But the vendor provides and sets up the units for clients at no cost. The units come in three sizes based on the amount of the product a company will need.

"I don't see us going back to what we were doing before—not at all," says Ed Fleming, owner of Milton, Del.-based Lawns Unlimited. Fleming made the switch from liquid fertilizers and micronutrient packages to Holganix two years ago, wanting to reduce the amount of nitrogen and herbicides applied to his customers' lawns.

"The concern was the amount of nitrogen we applied," he says. "We wanted the plant to not be dependent on

it as much. The more fertilizers that we apply onto these lawns, the more we're reducing the biology in the soil."

PLANT HEALTH ELEMENTS

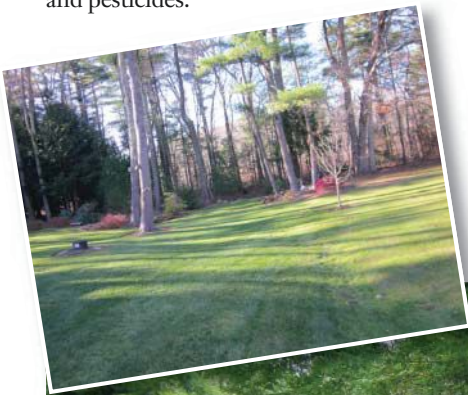
Fleming, who is an agronomist, learned about Holganix from one of his distributors. Since he's been using it, he says he's noted better color, fewer disease problems, healthier and stronger root systems and better control of broadleaf weeds on his customers' lawns.

"Based on the depth of the roots and the thickness of the turf, our lawns just stand out compared to our competition. They're greener, thicker and healthier," he says. "And the program is cumulative, so the longer you use it, the better the results are."

Gerry White, managing partner at Grassmaster Plus in Georgetown, Mass., north of Boston, has been using Holganix since last June. White had a 20-year career as a golf course superintendent before making his foray into lawn care six years ago. As a superintendent, he used organic products on fairways and greens to maintain the health of the soil.

When White saw Holganix, he thought it could help reduce his inputs, including the amount of nitrogen and pesticides his workers applied.

continued on page 44



Grassmaster Plus Managing Partner Gerry White, a former golf course superintendent, uses Holganix soil amendments to reduce nitrogen and other inputs.

continued from page 42

“The goal is to have a thicker lawn and fewer inputs of pesticides and herbicides,” White says. “I would say I’ve been able to cut my herbicides down, from a rate standpoint. I want to see it through another season, but I’m definitely intrigued by it and happy with the results I’ve seen so far”—results such as thicker blades of grass that grow laterally instead of vertically, he says.

Scott Whitehead, CEO of Unlimited Landscaping and Turf Management Inc. in Buford, Ga., is new to the Holganix program, launching it Jan. 1. It’s too early to see results, since the grass is just now coming out of dormancy, Whitehead says, but he’s optimistic.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSCIOUSNESS

The environmental health benefits and fewer inputs of Holganix are most appealing to Whitehead. “We want to give customers exactly what their lawn needs

and not more than that—to avoid having products just run off into our lakes, rivers, creeks and streams,” he says.

In years past, Unlimited was “fertilizing non-stop,” Whitehead says. But he got fed up with that. “We wanted to set ourselves apart and have a more organic approach than our competitors.”

Using less fertilizer also is vital for Fleming, who’s focused on environmental stewardship. “Using organics is important for being a good steward of the soil and the earth,” he says.

Whereas slow-release fertilizers used to be on Fleming’s agenda, now he’s focused on “preserving the biology in the soil, so the soil can feed the health of the plant,” he says. “It’s kind of like either putting people on welfare or giving them a job so they can be dependent on themselves.”

Holganix can be more expensive than

typical fertilizing products—White says it increased his material costs by about 5 percent. But “the benefits far outweigh the costs,” he says. “If you look at the whole picture, in the long run it will save money because you can reduce your rates,

“We want to give customers exactly what their lawn needs and not more than that.”

—Scott Whitehead, Unlimited Landscaping

spend less time spraying on the property, all of those things are going to build up as time goes on.”

One year into it, White has Holganix on all his trucks. “I wanted to see it last year,” he says. “I wanted to believe it, and I saw good enough results where I made the switch completely. I’m all in, baby.” LM

PVB LOCK BOX

PVB LOCK BOX

The **P.V.B LOCK BOX** will come in one size 24x24x12 this will fit all wall mounted Pressure Vacuum Breaker units ranging from ¾" to 2 ½" as you may have seen at the 2012 irrigation show this product is professionally built in the U.S.A. The product is powder coated hunter green, it comes with the four security bolts and lead anchors it also comes with one security key unlocking bit. This unit wholesales for \$319.99 and the manufactures suggested retail price is \$499.00. Our contractors are installing these units at \$600.00 each and the unit installs in less than 20 minutes.



CLOCK BOX

The **CLOCKBOX** will come in one size 14x17x10 this will fit most outdoor irrigation controllers, this unit will also be powder coated hunter green and come with a removable front cover for access to the unit the locking mechanism will be (2) security hex pin locking bolts and will come with two unlocking bits one for the owner and one for the irrigation or maintenance tech. This unit wholesales at \$259.99 and the MSRP is \$439.00. Our contractors installed pricing is \$539.00 and this also installs in less than 20 minutes. By installing this product this assures that no unauthorized person or persons are tampering with the irrigation controller and will also protect it from being stolen.



Call 800.372.1434 To Place Your Order Or Visit Us At www.pvblockbox.com