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BUSINESS: SOFTWARE

TopDown Conservation

TurfManager, a Web-based Software as a Service (SaaS) record-keeping solution, helps facility and property managers better monitor costs and resources by consolidating and automating the daily functions of turf management in one user-friendly Internet portal. It also aids in the process of measuring and quantifying costs for containment and sustainability programs — resulting in greater transparency and lower operational costs. GPS-linked aerial imagery overlays show accurate “as built” configurations, while the maintenance manager solution includes a program to be used by the turf manager or general manager to improve inventory accuracy, better manage labor and hourly tasks, equipment maintenance and scheduling, extend asset life, and develop metrics and processes that will save significant time and money. TopDownConservation.com



Magnetag Visible Systems

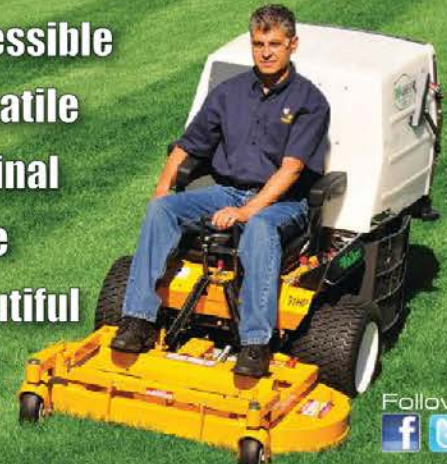
The new Crew and Route magnetic whiteboard allows Green Industry professionals to manage and communicate their weekly workloads so employees can see what to do and when to do it. The printed boards are easy to set up, easy to use and come with everything needed to operate them — including color-coded magnetic cardholders with printable inserts for job information and locations; two-sided, red/green Flip-Over magnets to show job status; and color-coded magnet signals for job priorities, equipment needed or your own special codes. Kits are available in three sizes, for 5 to 21 crews per board. Magnetag.com/CrewRoute

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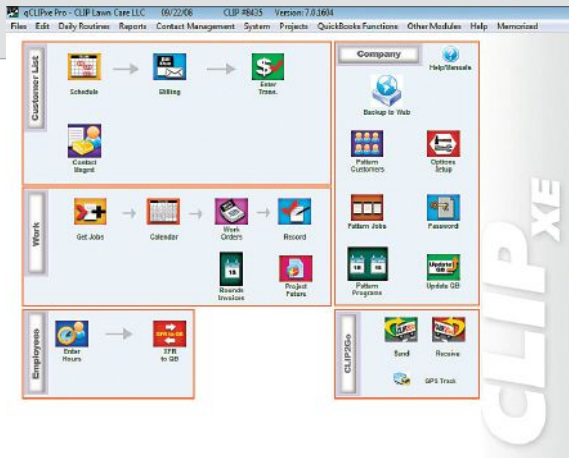


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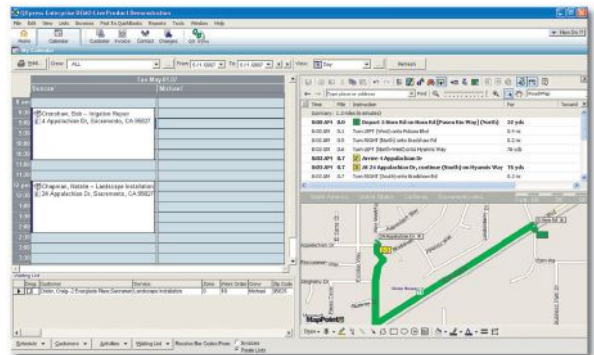
LS Training

LS Training has released its newest online training videos: Personal Safety, Aerator, and Fertilizer Spreader. This makes for a total of 23 online videos, with online exams in English and Spanish. More than 10,000 landscape workers in North America get their training from LS Training. Landscape-Safety.com



QXpress Scheduling Software

QXpress is the scheduling software of choice for field service companies using QuickBooks. QXpress adds scheduling, job costing and invoicing capabilities to QuickBooks, so users don't have to learn a whole new system; they can just add industry-specific functionality to their existing QuickBooks. Cut office time and increase productivity by simplifying tasks such as scheduling and dispatching, tracking service calls, scheduling multi-day projects, generating estimates, managing inventory and tracking job cost. QXpress.com



Clip Sensible Software

CLIP software gives you the ability to route, schedule, estimate and job cost your jobs and projects, and optionally bill directly through QuickBooks. In addition, CLIP2Go's bilingual (Spanish) mobile software features GPS, real-time directions, routes sheets, time clock, signature capture, customer information and much more. CLIP.com



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LAWN CARE: INSECTICIDES

FMC Professional Solutions

Talstar EZ Granular insecticide featuring Verge granule technology is now available. The clay-based granule breaks down quickly to release the active ingredient and disappear into the landscape, providing long-lasting control of surface-feeding pests such as ants, billbugs, chinch bugs, fleas and ticks. Virtually dust- and odor-free, the new formulation reduces applicator exposure while providing a more uniform distribution of product. Plus, now through Nov. 30, 2011: Buy nine, get one FREE! Simply purchase nine bags of Talstar EZ featuring Verge granule technology (25-lb. bag) or Talstar PL (25-lb. bag) and you'll receive the 10th bag free. Honored at the time of purchase, this promotion is a simple, cost-effective way to provide lawn care customers with the proven performance of Talstar. FMCprofessionalsolutions.com/LawnCare/Products/Insecticides/TalstarEZfeaturingVergeGranuleTechnology.aspx



The Andersons Inc.

DuoCide Insect Control provides a preventative and curative treatment to control a variety of common insect pests, including ticks, grubs, fire ants, mole crickets, European crane flies and more. Similar in cost to other single-mode insecticides, the product combines carbaryl and bifenthrin into a unique multi-mode formula that enhances performance both above and below the surface. DuoCide's performance is confirmed by multiple university research studies, and is formulated on the dispersible DG Pro carrier for easy spreading, low visibility and maximum performance. AndersonsInc.com

PBI/Gordon Corp.

With an active ingredient of dinotefuran, Zylam 20SG Systemic Turf Insecticide is a soluble granule labeled for key turf insect pests such as chinch bugs, annual bluegrass weevils, crane flies and mole crickets. State registrations for the product are complete, and availability is expected in January. A liquid formulation labeled for a wide range of tree and shrub insect pests will be available this summer. PBIGordon.com



Arysta LifeScience Corp.

Aloft combines two modes of activity for maximum performance: Bifenthrin provides immediate knockdown (within hours) of early-season adults, including black turfgrass ataenius, annual bluegrass weevil, cutworms and billbugs, as well as surface-feeding pests like chinch bugs, armyworms and sod webworms. Then, the outstanding systemic and residual activity of clothianidin provides preventive, season-long control of all white grubs, plus "reach-back" control of any escaped larvae from early-season adult and surface feeder eggs laid prior to Aloft application. TotalInsectControl.com

weedalert.com

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United Turf Alliance

New ArmorTech Guillotine, a fast-acting insecticide providing preventive and curative control of both grubs and surface-feeding insects, is a water-dispersible granular formulation containing the active ingredient clothianidin.

It controls white grubs and other insects for an extended length of time because of low water solubility and its ability to remain in the turf/soil interface area longer than other neonicotinoid chemistries. Guillotine is effective against most grub species, as well as ants, billbugs, annual bluegrass weevils, armyworms, cutworms and southern chinch bugs, including those resistant to synthetic pyrethroid insecticides. It is also labeled for use on ornamentals, interior plantscapes and non-bearing fruit and nut trees in a landscape environment. UTAarmorotech.com

MistAway Systems

Looking for a complementary, highly profitable, recurring service business? MistAway Systems is a leading manufacturer of automated outdoor misting systems for control of mosquitoes, spiders, no-see-ems and other annoying insects. During the last five years, our dealers have installed more than 13,000 of our systems in the United States and abroad. We are actively seeking landscaping professionals to sell, install and service our innovative systems in markets across the country. MistAway.com

Valent Professional Products

The new formulation of Arena 0.25 G Insecticide, incorporating the dust-free Biodac granular carrier from Kadant Grantek Inc., is a significant improvement over the clay-based carriers used for many granular products. Arena 0.25 G is now drier and less dusty, facilitates superior spreading and collects less moisture than its previous incarnation, resulting in better pest control. This includes long-lasting control over the pyrethroid-resistant chinch bug, as well as other pests like white grubs in turf and whitefly on ficus. ValentPro.com/Arena

BioWorks

Molt-X Botanical Insecticide / Nematicide works primarily as an insect growth regulator (IGR) that disrupts the molting process in insects. Once treated with Molt-X, the company says, insects become sluggish, stop feeding, and fail to mature and reproduce. Molt-X also acts as an insect repellent, anti-feedant and ovipositional deterrent. Molt-X is an emulsifiable concentrate containing 3% azadirachtin, a potent insect-active compound found in the neem tree. While it is derived from neem seed, Molt-X is not a neem oil. It has a 4-hour Restricted Entry Interval (REI), zero-day pre-harvest interval and is labeled for use on a broad range of turfgrass, outdoor shrubs, trees, ornamentals and food crops, as well as on greenhouse ornamentals, shadehouse, interiorscape and nurseries. Other key product features includes no residue on plant foliage and flowers; no phytotoxicity issues on most plants; generally safe on beneficial insects and bees; and it's compatible for tank-mixing/rotation with other registered inputs including BotaniGard and SuffOil-X. BioWorksInc.com



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BEST PRACTICES

BRUCE WILSON

The author, of the Wilson-Oyler Group, is a 30-year industry veteran. Reach him at bwilson@questex.com.

Outsourcing to manage costs

O utsourcing or subcontracting might be a good business decision in the day-to-day running of a landscape business under normal circumstances. I keep hearing the “new normal” term being thrown around. So what should one think? What is “normal,” and what works? Today, you have to examine and question everything you do.

Many of today’s property managers prefer dealing with fewer suppliers when hiring service providers. As a basic landscape maintenance company, you might find yourself at a disadvantage to your

multi-service competitor unless you can also be that one-stop-shopping answer.

On the other hand, the process of starting new service lines, such as arborist services or irrigation services, can be a major distraction — as well as a drain on profits. With your customers on tight budgets, you might find you can no longer keep a crew busy, but need to carry the people so they don’t go elsewhere, offsetting any profit you might have made on them.

Most customers probably do not care whether you self-perform these additional services; they just would like you to make them happen. With some trades, you might be able to make as much marking up a subcontractor as you would self-performing, and do it with less risk.

The key factor in making this work is finding the right subcontractor. Good characteristics to look for include:

- › They are responsive.
- › They provide the level of quality you require.
- › They are price competitive, even with your mark-up.
- › They can refer you to their customers.

Other opportunities

What about outsourcing? We are in a business that relies on our customers outsourcing their maintenance rather than doing it themselves, yet we fail to look for the same opportunities to make our own operations more streamlined.

In our consulting business, we call any unnecessary overhead a company carries and tries to pass on to its customers a “dumb tax.” We see many companies self-performing tasks in their business that are a huge distraction to them, and could be outsourced for less money (see box).

A good business does not lock itself into one way of doing business. Take advantage of all the options available so you can compete and serve your customers better.

OUTSOURCING OPPORTUNITIES

Payroll: Payroll can be outsourced to a payroll company or an employee leasing company.

For small companies in this industry, employee leasing is one of the most cost-efficient ways to handle payroll. It can often save a considerable amount on worker’s compensation insurance, and it also allows you to offer benefits you wouldn’t be able to afford otherwise.

Fleet maintenance: Mechanical shops can be a huge black hole. Shops are hard to control, especially if you are not really a hands-on manager. There are many mobile services available today that service your vehicles — do brake work, tire maintenance, etc. Having your own mechanic is a major commitment. Few companies in this industry have efficient shops. Outsourcing is the right solution when you are in the various growth stages where you are too small for a full-time mechanic, or have too much work for one mechanic but not enough for two.

Spray techs: Many companies struggle to keep good spray techs. The struggle is even greater when you have to carry them in the winter so as not to lose them. Hiring a good lawn care subcontractor may be the most cost-effective way to do this work.

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CONTAINERS OPEN UP NEW OPTIONS FOR PLANTINGS.

BY M. ROLL AND C.R. WILSON

CONTAINERS CAN be grown where traditional landscape plantings are not possible, including apartment balconies, small courtyards, decks, patios and areas with poor soil. They are an ideal solution for clients in rental situations, with limited mobility, or with limited time to care for a large landscape.

Container considerations

Just about any container can be used, however, make sure you never use a container that held toxic materials, especially if edible

plants are going to be grown.

No matter the container, the most important thing to consider is drainage. Plants will not grow successfully in soil that is continually waterlogged. In waterlogged soils, space fills with water and leaves no room for air, which is necessary for proper root growth. If there are no existing drainage holes in the container, make multiple holes in the bottom. Keep in mind that containers made from porous materials (like clay and wood) lose moisture quickly, but allow air movement into the root zone. Metal, plastic and glazed containers hold water longer, but restrict air movement making drainage holes especially

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important. Use a container insert if you plan to use an expensive decorative container without drainage holes. Make sure the insert does not rest in water.

Consider whether your pots will be moved during the growing season. When water is added to soil in an already heavy container, the weight might be too much to lift easily. Plan ahead when planting large containers and add container dollies with wheels.

The container should be large enough so the plants won't dry out between waterings. Consider using larger containers with more soil to hold moisture and reduce maintenance.

The size of the container should accommodate the roots of the plants when fully grown. With flowers, a general rule is the larger the height of the flower, the more root mass is produced, thus requiring a larger container.

Soil choice

Potting soil should be free of disease organisms, insects, and weed seeds. It should be porous yet hold water and nutrients with a slightly acidic pH. Do not use native soil, even if you can pasteurize it. Most native soils have a high percentage of clay particles that easily compact, reducing the oxygen available to the roots.

Never reuse the same potting soil from the previous growing season because it may contain disease organisms.

Soilless mixes contain many of the same ingredients as potting soil, but are two to three times lighter because they don't contain heavy soil. You can add up to 10% of the volume with clean, coarse sand to add weight for top-heavy plants.

The rapid growth of many container plants quickly depletes the fertilizer available in the limited volume of soil. Well-drained soil mixes also result in the regular loss of fertilizer in the drainage water. To provide the right amount of fertilizer, mix controlled-release fertilizer granules into

the soil mix at planting. The large number of plants often grown in containers places extra demands on the fertilizer supplied by timed-release products. Fully soluble fertilizer products can be added to the irrigation water to supplement or replace timed-release products.

Design basics

There are a few design principles to consider when planting container gardens.

To avoid a flat look, add a spike — a tall plant, or a garden ornament — for height and a trailing plant to drape down from the container. A grouping of different-sized containers will also help achieve this goal. Choose plants that are in scale with the size of the container and planting backdrop. Generally, plants should be twice as tall as the visible part of the container. If planting one large plant, such as an ornamental grass, select a larger container that will fulfill both plant growth and design needs.

Consider the texture or shapes of plant leaves and flowers. A variety of leaf shapes and sizes can be more appealing than uniform foliage. Combine round-shaped flowers with irregularly shaped ones.

Use complementary colors on the opposite side of the color wheel or analogous colors adjacent on the color wheel. Also consider whether you want an area to stand out through the use of hot colors like orange and red, or recede through the use of cool colors like blue and violet. Repeating a flower color among different vertical plant layers will give a stronger and more unified appearance.

Plant types

The group of plants most immediately thought of for container use may be annuals. In addition to new versions of old favorites, many new choices are available. Geraniums feature new zonal, ivy, and cascading types. New petunia colors are available as well as improved trailing

types that require no pinching or pruning. Other improvements have been seen in Verbena, Salvia, Impatiens and Fuchsia.

Don't overlook "indoor" or tropical foliage plants for shady areas. Cacti and succulents can also be used, but don't combine them with plants that require more moisture.

Perennials are generally treated as annuals in containers and not overwintered. Bulbs and bulb-like plants can also be grown in containers. Ornamental grasses and grass-like plants grown in containers make bold statements.

Either alone or for height in a mixed container, consider woody plants. If you want to evoke an English garden, container roses are a good choice. Vines on a trellis can also be used in containers. Consider morning glory, Nasturtium, scarlet runner bean, or canary creeper.

Many vegetables and herbs can be successfully grown in containers as well. **LM**

M. Roll and C.R. Wilson are Colorado State University Extension horticulture agents.



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