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## MAINTENANCE: TRENCHERS

### Ditch Witch

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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](http://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](http://LandPride.com)



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## A business with bite

Jim Agabedis offers an organic solution to tick and mosquito control.

**W**HEN 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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## 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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# MYBIGGESTMISTAKE

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

**R**ISK 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.