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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

**A**t 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

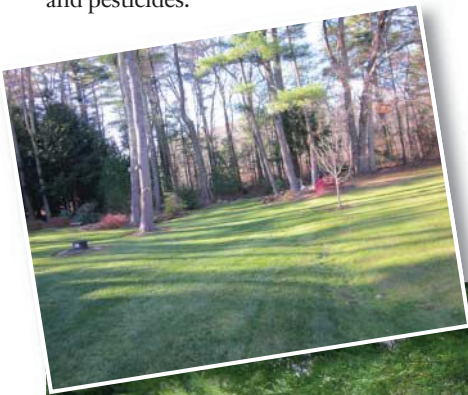
Fleming, who is an agronomist, learned about Holganix from one of his distributors. Since he's been using it, he says he's noted better color, fewer disease problems, healthier and stronger root systems and better control of broadleaf weeds on his customers' lawns.

"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.

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

PHOTOS: GRASSMASTER PLUS

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#### **Joe Boggs**

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Boggs is a commercial horticulture educator, providing support to the Green Industry.

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#### **Rex Bastian, Ph.D.**

*Regional Technical Advisor  
The Care of Trees/Davey Tree Expert Co.*

Bastian joined The Care of Trees in January of 1989 after receiving his Ph.D. from Iowa State University, majoring in entomology. His emphasis is on education and training, public relations and diagnostics. He is an ISA Board Certified Master Arborist and currently serves on the ISA Board Certified Master Arborist Test Committee.

### MODERATOR:

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“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

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# SNOW+ICE

## GUIDE



Snow and ice contractors are adding specialty services and equipment like agricultural tractors to improve residential snow profits.

# On the home front

Three snow contractors put a new twist on winter's residential market. **BY DAN JACOBS**

**WHEN WINTER'S ICY** tendrils snake their way through the northern part of the country, many contractors put the mowers away and attach plows to the fronts of their trucks. But today they're doing so on the heels of a couple seasons where snowfall was erratic and unpredictable.

In the face of such uncertainty, contractors can't confidently rely on the residential market to earn their winter keep, and many of them have come to

prefer the steadier, long-term income generated by commercial accounts.

Nonetheless, snow contractors have found several ways to differentiate themselves and make money from their residential services. Here's a look at how three contractors are doing just that.

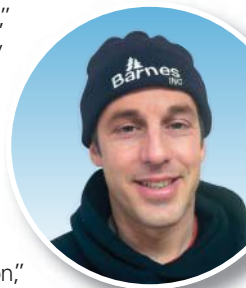
### Short-term accounts

Madison, Wis.-based Barnes Inc. provides both commercial and residential service during the long Wisconsin winters. And while the bulk of the winter income is derived from the commercial accounts,

Barnes is growing its residential base, often with the clients dropped by competitors leaving this part of the market.

"It's a balancing game," says Chris Schultz, quality control coordinator and sidewalk snow removal division manager for Barnes.

"When you transition to residential, you have to do that in a timely fashion," he says. "Getting to your residential accounts as soon as you can after your commercial accounts is the challenge."



BARNES INC.'S CHRIS SCHULTZ

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Barnes is large enough and flexible enough to offer traditional snow services along with vacation and emergency services. Many customers are content to take care of their own

driveways—until a big snow comes along. Nobody wants to shovel a 15-in. snowfall, Schultz says.

“Because we are so big, we’re able to take on customers for a short period of time,” he says.



Providing short-term snow removal services is a gateway to full-time customers for Barnes Inc.

Even when the snows don’t pile up quite that high, many customers call on Barnes to provide services while they’re away for the holidays or on a business trip. They hire Barnes to take care of their properties during those times.

“We’re very flexible like that,” Schultz says. “Whenever our customers are gone and need snow removal services, we’re there for them. It’s a nice service to be able to offer for people because it’s one less thing they have to worry about. One less thing customers want to do is come home to three fines because their snow removal wasn’t done. It’s one phone call. It’s peace of mind for them.”

It’s all about delivering on a need. “We’ve been doing that forever,” Schultz says. “It’s one of our selling points. We’ll pick up full-time customers from that because they’re so happy with our service that we’re able to fit them in for a week or two. They don’t want to continue to do their own snow removal, so they’ll hire us out for the rest of the season. It’s a nice service for our customers because we’re able to take the work on and not lack any quality or service.”

## Concierge service

The unpredictable nature of winter weather often brings late night and sometimes very long hours.

When he first entered the Green Industry, Aaron Smith worked in snow removal for a large landscaping company in Minnesota.

“I could be gone for 80 hours straight and not see anybody, not sleep and barely eat,” says Smith, general manager/  
*continued on page 48*

PHOTO: BARNES INC.

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sales manager for Essex, Vt.-based S&D Landscapes. "It was fun for the first two events. After that it got kind of old."

It was old for his new bride, too, and Smith promised when he started work-

ing in the family business he wouldn't work those hours again. Yet the allure of winter income proved too strong.

Not wanting to break his promise to his wife, Smith had to find a way to bring in the income without working

those long hours. Smith's solution was to offer a highly personal, higher-margin concierge snow removal service.

"We use walk-behind snow blowers," Smith says. "We service some of our summer clients and a few who are not. The minimum charge is \$45 for a single width or a very short double-width driveway from 3 in. to 6 in. of snow. More than 6 in. is \$65. In the case of continuous snow, we're trying to be there every 4 in."

The route is small and Smith uses only two workers. And the service includes more than just clearing snow from a driveway.

"If your car is in the driveway, the car will get brushed off," Smith says. "It does not get scraped for ice for liability reasons. We hand shovel around all the cars so there is no snow underneath the car. We snow blow the front walks and city walks."

Because S&D only provides the concierge snow removal to a few customers, the service can be customized, such as clearing a client's back deck by request.

"The beauty of it is, it was an afterthought," Smith says. "Because our budget is set up to recover in the summer, this boils down to extra operating capital and keeping guys busy."

Smith acknowledges it's been difficult to manage expectations. Two years ago there wasn't that much snow, and customers were thrilled with the service. Last year, when the snow was much heavier, some customers found themselves with a \$500 monthly bill.

That said, Smith has some very devoted followers.

"We looked at doing something else, expanding in a different direction, and we got some push back when we suggested we would drop the service," Smith says.

## Tractor-based approach

Chris Marino, owner of Xtreme Snow Pros of Mahwah, N.J., visited a Montreal, Canada-based colleague to learn about the approach contractors there

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ANGLED RIGHT



SCOOP POSITION



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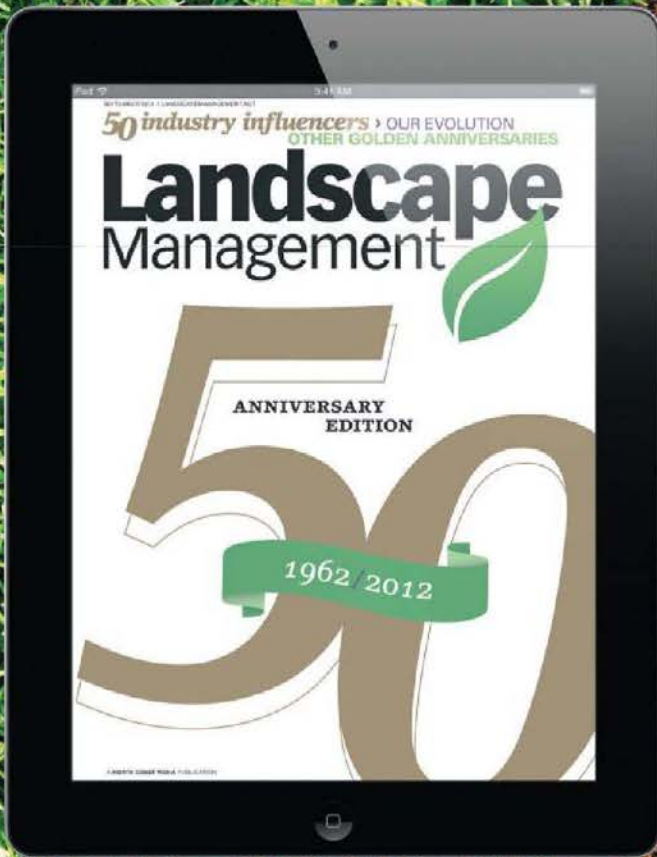


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