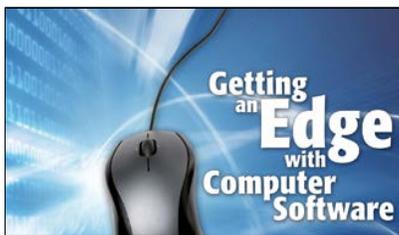# LandscapeOnline.com
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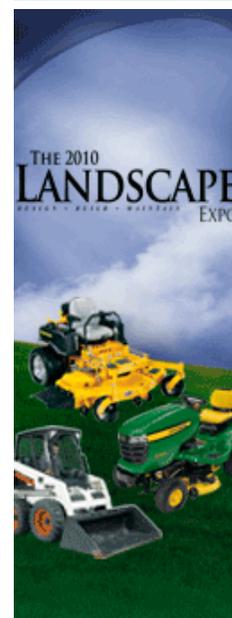## Getting An Edge With Computer Software

By Ashley Harbaugh, assistant editor

There are many different types of computer software and technology that serve to maximize business and management efficiency for landscape contractors.
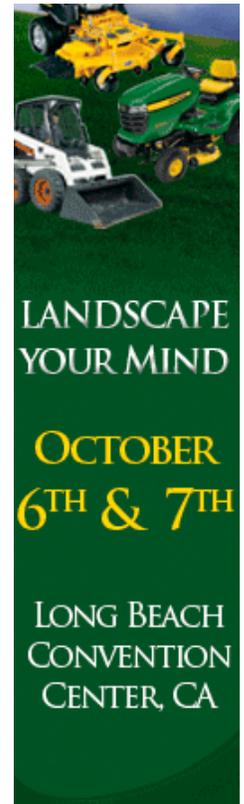
Computer software specializing in landscape maintenance helps keep contractors' business operations organized and up-to-date.

In the current down economy, competition for the limited supply of jobs available is intense.

Landscape contractors are looking to find different ways to bolster their income, whether it's adding new services to their service inventory or cutting waste in their existing operations. But one important option that has tremendous potential for both improving and expanding a contractor's business is computer software.

Design and imaging software allows contractors to provide a clear image of their design vision to their clients. Using the imaging software PRO Landscape, a digital photograph can be taken of the client's home or building and then overlaid with plant material, hardscapes, water features, etc. The software also gives the option of rendering the image into a CAD drawing. *Photo courtesy of Drafix Software*

Design software, such as PRO Landscape, not only gives visual representation of the contractor's vision, it can also provide accurate scaled measurements. With visuals and measurements in hand, contractors can create professional-looking and accurate estimates for their clients.

Efficiently managing workforce labor and hours cuts costs and waste in a landscaping business. Labor tracking, such as with Exaktime's JobClock System, enables employers to analyze individual, group or total employee performance, and how much time and money is being spent for employees by task or area.

Design Software

Design software is an excellent tool for landscape contractors because it allows the landscaper to see different variations of possible landscape designs for their client, and it provides for the client a clear image of the landscaper's vision.

PRO Landscape by Drafix Software creates stunning designs and helps contractors and designers with all aspects of any landscape project, from imaging, to planning, to proposing the project to the client. A digital photograph can be taken of the customer's home or residential building, and then grass, mulch, water features, hardscapes, etc. that are taken from the software's extensive image library can be overlaid onto the photograph, thus giving the client a complete design look. In addition, the program can render the landscape visual into a CAD drawing, which ensures accurate scaled measurements, and it can also import AutoCAD DWG or DXF files from other CAD programs. Once the visuals and measurements are finished, the software lets the designer create a professional-looking estimate that is based on either the photo image or the CAD plan based on the contractor's prices and tax rate. A bid can be created in less than five minutes, and the designer can instantly print out a material list, plant information, and a cover sheet for the client.

Exaktime's JobClocks eliminate the hassles of manually keeping track of worker attendance and allow contractors to keep accurate accounts of worker hours. Workers simply clock in and out with the correctly colored keytabs, and supervisors can then instantly access worker time and attendance records. According to the manufacturer, these clocks offer up to a 60 percent decrease in payroll calculations, and a 22-48 percent decrease in overtime pay. *Photo courtesy of Exaktime*

Organizing a crew to go out and manually measure property can rack up costs in terms of labor, fuel and time. By doing land measurement through a computer, contractors can save time and resources. With the online measurement program Go iLawn, a contractor types in the address of the property, an image of the property appears, and the contractor can then trace with the mouse the parts of the property that need to be measured. Photo courtesy of Go iLawn

It is important to keep the equipment that gets the most use in perfect working order, which means keeping regular equipment maintenance schedules. With TurfCentric's SmartShop software, a contractor can receive audible and visual alerts (on screen and via reports) when equipment requires service, and generate service work orders directly from the equipment section.

Another feature that makes this particular software program unique is its holiday lighting design feature. Since holiday lighting is becoming a more popular service for contractors seeking to add to their bottom line, the software's holiday lighting feature makes it even easier for contractors to expand into seasonal decorating. Landscapers can use light strings, icicle lights, and over 100 displays (such as snowmen, bells, etc.) plus garland, wreath, and light nets. The holiday lighting is also tied into the estimating so a contractor can quickly create a bid for his or her work.

Software:

Here is a list of all the software programs highlighted in the article. Check out their websites for more information.

- ArborPro: www.arborprousa.com
- Arborscape Pro: www.arborscapepro.com
- Blizzard Buster: www.adkad.com
- Exaktime's JobClock System: www.exaktime.com
- Go iLawn: www.goilawn.com
- Gopher Landscape and Billing Software: www.gophersoftware.com
- GroundsKeeper Pro: www.adkad.com
- MaintStar: www.maintstar.com
- MoreVisibility: www.morevisibility.com
- PRO Landscape: www.drafix.com
- TurfCentric's Grounds Care System: www.turfcentric.com
- TurfCentric's SmartShop: www.turfcentric.com
- ServiceCEO: www.insightdirect.com

- SLICEplus: www.sliceplus.com
- WaterMark PRO: www.sciencehill.net

Properly caring for equipment and trucks is a crucial part of a landscape contractor's business. Fleet maintenance software like TurfCentric's SmartShop automatically alerts mechanics when scheduled maintenance is due, eliminating the manual systems and guesswork often associated with preventative maintenance operations. It also keeps records of the parts and labor costs of services performed on equipment.

In addition to keeping inventories of landscaping materials, software like TurfCentric's Grounds Care System can also keep inventories of machinery and equipment. With equipment inventories, detailed references of equipment history, in terms of parts and labor, can be made and easily accessed.

Landscape management software such as TurfCentric's Grounds Care System allows landscape contractors to organize turf and landscape maintenance operations. This software lets you set up maintenance service schedules and chemical and fertilizer schedules, list the materials needed for specific jobs, assign crews to worksites, track weather and irrigation data, etc.

Measurement Technology

Manually measuring property for landscape work is a process that uses up time and resources that can be better spent elsewhere. Land measurement technology, however, can make measurements quickly and accurately without contractors even needing to visit the location.

Go iLawn is an online measuring service that can be used to measure both commercial and residential properties. Developed by GIS Dynamics, Go iLawn is a web-based subscription with no software to download or install, and it is available online at www.goilawn.com 24 hours a day. A contractor first enters the address of the property and then an aerial photo of the property appears with outlined parcel boundaries. A contractor can then trace anything on the photo with his or her mouse, whether it's a lawn, driveway, swimming pool, roof, etc., and Go iLawn will calculate and immediately display the measurements results. This innovative technology is accurate, quick and easy to use, and saves time and money. For a free trial of the product, go to www.goilawn.com/promo and enter the code PE1215.

For landscape professionals who offer tree care and maintenance services, tree maintenance software is a very helpful tool for business organization. With Arborscape Pro software, landscapers can create, edit and link worksite plans, maps and image files, and they can increase business with integrated scheduling, phone logging, work-crew planning, call-back tracking, and more.

Tree management software like ArborPro has a comprehensive inventory program to assist contractors in the efficient management of trees, landscape and physical assets. These programs utilize GIS technology to provide the user with an immediate visual representation of any field asset. Areas or sites can be quickly highlighted on a map, maintenance costs calculated, work lists issued and tasks completed.

Keeping track of pesticide and other chemical applications to lawns is of course important for contractors to know. GroundsKeeper Pro software allows contractors to keep detailed records of chemical applications to landscapes, thus ensuring that all the steps necessary for the chemical process are followed through.

Labor Management Software

Keeping employee hours properly tracked can save contractors a significant amount of money, as well as ensure that they are getting the most out of their workforce. Handwritten timecards can be problematic for contractors because it's easy for workers to "fudge" numbers, and it can be time-consuming for bookkeepers to both decipher handwriting and manually enter the information. New labor management software can help save contractors from all these headaches.

The JobClock System offered by Exaktime tracks time and attendance for every worker at every jobsite 24/7. JobClocks are battery-powered, weatherproof portable timeclocks that are locked down at each jobsite 24 hours a day, rain or shine. Each worker carries green and red keytabs on their own key ring that identifies them in the system (the green tab to clock in, the red tab to clock out), and a supervisor can then use a PDA to collect the time and attendance records from the timeclock. The records collected can in turn be easily transferred into the company's TimeSummit software, which offers clear, concise attendance reports. Data can also be exported directly into most accounting and payroll systems, thus eliminating time-consuming payroll calculations.

Along with getting the most out of employees, it is important to also get the most out of the equipment that the employees use. Equipment maintenance programs enable contractors to keep regular maintenance of machinery and equipment up-to-date, as well as record the past histories of machines. By taking care of tools and equipment, contractors save money and time in the long run.

Knowing which materials are in stock and not in stock is crucial for keeping business operations running smoothly. Landscape software such as Gopher can keep a contractor's entire inventory overview, and can also tell him or her how much of certain materials will be needed for jobs in a specific date range, how much material needs to be ordered, which vendors to order from and how much they will cost, and so on.

Storing pesticides and chemicals in proper storage buildings help reduce the risk of poisoning and injuries among pesticide handlers and agricultural employees, and will also help you protect against chemical spills, children and animal poisonings, theft, fire and unauthorized access.

Irrigation design software like WaterMark PRO is a huge advantage for irrigation installation and management. This software allows contractors to calculate sprinkler head spacing, spray radius, spray pattern within the parameters of available pressure and water flow, etc. This software can also keep irrigation histories of treated areas by date.

Business Management Software

Managing and analyzing all the various costs of landscape projects, such as equipment, labor, materials, etc., in addition to the profits that those projects entail, can be a complex, potentially overwhelming practice. Efficiently keeping track of all the operations that go into a landscaping business can be difficult, but business management software can keep project records organized and accessible.

SLICE Technologies provides software solutions to landscape, nursery, wholesale, maintenance, and retail garden center operations. The company's flagship software product, SLICEplus, offers the functions and support needed to manage a business efficiently. The software program helps take care of all the essentials of a landscape project, from estimating a project, to controlling the flow of materials and other resources on the job, to managing the contract, to billing the client for the work and, finally, to the job costing of the project. By keeping a careful and orderly account of financial records from the beginning of a project to its end, contractors benefit from the increased efficiency by potentially adding more projects without any conflicts.

Snow removal is a service that many contractors are adding to their inventories. Software like Blizzard Buster that specializes in managing the logistics of snow removal, such as creating routes, billing customers, etc., helps keep contractors on top of things.

Since more contractors are expanding into holiday lighting installation, software like ServiceCEO that helps them with this business niche is a useful tool. Organizing and viewing jobs, customers and routes, as well as keeping track of equipment, ensures that contractors can install holiday lighting without any problems. Design software also helps with creating visuals and presenting them to clients.

For contractors who maintain city parks, park management software allows them to manage large areas of land effectively. MaintStar's park management software has screens and tables to record park features like trees, walkways, paths, courts, etc., and the contractor can then create work orders, management histories and inspection schedules.

Landscape and Tree Maintenance Software

Managing and maintaining landscape grounds and trees is a crucial aspect of many contractors' service inventories. Keeping track of specific jobs, materials, labor, as well as costs and revenue, can be unnecessarily complex. Software specializing in landscape grounds and tree maintenance, however, can help contractors managing these operations no problem.

For tree care, Arborscape Pro software was designed by arborists for arborists to save time by keeping bid, billing, and contact data at their fingertips. For grounds care, GroundsKeeper Pro by ADKAD Technologies has features that include scheduling, routing, billing/invoicing, customer maintenance, job estimating, payroll, business tracking expenses, chemical application tracking, etc.

ADKAD Technologies also offers the Blizzard Buster software for landscape professionals who include snowplowing and removal in their inventories. The Blizzard Buster creates routes, bills customers, keeps track of how much customers owe, reports on income earned, etc.

Landscape software with GIS (Geographic Integration System) enables contractors to work visually with land features. A contractor can view asset details, work orders and all related work history with park maintenance software that utilizes GIS (such as MaintStar).

The Internet is such an important tool for business advertisement because it can reach untold numbers of people, so having a visually appealing, user-friendly website is an important way to gain potential customers. The company CAST Lighting partnered with the Internet marketing company MoreVisibility to enhance their site's presence on the web. After implementing the changes that MoreVisibility recommended, CAST Lighting's site traffic increased dramatically. *Photo courtesy of MoreVisibility*

Internet Traffic

The word-of-mouth advertisement that comes from doing quality work for the right price is of course a good way to get a landscape contractor's business known, but chances are not very many people will hear about it.

The Internet, however, is a fantastic means for reaching large populations of people because of its ease and accessibility. In order to take advantage of the nearly unlimited advertisement potential of the web, marketing companies that specialize in Internet marketing can help contractors create professional-looking sites for their businesses that draw floods of visitors.

MoreVisibility is a company that helps clients discover how to best utilize the marketing potential that the Internet offers. Search Engine Optimization (SEO), or finding ways to maximize website traffic, is a cornerstone of the company, and it constantly seeks to improve results within major search engines. To find ways to improve those results, a team of search engineers first carefully reviews the client's site and then provides a detailed written analysis and recommendations. The company then works closely with clients to help them implement those changes, and in certain cases will perform the work themselves. Keywords are also a crucial part of the SEO initiative, and the company has a highly effective process for selecting the most appropriate keywords by taking into account client objectives, site content considerations and empirical data from search engines.

Internet-Based Resources

LawnSite.com is the lawn and landscaping industry's largest online community. Since 1998, this site has been a premier online resource for lawn care and landscaping business owners. Joining the site is free, and members are allowed to ask and answer questions, participate in discussions, sell and buy equipment, contact other members, and more. Whether you are a beginner or an industry veteran, this site could provide beneficial information for you.

Since we live in such a technologically fast-paced society, computer technology is becoming more of a necessity for any business owner. Computer software allows contractors to keep track of and manage their business more efficiently, and it presents a fantastic opportunity to capitalize on the instant connections that come from the Internet. In an economy where people are struggling to find new ways to compete for jobs, computer technology and software may be the way to go.

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