

The Mighty PDA



While I may not always be the first person to realize when I am wrong I am usually the first to admit it. Such a situation happened to me recently. For a couple of years now a friend had been touting the use of this little device called a "PDA" or "Personal digital assistant" in managing turf. To be honest I have always thought of these little gadgets as really nothing more than glorified calculators or agendas. Well I was wrong - really wrong.

A PDA is essentially a handheld computer, which despite its small size, will surprise with its capability to replace many of the functions of the standard desktop computer. Yes it will do a formidable job of keeping track of your scheduling tasks and to do lists but that just scratches the surface of its abilities.

These devices come in many flavors now with a couple of different operating systems, but for the purpose of this article we'll focus on the very basic Palm IIIxe (\$199 after rebate). At the time of the publishing of this article the Palm IIIxe is no longer in production but has been replaced by higher performance and even more economic models.

Equipped with the Palm operating system, the small Palm zips through most all tasks that it is given. With only 8mb of ram one might think that is hardly enough however 8mb proved to be plenty of storage and memory to operate the many standard applications that come with the little unit such as the address book, Date Book, Memo pad and more. However, you don't begin to see the potential of a PDA until you start installing some other applications.

There are many applications out there that can enhance the job of a superintendent, assistant, mechanic, irrigation technician and more and the good news is that the majority of applications for PDA's are, well, down right cheap! We'll take a look at one example here: HandDBase. HandDBase is a program for keeping records - of anything and it sells for \$49.95 u.s. It allows you to create your own fields and enter data into those fields to create records. In a few short minutes I was keeping fertilizer applications, pesticide applications and many others on sorted database records. HandDBase allows you to create Pop up selection lists that expedite data entry even further by picking a product such as 'Rovral' from a list rather than entering it each time. Having information stored in a database like this enables it to be manipulated much easier.



When it comes to keeping sensitive operational records it would be irresponsible to not have current backups for safety reasons and Palm PDA's have the ideal solution for this - hot syncing. This is the process of placing your PDA in its cradle while the Palm software on your PC backs up all databases. This keeps all of your information safe. In the case of HandDBase, you are then able to export the data which you have entered in your PDA to other applications such as Excel for more detailed reporting. There are back up memory packs available for many different PDA's so hot syncing is not the only option for data security but, it may be the most convenient.

In the field, HandDBase is a real work horse, you can create tables on the fly in seconds to deal with any record keeping duty. Quickly entering data such as sprinkler heads in need of repair, Parts orders, Inventory adjustments, employee data, environmental data while at the same time updating your to do list!

HandDBase is just one of many great applications available that adapt to the job of managing turf.

Then with perhaps one of the best team working features of the devices, point your PDA at that of a co-worker and 'beam' them the information. Wireless infrared communication! Many applications support this method of networking the units.

The PDA can seamlessly work with most of your favorite applications such as Excel, Word and others using the many document conversion utilities available. While you could do it, attempting to write a novel on the PDA may not be an effective use of the device and nor should it be as that is not what they are designed to do. For intensive document tasks your desktop PC is probably still your best choice. However when the two are combined in your daily operations they will greatly reduce the amount of time needed in the office. Worthy of note is the fact that one could easily use a PDA to keep track of all operational data of a turf management operation if need be. This then brings up the question of irrigation system operations. Stay tuned, tight integration is just around the corner.

Quite possibly one of the strongest selling points of the Palm devices is its economical price. Color models are available for under \$500. The Palm operating system is also the system of choice on many other units such as the Handspring Visor line, which is popular for its expansion capabilities. While we have dealt with the Palm PDA in this article, it must be noted that there are many types of PDAs out there (including Windows CE and Apple Newton based devices), each with its own strong points. So shop around for the device which suits your needs.

So far I can't see the end of the Mighty PDA's potential uses . It is rare that we get a tool with this level of convenience at this economical of a price so this so worth checking out. Oh, and as a footnote, I wrote most of this article on the little Palm IIIxe!

Derek Vokey