"We've shined over the years when people say to us, 'You cannot grow grass here.' "

— Soil Tek founder and co-owner Brad Blackman

RODNEY WHITE/THE REGISTER

Taking aim: Anton Nichols of Soil Tek sprays compost and grass seed in a process called terra seeding, a sodding substitute.

To boldly grow

where nothing has sprouted before

Soil Tek makes Filtrexx Filter Soxx, the orange or black mesh tubes used at construction sites to prevent soil erosion.

By KRISTIN SENTY
REGISTER CORRESPONDENT

Chicago is home to the White Sox, and Boston holds bragging rights about its baseball champion Red Sox. But Des Moines recently is gaining a reputation for its "orange soxx."

The highly recognizable bright-orange or black mesh tubes snaking around metro-area construction sites and guarding storm water sewer drains are a product licensed for use in Iowa by Soil Tek. The cutting-edge Filtrexx Filter Soxx have gained rapid acceptance in the local construction industry as an effective solution to soil erosion.

Soil Tek founder and co-owner Brad Blackman draws upon a military analogy when describing his company, which, to date, is best known for the "green roof" of the new downtown Des Moines library now under construction.

"Roofs, asphalt and concrete are all the enemy," said Blackman. "There's nothing better than natural vegetation for erosion control, and the construction industry is beginning to realize this."

The Filtrexx tubes are filled with composted material.

According to Soil Tek President Tom Truelsen, the number of contracts and the size of the company's operation have tripled in the past year. Popular products and services besides the filter tube is a lawn-growth process called terra seeding. The method blows organic compost mixed with grass seed onto an area as a substitute for sodding.

Blackman and wife Kristin started the business in 2001, as a residential mulch-blowing operation called Groundscapes. Business was slow, so they expanded their services to include the Filter Soxx and terra seeding.

Not one to cringe at a challenge, Blackman said the company quickly established a reputation for its ability to boldly grow grass where none had sprouted before.

"We've shined over the years when people say to us, 'You cannot grow grass here,' " said Blackman.

In the early days, the company lacked capital to expand, and costs for additional trucks and equipment were steep. Enter Truelsen and Brad Blumenthal, who saw potential in the company and formed a partnership with Blackman in November 2002.

However, Soil Tek's key niche now is combatting and managing construction site

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Soiled sock: At right, Jared Bright, Soil Tek inspector, totes a Filter Soxx. Soil Tek co-owner Tom Truelsen, from left, Bradley Stanbrough of Stanbrough Real Estate and Home Builders, and Soil Tek co-owner Brad Blackman help put the Filter Soxx to use on a building site.

About Soil Tek

LOCATION: 4400 N.E. 14th Street, Des Moines

INFORMATION: Call (515) 244-7474 or go online at www.soil-tek.com.

OWNERS: Brad Blackman, operations manager; Don Blumenthal, partner; Tom Truelsen, president

FOUNDED: November 2002

SERVES: Des Moines, Cedar Rapids and Omaha, Neb.

EMPLOYEES: 30

REVENUES: Declined to disclose

OPERATION: Specializes in environmentally friendly, compost-based solutions for erosion control and lawn seeding.

YOU KNOW THEM FROM: The Filtrexx Filter Soxx are the orange mesh tubes at construction sites and storm water sewer drains. The tubes stop soil erosion.

Soil Tek manages 40 local construction sites

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erosion.

In recent years, tighter enforcement of governmental regulations for storm water pollution prevention has dramatically changed the way the construction industry manages urban sites. Developers must take measures to combat erosion, or face serious consequences.

According to Truelsen, six-figure fines were issued to some local developers last year for non-compliance with Environmental Protection Agency regulations.

"The first time they came in locally, they came in with a hammer," he said. "The days of construction sites tearing up the soil and leaving it like an open wound are over."

Solutions for construction-site erosion were suddenly in demand, with Soil Tek poised to offer its kinder and gentler options.

Bart Weller, director of public works with the city of Clive, was drawn by the eco-friendly approach. "We were probably one of the first to try their system," he said. The city now regularly uses both terra seeding and the Filter Soxx in construction and road-improvement projects.

"In the metro, our biggest environmental battle is erosion control . . . and we do use (Soil Tek's) expertise," Weller said.

David Hanson, production manager for Triton Homes, a developer of townhomes in the metro area, now incorporates erosion control into its designs.

"Large developers really have a responsibility to preserve Iowa's resources, and to make sure we're not impacting the environment," he said.

Hanson utilizes Soil Tek's Filter Soxx in building water-retention pools, and regularly contracts with them to manage on-site EPA compliance during the construction process.

Truelsen said that Soil Tek currently manages 40 local construction sites to help maintain compliance, and has increased its staff to include several job-site inspectors.

"Brad and Tom are really two passionate individuals . . . with a proactive approach to storm water prevention that's on the leading edge," Hanson said. "Their responsibility and thoroughness really helps to protect the contractor."

In 2003, Soil Tek installed 80,000 linear feet of Filter Soxx, which jumped to about 250,000 in 2004.

Truelsen said the biggest surprise is how the company's role in the construction industry has changed dramatically.

"When we first got involved, I really thought we'd be landscaping, mulching, and growing some grass," he said. "What this has evolved into is high-tech erosion control, dealing with big developers and the government. We've gone from a kind of feel-good business to a critical, fast-paced industry."

RODNEY WHITE/THE REGISTER

Concrete washout: Concrete trucks can wash out their loads and dump the water here.