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Man vs. bugs

By [Toni Whitt](#)

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Mike Gould is like McDonald's. He figures he has served billions, of [mosquitoes](#) that is. And he is always the main course.

For some reason [mosquitoes](#) and no-see-ums -- particularly the no-see-ums -- love to feed on him. It does not help that he lives on Palma Sola Bay and has a backyard lined with mangroves.

"The dinner bell rings as soon as I go out at night," he said.

When he complained about the problem a couple of years ago, a friend told him about a new company called MosquitoNix. Then he saw one of the company's bright yellow vehicles in his neighborhood, wrote down the number and called for service.

Now his backyard is covered in a botanical fog several times a day that kills the biting bugs and keeps new ones from making their homes there. Gould, 58, says he can eat his hamburgers outside without fear.

Combating biting insects is big business in Florida, where [mosquitoes](#) and no-see-ums still outnumber humans -- even with the influx of population in the past decade. As people have flocked to Florida, they have moved into territory -- including far-flung outposts in the east -- formerly belonging to the bugs.

You can hear it at county commission meetings across the state where residents complain that the county does not spray their neighborhoods often enough.

That is where Reese Lansberg comes in.

Lansberg saw an opportunity in the battle between man and mosquito. Having been in the ecotourism business, he also liked that MosquitoNix offered a repellent that is considered a "green product" because it is derived from plants and is quickly biodegradable.

So he sold his ecotourism/fly-fishing business, based in Oklahoma City, bought a MosquitoNix franchise and decided to head to Florida.

Since arriving in Sarasota three years ago, Lansberg has signed on 1,100 customers from Tampa to Naples and is finally making a profit.

"It took a couple of years," he said.

High-end customers, too

Lansberg has 13 employees and a small fleet of bright yellow vehicles, including a Mini Cooper with dead [mosquitoes](#) painted on the roof and doors.

Just this year he expanded his franchise into Tampa, where he hopes to capture more customers from Davis Island to South Tampa to Clearwater.

Fears of the West Nile virus and equine encephalitis have made MosquitoNix popular where people keep horses, such as around the Lakewood Ranch polo grounds and out toward Lakeland.

Lansberg's business territory covers New Port Richey in the north, goes east to Lakeland and south to Marco Island. He has offices in Naples and Tampa, but chose to keep his headquarters on the edge of the [Sarasota-Bradenton International Airport](#).

His success so far has been results based, he says. He claims to be able to eradicate 90 percent to 95 percent of [mosquitoes](#) and no-see-ums using a product that is safe for the environment. Lansberg's operation also gets high praise for customer service in an age when many companies struggle to offer personal attention.

Lansberg has some demanding customers.

He has installed systems for the Hyatt Regency Coconut Resort in Bonita Springs and the upscale golf and country club communities that WCI Communities has developed in Venice, Naples and Marco Island.

His first big job was for the Hammock Bay Golf and Country Club that WCI developed right next to what was essentially a swamp on the outskirts of Naples.

The [mosquitoes](#) and no-see-ums were so bad that in the first couple of months, company officials were concerned that they might have made a mistake.

"We're the last stop before you get to the Everglades, so it's mosquito country," said Scott Finer, chief engineer for Hammock Bay Golf and Country Club. "When we first opened in 2004 our first event outdoors was an absolute disaster. People were being carried off by [mosquitoes](#)."

Finer said the visitors moved indoors and were standing in the country club's halls to eat their dinner. That had executives scared.

"This place was designed to be an outdoor environment," Finer said. "Those first couple of months everyone was cringing saying we can't have any outdoor activities."

Finer was assigned to find a solution, and after doing extensive research he called MosquitoNix headquarters in Texas.

The company's money-back guarantee, its attention to detail and its environmentally friendly solutions to the mosquito problem persuaded Finer to let them have a shot at the enormous problem at Hammock Bay.

Lansberg had to get rid of the biting bugs around the swimming pool, the country club terraces, the tennis courts, the driving range and the 18th hole, which was right next to the mangroves.

For \$70,000, the company installed five systems that spray a fog of insecticide several times a day covering 100,000 square feet. Those first two weeks, Finer said he swept "millions of dead [mosquitoes](#)" from the pool deck.

The country club uses both the Pyrethrum, a biodegradable insecticide derived from chrysanthemums, and a repellent made from a mix of the essential oils from lemons, rosemary and mint.

The system also helped the club receive an "Audubon Gold Seal," which requires that the course meet a stringent set of EPA regulations for how it cares for the greens and keeps the bugs away.

"Only a handful of clubs have the gold seal from Audubon," Finer said.

That played into the club's decision to use the mixture of rosemary, lemon and peppermint oils near the mangroves. That mixture is most typically used for homes on the water.

It is not used in many other places, unless requested, because it can leave an oily residue. Finer is impressed that MosquitoNix is always on the lookout for the most eco-friendly, yet effective mosquito repellents.

He said he received "all kinds of accolades" from WCI for finding a solution that worked so well. Since then MosquitoNix has installed a system for WCI's Venetian Golf and River Club in Venice.

"We have installed it in numerous WCI locations," Finer said. "Most of the bigwigs like to come down here and play golf and eat around the pool. Anything we build from now on, we'll install the system."

Bread and butter

While Lansberg has more than a dozen corporate customers, homeowners are the company's bread and butter.

For about 90 percent of homeowners, a system typically costs about \$2,700 to \$3,400, depending on lot size and coverage area. Maintenance for homeowners is \$50 to \$60 a month.

The thin hoses and tiny nozzles -- 5/8 inch long and a quarter-inch in diameter -- are easily hidden and often are put into fences along the property line.

The pump for the system is enclosed and hidden, and while the system is on a timer, customers can also turn it on and off with a remote control.

"It's not inexpensive," said Gould, the semi-retired customer who lives on Palma Sola Bay. "It's a regular thing that they charge you a decent amount of money for, but as far as I'm concerned it's worth it to be able to go outside."

Lansberg said he has a great customer base on Longboat Key, Siesta Key and in the bayfront neighborhoods near the Ringling Museum of Art. He says he has even had some mosquito-frustrated customers referred to him by Sarasota County.

"The county has a budget and it can only spray so many times a year," Lansberg said. "It helps but it doesn't last."

Lansberg said homeowners have his technicians' cell phone numbers so that if they are having a party in the backyard and the system malfunctions, an employee can respond right away.

Teresa Hartford, 49, said she practically lives on her unscreened patio overlooking the Manatee River in Ellenton. She and her husband entertain there every other weekend, so she counts on the system to keep her guests from being eaten up.

"The customer service is just phenomenal," Hartford said. "If I have a problem, like one of the nozzles gets plugged up, they are usually out that day to remedy the problem."

Hartford said she can work in her plant beds without getting bitten, and when the couple lights candles outdoors at night, it is now for the ambience and not as a repellent.

"It's not going to be 100 percent effective," she said.

"It won't totally get rid of them. But we don't have any [mosquitoes](#) unless we get a lot of rain, and it has to really rain a lot."

MosquitoNix

Year started: 2002

Projected revenue for 2008: \$20 million

Sites: 20 operations across the United States; most are franchises

More information: www.mosquitonix.com

About the insecticides:

Eco-exempt is a mix of rosemary, mint and lemon. It is oil-based and can leave a residue, but is safe for waterfront properties and is biodegradable. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency does not regulate the all-natural repellent.

Pyrethrum is a biodegradable insecticide taken from the chrysanthemum. It is regulated by the EPA, used in flea baths for dogs and applied to mosquito repellent clothing. County governments typically spray Pyrethrum.