

Company's robots want to do your chores

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Slobs and housework-haters rejoice: If one company has its way, in the near future there will be robots to set the dinner table, clear it after dinner, shovel snow and mop the floor.

In short, the robots will "move in and around the home, doing the mundane tasks that people don't like to do anymore," Friendly Robotics Chief Executive Officer Udi Peless told United Press International in a telephone interview.

For its part, the Pardesiya, Israel-based company has already developed a lawnmower robot, the Robomow, and a vacuum-cleaner robot, the Friendly Vac.

The other innovations are as close as five to 10 years down the road, Peless said, although he added that one of his company's competitors has already developed a robot to mop the floor.

The Robomow barrels around the yard randomly, guided to stay on the lawn by a cable the user must install around the perimeter of his yard, similar to an invisible fence for dogs. At a hi-tech exhibition in Tel Aviv curious onlookers who wandered onto the demonstration patch of turf often had to jump out of Robomow's way.

When the device does make contact with something, like a tree in the middle of the lawn, it backs up and changes direction. This may not be the machine for people who love neat stripes.

Luckily, the newer Friendly Vac doesn't careen into furniture the way the Robomow bumps into obstacles.

"Inside the home, it's done differently, to avoid contact," Peless said. The vacuum cleaner "senses furniture from a distance of half a meter."

It also senses walls, meaning the Friendly Vac doesn't require a cable installment like Robomow.

The company is counting on the fact that people will want to spend close to \$1,700 to avoid doing these chores. For comparison's sake, Sears.com sells rear bag mowers for between \$189 and \$359, while lawn tractors run between \$879 and \$3,000.

However, if Peless' behavior is any indication, perhaps the market is bigger than one might think: He was working on an unrelated business venture when he set out to develop the Robomow in 1995, according to the company.

He demonstrated such an aversion to mowing the lawn that his wife suggested he build a machine to do it for him, the company said.

If one man was willing to leave his job and start a company to avoid cutting the grass, perhaps many more are willing to take on the easier task of shelling out big bucks to get out of it. The Robomow dealer at the exhibition estimated that thousands are sold worldwide.

The Robomow is on sale in 25 countries in the West, Peless added, including the United States, Canada, Western Europe, New Zealand, Australia and South Africa.

Customers have two models to choose from: The RL 850 carries a \$1,095 price tag, and the newer RL 1000 model runs \$1,599. However,

these prices do not include the \$56 perimeter cable or the \$40 set of perimeter pegs.

Peless said repairs and service are done through the company's distributors and dealers in the various countries, so that the question of problems getting robots repaired is "not even an issue."

The machines are "repaired in the field, just like any other appliance," Peless said.

A Robomow replacement blade costs \$68.

Other robots on the market that can handle chores include Roomba and Scooba, both products of Burlington, Mass.-based iRobot. Roomba is a vacuum cleaner, while Scooba mops and dries floors, according to the company, which is best-known for its robotic military technology.

Scooba runs \$400 on the iRobot Web site, while various models of the Roomba range from \$150 to \$330.

Besides being the ultimate toy for gadget geeks, home robots have been suggested as ways to help the elderly or the infirm live independently.

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