Digital Dominance

Electrical and mechanical controllers, move over. Solid state is making its presence felt in the irrigation industry.

by Jack Schember

"If it sells in California, it'll sell anywhere."

This often-quoted axiom may be accurate in describing the phenomenal success of the waterbed, hot tub and Apple computer, but will it ring true for the solid-state irrigation controller?

Manufacturers of irrigation equipment think so. They believe the digital controller will be a big hit with the nation's landscape architects and contractors.

The solid-state controller is already a hit in California. According to a survey by Irri-Trol Mfg. Inc., 70 percent of the irrigation market in California is using solid-state controllers while 30 percent are employing the electrical or mechanical versions.

"But the reverse is true once you get outside California," says Irri-Trol's Chuck Hoover. "Here we found that 30 percent were using solid-state and 70 percent were still using electrical or mechanical.

These odds help pinpoint a potentially huge market for sophisticated irrigation equipment, according to Hoover. "I think solid-state will be big everywhere pretty soon," he says.

Components dominate

Hoover was one of the more than 300 manufacturers and distributors exhibiting landscape supplies and equipment at the 1985 Landscape Industry Show which took place in March at the Long Beach (California) Convention Center.

Produced by the California Landscape Contractors Association, the sixth annual trade show attracted more than 5,000 professional contractors, architects and turf managers, according to Greg Meyer, show chairman.

"There is no other show in the West as diverse as this one," says Meyers, who is vice president of Valley Crest Tree Co.

"We have everything here from A to Z for the landscaper."

Irrigation components dominated the show floor.

More than 35 companies were exhibiting irrigation products like backflow preventors, fittings, PVC pipe, drains, drip emitters, filters, pumps, sprinklers, controllers, valves and meters.

Water is lifeblood

Such displays of irrigation parts are not unusual at the yearly Landscape Industry Show, for in the arid West, water is the lifeblood of landscaping.

"Everything is irrigated here," says Mark Pedicone, a sales representative for the turf division of Rain Bird. "For a built landscape, water is essential." With a construction boom and a strong economy in key Western cities, there is plenty of business for the irrigation industry, Pedicone says.

"There is a demand for more "localized" irrigation products. Landscape architects are designing smaller parcels of property and are specifying that zone watering and low volume irrigation be implemented. Products marketed for this style of irrigation include bubblers, drip emitters and micro spray heads.

The "water manager" is beginning to appear as a viable member of the landscaping work force. Such a specialist will typically approach a homeowner's association or a city planner and propose a water savings plan. The water manager is compensated according to how much he can reduce the water bill. "This is a big trend," Pedicone says.

New to the market is a line of valves and nozzles that makes irrigation "more efficient," says Chuck Turnell of Champion Sprinkler Co.

Champion's new In-Line Y Valve, for example, reduces pressure loss and improves the flow of water, Turnell says.

"We have a line of pop-up sprinklers with matched precipitation rate nozzles," he points out. "Even though the nozzle sizes are different, the lawn still gets the same amount of water."

Joe Silva of Hunter Industries says the landscape manager wants to simplify his sprinkler inventory and find one sprinkler "that can do it all."

Hunter's new Professional Series sprinklers can apply water from a 15-foot radius to a 52-foot radius, and from one-half gallon per minute to 11 ½ gallons per minute, thanks to interchangeable nozzles.

"The contractor can get 12 sprinklers in one, Silva says.

Hunter is planning to market a fully adjustable head with one nozzle for a multiplicity of uses, he indicates.

Solid-state controllers, zone watering, irrigation management and versatile nozzles are not the only trends to catch the fancy of the Western landscaping industry.

Larger trees

Greg Meyer of Valley Crest Tree Co. says architects are now regularly specifying larger trees for commercial sites.

"Budgets are now calling for 15-gallon and 24-gallon trees, rather than the popular five gallon trees of yesterday," he says.

At Belcourt, a swanky residential development in Newport Beach, CA, "contractors were putting in 48-inch box specimen trees like they were as inexpensive as groundcover," Meyer says.

Greg Meyer, vice president of Valley Crest Tree Co.
remembers. The trees cost about $800 each, he says.

Sophistication
Pointing to other trends, Meyer believes there is a direct relationship between landscaping and real estate marketing.

"Landscaping is worth the initial investment because it will pay off handsomely once the building or house is sold," he says.

Many landscape architects and contractors are working closely with developers in building corporate office parks where landscaping is used to lure clients, Meyer confirms.

In short, Meyer says, the industry is becoming more sophisticated, "even down to the homeowner level." He says homeowners are demanding quality workmanship and that in turn breeds higher standards for the industry."

He says the West will continue to be "a haven for architects and landscape contractors" as long as the climate, economy and the outdoor-oriented lifestyles of the people remain unchanged.

Jack Schember is the former editor of Western Landscape News.

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