

RENOVATION TIME

The silver lining to all those clouds we didn't see last summer is the need for lawn renovations. And that's another way for the astute landscaper to put dollars in the ledger.



Many green industry companies have scheduled large numbers of lawn renovations due to the dry turf conditions left in the blistering wake of last summer's drought.

Most renovation work seems to be occurring in the East and Midwest. For the southern and western regions of the country, little rainfall is business as usual, and irrigation systems come into play to provide relief.

"We'll probably be involved in a lot of spring renovations whether we want them or not," says Rick White of ServiceMaster, Downers Grove, Ill. "There's a lot of dead grass out there."

Joseph Kudwa, president and owner of Linden Lawn Care in Michigan, will have completed close to 200 lawn renovations by summer. Portions of Michigan were slammed hard by the drought, receiving .83 inches of rain from May through June. Normal rainfall for that time is six inches, according to Paul Rieke, Ph.D., at Michigan State University. The Lansing area also experienced 37 days above 90°F, well above the average 11 days of above-90 temperatures.

Fulfilling a need

Customers want this service. "They're coming to us requesting something be done, and we simply make suggestions," says Kudwa. Kudwa's company completed about 30 re-dos in the fall, and is expected to do between 100 and 150 this summer.

Rather than prospect extensively, Kudwa distributes flyers among his present customer base, using that base as a more than adequate source of renovation income. "We've got more than we can handle as it is."

Neuvirth Lawn & Landscaping of Omaha did very well by overseeding last fall, when the drought began to taper off. Frank Neuvirth reports that his field personnel encouraged his customers to undergo lawn renovation "because the way things were going, if we didn't re-establish their lawn we wouldn't have any customers this spring."

Neuvirth estimates that 25 to 30 percent of his customers agreed to renovation last year, despite the fact that most have irrigation systems. Total renovation was in the 750,000

Many landscapers did well last fall by making the best of a bad situation: renovating drought-stricken turf.

square foot range.

Neuvirth says "there is quite a nice profit to be found in renovations." He won't be purchasing new equipment this year. "The amount of time we use renovation equipment compared to its cost doesn't fare too well, especially when you compare it to things like mowers. It just doesn't pay off for us," Neuvirth says. He recommends the new fine fescues to his customers because of their drought tolerance.

Neuvirth's neighbor to the north, Leonard Hernoud of Pro Mow in Lincoln, Neb., agrees that the drought created a nice market for lawn renovations last fall. Hernoud's company did no advertising and still managed to drop about 2,000 pounds of seed last year. He and his customers are getting away from traditional bluegrass mixtures, he says, and are using the hardier, more drought-tolerant tall fescues. "We definitely did a much larger percentage of renovations last year, maybe as much as 75 percent," says Hernoud.

Lied's Nursery of Sussex, Wisc., is having no trouble selling lawn renovations among its customers, according to customer service representative Tim Narr.

"Our plan is to focus on our current market of homeowners, rather than find new customers," Narr notes. "We have the necessary equipment and chemicals, and staff additions aren't necessary." He uses a bluegrass blend/ryegrass mixture which has been in good supply.

Lawn renovations play well in Peoria, Ill. Dean Ramseyer of D.A. Hoerr & Sons says many of his for-



Dean Ramseyer of D.A. Hoerr & Sons believes cooperative fall rains could bring good results come spring.

ward-thinking residential and commercial customers also requested renovations in early fall. And the cooperative fall weather gives Ramseyer reason to believe results should be good come spring, but he admits his renovating work is far from over.

"There's still plenty to be done that should give us a good start on spring, and seeding should go well if the weather is good," he says. Ramseyer adds that Hoerr's may also do some sodding projects if the product is reasonably available.

Though customers indeed want relief from torched lawns, Kudwa thinks the degree of work will greatly depend on what kind of budget people will be willing to set for lawn care after "the discouraging summer of 1988."

Where do you begin?

The degree of renovation required (do you start at square one with

Roundup?) obviously depends on the extent of drought stress. As Ramseyer puts it, "You don't need to kill it if it's already dead." Kudwa uses Roundup for coarse fescue problems, goes over the area twice with a slitseeder, then fertilizes.

"We use a fertilizer that will not burn the turf, something with heavy phosphorus and potassium content, like 18-24-12. If the lawn is over-the-hill," says Kudwa, "we explain the circumstances, and recommend slit-seeding. One man can slitseed a 10,000 square-foot lawn in half a day."

Ramseyer's crews can slitseed if plant kills are not total, and lots of power raking and overseeding will probably be in order. "But if the lawn is totally devastated, you're best off stripping it off and cultivating a new seed base."

Though Ramseyer, like Kudwa and others, hasn't had to do much promoting of the service, he is making some changes in his approach. He says recent research suggests the winterizing family of fertilizers is perhaps the better way to go for overall root durability and drought tolerance.

"That would be those fertilizers with lower nitrogen/higher phosphorus content. A winterizing product would be in the range of 14 percent nitrogen, 8 to 10 percent phosphorus." In some cases, Ramseyer says, consumers are going to straight winterizer/fertilizer year-long, and not giving the soil extra nitrogen in the spring.

Another trend Ramseyer thinks might be sprouting among two-income families with little time on their hands is that of using a seed mix that allows the homeowner to slack off a bit in watering and fertilizing and still have something decent.

"That might mean a shift into fescues and perennial ryes," he says. "Bluegrass tolerance is also improving, and the consumer might be happier if the mix gives them a more relaxed maintenance schedule."

Compounded problem

Jay Gilfus, vice president/general manager at Arbor Heights Nursery in Webster, N.Y., says Arbor renovated up to 50 lawns last fall, and he expects more requests come spring. Three lawns were total kills, brought about by excessive thatch buildup of up to 1 1/2 inches. The thatch acted as an insulator, and the high temperatures "cooked the grass right off its roots."

"In severe thatch cases we had to use a sod cutter to strip the thatch off the lawns, which in some cases can take hours of labor. Then we'd verticillate or power rake, reseed, then



Step one of a lawn renovation often involves the application of Roundup to eliminate all plant material.

make a light pass with the vertiseeder to work in the seed. Finally, a high phosphorus fertilizer is added to aid development."

For cases of "no thatch, but very little grass," Gilfus's crews would vertislice and overseed or use a slicer/ seeder or power rake, rake off the loose material and reseed.

A majority of the other cases Gilfus encountered involved maladjusted pH levels of 7 to 8 pH. "We have heavily limestone-based soils in the Rochester area," he explains, "and if the pH is not adjusted downward with sulfur or a sulfur compound, you have weak, shallow-rooted turf. Even if you have the proper fertilizers and nutrients going into the soil, the high pH restricts root and soil exchange capability. Fighting to overcome the difference makes it difficult for grass to be hearty."

Despite the high demand for the renovation service, Gilfus prefers more challenging projects, and only performs renovations as requested. "It's not profitable for us," he says. "It's a labor-intensive, plain vanilla, one-shot deal. Still, we will perform the service to accommodate our customers."

It's "Slitseeding City" at BGT



"There's a lot of dead grass out there," says ServiceMaster's Rick White. He says he'll be doing a lot of lawn renovations this year.

Landscaping in Mundelein, Ill. Jim Biebach says seed is on order, and another slitseeder is on the way to service his commercial and industrial clients.

Biebach believes slitseeding is a profitable, cost-efficient service, thanks to new slitseeders on the market. "If you do it well, you can have a standard grass in two weeks," he says.

Seed availability has not been a problem, however Biebach has seen prices go up about 20 percent. "We pass it along to the customer," he says, "but they don't mind because it (the cost) can be justified, and it's cheaper than (installing) sod."

Business is hot!

Many southern and western companies found the drought posed no problems because hot weather was expected. Bret Boland of Lifescapes of Canton, Ga., says the company did circulate more information on manual watering, and did more of that service than usual.

"We also changed our irrigation management program a bit as far as tuning more people in to how their irrigation systems work," he says. "The drought situation brought to light how well we managed irrigation on the site, pointed out irrigation system weaknesses, and gave us an opportunity to sell hand watering to about five percent of our customers."

Lifescapes has done lots of overseeding, but not total lawn renovations. "Any established fescue in this zone has to be overseeded at least once a year, even without the drought," explains Boland. "The heat down here regularly results in thinning turf."

Messer Landscape of Staunton, Va., doesn't see a big demand for lawn renovation from its commercial or homeowner accounts. Says customer representative Don Esch: "We don't do a lot of lawn reseeding. It's not all that profitable, frankly."

He is recommending his customers go with fine-bladed and turf-type tall fescues. "The fescues did fairly well last year for the most part," says Esch, "but we had problems with Kentucky bluegrass."

Related issues

As an off-shoot of the drought stress, Gilfus says he found grub control to be tougher than usual:

"The grubs burrow deeper to find the moist soil, making it hard to reach them with chemicals."

Jim Biebach of BGT believes the drought of '88 pointed out the need for more professionalism within certain companies seeking a fast buck.

"Too many companies are cutting and running, not pointing out the drought stress problems. I drive by sites all day long," reveals Biebach, "and watch the leaves fall off the trees. Maybe customer budgets don't allow more maintenance."

He admits that sprinkling bans were perhaps a factor depending on location, but he was able to easily sell manual watering. "It was unbelievable the number of water tankers we had going," Biebach recalls, thanks to the company's private lake. "It's an expensive service, but if you're knowledgeable, you can convince a customer to water manually."

Rain in '89?

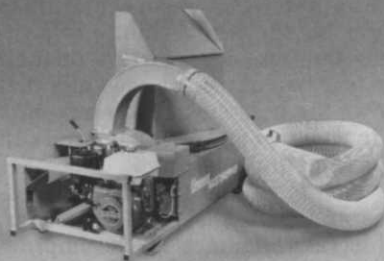
Will drought conditions return in 1989? Norton Strommen, chief meteorologist with the World Agricultural Outlook, does not offer any predictions, but he says soil recovery is going well in most of the country.

"The Mississippi Delta up through the Ohio River Valley and the Great Lakes area has had a good moisture recharge," reports Strommen. "And in the West, the cumulative snow pack for the season—which provides the runoff that fills irrigation reservoirs in the spring—is at or above normal."

Of concern is the western Great Plains states, from the Canadian border to down to Texas, which have escaped much winter snow and fall rain.

Strommen adds that history has yet to record two consecutive major droughts, and prospects are for significant improvement. However, the mild winter could lead to greater insect problems in 1989. **LM**

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