

Certification:

The professional edge

BY KEN KRIZNER

As water use becomes a bigger issue, certification may be required.



A CALIFORNIA LANDSCAPE company placed a bid on a contract with a local municipality earlier this year that would have been worth thousands of dollars. Company executives believed the bid was fair and competitive, and they were confident the community would accept it.

Instead, the bid went to a competitor. The primary reason why? The competing company employed irrigation professionals who were certified, while this company did not.

“The company signed up for our water certification program the next day,” says David Silva, certification programs manager for the California Landscape Contractors Association (CLCA). “If your competition is certified, you need to even up the playing field. It’s becoming less of an ‘extra thing’ and more of a requirement for contractors. It is now the norm.”

While the issue is more imperative in certain states, such as California, more landscape contractors around the country are determining that it is important for members of their workforce to achieve certification in irrigation.

“The industry is trying to take it upon itself to improve the professionalism and knowledge of employees,” points out Sherrie Schulte, certification and education director for the Irrigation Association (IA).

And as the California contractor discovered, more local municipalities are passing ordinances involving publicly-funded projects that companies cannot bid for unless their workforce includes certified professionals.

“If there are certified professionals on a project, the community feels it can be done correctly the first time, in the most efficient way possible,” Schulte says. “There’s no worry that someone else will have to come in after the fact and correct any problems. An inefficient system costs money and, more importantly, energy and water.”

Programs available on national, state levels

IA offers national water certification programs, while CLCA offers similar programs in the Golden State.

The CLCA water certification program gives landscape professionals the tools to map the site a client wants watered, measuring the turf available vs. the number of medium- and low-water plants. The program plugs data into a system that allows contractors to create a water budget.

The IA program includes six different credentials, including Certified Irrigation Contractor. To achieve certification, contractors must hold at least three years’ experience and pass a written exam. For another certification, the Certified Landscape Irrigation Auditor, professionals must pass both a written exam and a field test. All certified professionals must adhere to a code of ethics and continue their education.

Passing either organization’s program gives professionals the ability to become a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) WaterSense irrigation partner.

WHY CERTIFICATION MATTERS

Customers, especially those owning or responsible for managing larger landscapes, increasingly demand credentials from irrigation professionals to document competency. Certification provides tangible proof of your dedication to performance and service excellence.

But don’t confuse certification with licensing. Licensing is a government-controlled process that serves as a requirement for functioning in specific professions. Certification is a voluntary credentialing process, which is managed by members of the profession. Industry-based certification provides a set of high standards, consistently maintained, that ultimately benefit the public when developed and managed appropriately.

The benefits of certification include:

- › establishing a recognized standard of knowledge and competency for the financial professional;
- › formally recognizing those who meet these standards;
- › providing employers and clients with a tool to identify skilled, knowledgeable professionals; and
- › supporting the benefits of professional continuing education and development.

By meeting the requirements of certification, you document your knowledge, experience, performance and definition of professional ethics in a scientifically verifiable process. It is this documentation that becomes the credential that employers, clients and peers can use to measure your value in meeting their needs.



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Tom DeLany, CEO of ACLS in Fresno, CA, was one of the first 10 landscape professionals to participate when CLCA launched its water certification program in 2007, and the first in the Central Valley region to do so. “People were questioning why I was doing it,” he says. “The Fresno (metro) area wasn’t even on metered water at the time.”

But DeLany looked at it from a business perspective: “I felt that in order to be more professional, we needed to save our clients water.”

ACLS used the certification to launch a certified water consulting service in January, which immediately produced a \$100,000 project at a local children’s hospital. The company refitted nearly 6,000 irrigation heads at the hospital, which pumps its own water. The hospital is expected to see a 30% decrease in water usage, leading to a monthly savings of thousands of dollars on electrical pump costs.



Niccoli points out.

“Clients are becoming more educated,” he says. “They want an expert. Our landscapes last longer because we don’t overwater. We want to partner with our clients to show them how they can save money.”

Of course, overwatering is an environmental issue, and certification allows landscape contractors to make more efficient use of a limited resource. “If you are certified, you have more knowledge on proper lawn and landscape irrigation practices and techniques,” says Mike Temple, project manager for Irrigation Consulting, Inc., in Waxhaw, NC, near Charlotte, who holds several irrigation certifications. “It

Landscape professionals interviewed for this article agree that the industry historically has a reputation of not being good stewards of water. Certification, they note, can help turn that reputation around.

“Our water program changes the mentality that people have of landscape contractors,” CLCA’s Silva says.

Niccoli says a number of water agencies look at landscape contractors as part of the problem. “They thought we were wasteful—and they were right,” he maintains. “Certification indicates that we know we were part of the problem, but now we want to be part of the solution.”

Now, The Village Gardener uses its certification to work with water agencies, sitting on their boards and discussing ways to partner to save water. “Part of that involves plant selection; part of that involves the day-to-day management of an irrigation system,” Niccoli says.

“We would not have been able to get this business if we weren’t able to tout our water certification,” DeLany emphasizes.

Prevent overwatering issues

Likewise, Frank Niccoli, CEO of The Village Gardener, Inc., in San Carlos, CA, looks at water certification as another profit center, with built-in rates of return for the company’s clients. Instead of paying extra money annually to their local water districts as a result of overwatering, he tells clients they can contract with The Village Gardener, which will use its certification expertise to solve the overwatering issue and get them an immediate return on investment.

“It makes sense for the client to invest in water savings,” Niccoli says.

Certification has allowed The Village Gardener to charge more because its service line is of a higher nature. And clients are ready to pay that higher cost,

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makes you a better steward of water.”

Overwatering brings a multitude of problems. On average, landscape contractors will overwater a project by 140%, according to DeLany. “State of the art means throw more water on landscapes and it will be green next week,” he says. “It might be green, but clients will also have more weeds and crabgrass, and their plant materials won’t grow as well.

“If we can get our clients to about 80%, that’s a 50% to 60% drop in water usage,” he adds. “That is absolutely huge cost savings. The certification program helps us get there.”

From both an environmental and a business perspective, certification makes sense for landscape contractors. Many clients today want to be known as green companies, while at the same time save money.

“You read about it all of the time: ‘We have to save water,’” says Jamie Rust, general manager of ACLS. “Being certified is a good way for us to help our clients achieve that goal.” **LM**

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