

Sustainable

Some landscape companies are growing greener now to earn mega-watt savings in the future.

BY **BETH GERACI** SENIOR EDITOR

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ORE AND MORE, landscape businesses are putting even more green into the Green Industry. Some recycle natural waste from job sites back into the

property. Some encourage their clients to use smart controllers to conserve water. And some propel their equipment with cleaner-burning fuels.

But contractors like these are ramping up their ecological efforts even more. They're putting their sustainable efforts into practice not only in their customers' yards — but in their own.

Solar energy

In August, Ruppert Landscape completed construction of a solar field at its Laytonsville, MD headquarters. The roughly million-dollar project consists of 988 solar panels on three-quarters of an acre, making it the largest non-institutional ground-mounted solar farm in the region.

Ruppert Landscape President Chris Davitt says the company implemented the solar field for two reasons. "One, we wanted to be greener. We think it's our obligation, and we want to make less of a footprint on this earth.

"Two, a lot of it is what our customers are looking for. Not all of them are waving the green banner and asking for it up front, but when we bring up our green practices, almost all of our customers are interested."

Ruppert Landscapes' solar farm led to the elimination of the company's \$40,000 annual electric bill.



Without financial incentives, however, constructing the solar field would not have been feasible. Government grants and renewable energy credits made it possible. Ruppert obtained a federal grant worth 30% of the project's value. That grant offsets solar field construction costs, Davitt says.

In addition, Ruppert receives a payment for the sale of its solar renewable energy credits (SRECs) through a local power provider. The payments for the energy credits should continue for the next 20 years, the solar panels' total life expectancy.

"The revenue from the sale of our SRECs started at \$83,000 a year, and

it will diminish gradually," Davitt says. "In the latter years we'd be getting \$10,000 a year."

Given those financial incentives, "from a return on an investment standpoint, it's a no-brainer," Davitt says.

Before creating the solar field, Ruppert's annual electric bill totaled \$40,000. Now, those costs have been eliminated; the solar field is big enough to provide all of the electricity for Ruppert's Laytonsville, MD corporate campus.

Between electricity savings, the sale of solar renewable energy credits, the grant and the bonus depreciation of the asset, Davitt expects the solar field to pay for itself within seven years.



The amount of carbon emissions solar energy generation produces

Whether a long-term or short-term financial investment, “sustainability does go hand in hand with reducing costs,” Davitt says.

So why aren’t more companies rushing to use solar energy? “One, you need land,” Davitt says. “The other reason is, a lot of people aren’t aware of the government grants and credits. But a lot of these things tend to catch on, and they catch on quickly. Ultimately, as more people invest in solar technology the costs are going to drop. It just depends on how quickly people invest in it.”

DeSantis Landscapes installed 20 solar panels on its roof in May 2008. According to Dean DeSantis, president of the Salem, OR-based company, the 3.9-kilowatt system provides 15% of the total power needs at DeSantis Landscapes’ headquarters.

“I think it’s been a good thing for the business,” says DeSantis, relenting that the solar energy constitutes a relatively small percentage of his company’s overall power.

“There isn’t a huge impact there,” he says, “but the statement that it makes about the direction that our company is going, it just kind of fits with our overall branding message that we’re a greener company and we support alternative energies.”

DeSantis Landscapes invested \$31,000 in its solar panel project. Those costs were offset by a federal tax credit of \$4,674, a state tax credit of \$15,580 and a \$5,700 incentive from the Energy Trust of Oregon. With a three-year return on investment, the project is now entirely paid off.

DeSantis Landscapes initiated its sustainability discussion in 2005, when it was in the midst of strategizing for its future.

“It kind of came out that each one of us was interested in the environment and it was kind of like, ‘Why aren’t we doing something about this?’” DeSantis says.

Like Ruppert and DeSantis, Pacific Landscape Management in Hillsboro, OR installed a solar system — in 2009. It produces 95% of the company’s power. Like other companies that

employ solar power, Pacific president Bob Grover says that without tax incentives solar energy wouldn't have been feasible for the company.

"Quite frankly, there was a great financial incentive for us to do that, so it was an easy decision," says Grover.

Pacific received a 30% federal tax credit the first year and a state tax credit worth 10% annually over five years. In all, 90% of the solar project's cost was covered through federal and state tax credits and grants.

Pacific's 35-kilowatt solar panel array cost about \$250,000, "but after all tax credits and grants paid out, my costs were about \$25,000," Grover says. "It's a good deal. I still had a seven-year return on investment, but after the seventh year our power will be free. In the long term, we're going to save money."

And because many people in the Northwest are environmentally conscious, "it's good for our marketing," he adds.

Solar power works well for Pacific, and Grover has no regrets about following through with the project. But he does say that though solar energy is the future, it's not cost effective.

Parry Webb, director of sales and business development for Littleton,



CO-based Terracare Associates, agrees.

"We have to be able to be cost effective with any changes that we make," he says. "There's been quite a lot of talk about solar, but it depends on the scope of your business. For us, it becomes economically impractical."

Edible garden

Terracare Associates may not be joining the solar revolution, but it does focus on other types of sustainability at its offices. It uses smart controllers to conserve water at its headquarters, and it's an advocate of "edible" vegetable gardens for commercial properties.

Thanks to Terracare Associates Vice President Bill Horn, who drove the project, the company removed turf at its Bay Area Martinez, CA branch last spring to plant an edible garden.

By removing the turf, the company reduced the water and chemical use turf maintenance requires yet still made use of the land. "It's a way of replacing turf with a more sustainable landscape," Webb says.

"It's like farming in an urban environment."

Some of Terracare Associates' irrigation professionals also planted an edible garden at Terracare's Littleton office, building the frame out of used pallets and filling the boxes with recycled soil from clients' landscaping sites. The garden sprouted greens and vegetables for company staff all summer.

Sustainability is "really at the heart of what we do," says Webb. "The

DeSantis Landscapes' solar array provides about 15% of its office energy needs.

sustainability movement in landscape is evolving, and I think for most people, because you're in landscape, they assume you're sustainable because you're around plants. But there's always a right way and a wrong way to maintain sustainable landscapes."

Rain garden

Other than its solar project, Pacific has taken many other steps toward sustainability. It's reduced its chemical use, converted its equipment to lower emission models, built a 10-foot vertical garden at its facility — and installed a rain garden there.

To create the rain garden, Pacific disconnected its downspout so water would no longer flow into a storm sewer. Thus, water from the roof now pours directly onto the garden and into its soil.

"The advantage of a rain garden is, it reduces runoff," Grover says. "The storm sewer flows into the local creeks. By planting our rain garden, we're trying to get the water to go back into the soil, thereby easing the stress on our sewer system."

Although rain gardens are best installed as part of a building's original design, Pacific removed part of the existing landscape at its headquarters to make room for its rain garden, which Grover emphasizes features both native and non-native plants.

"There's a really big push in landscape design today to utilize native

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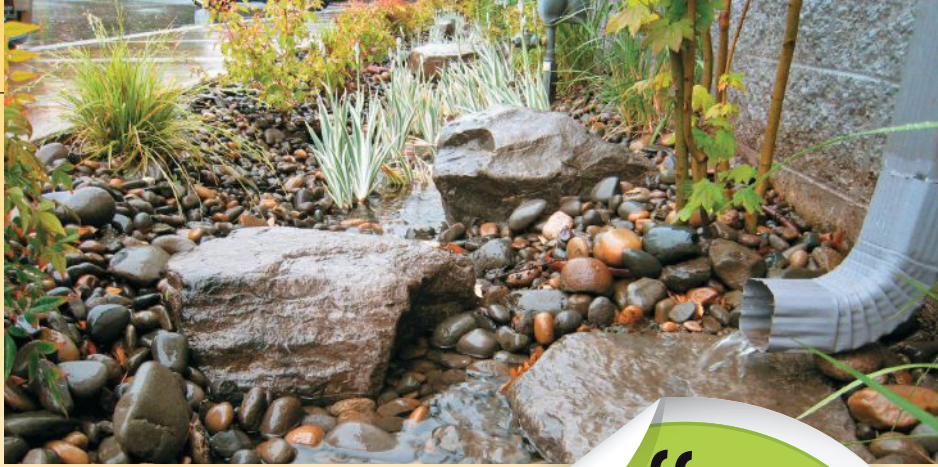
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From a return
on an investment
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it's a no-brainer.

— RUPPERT LANDSCAPE PRESIDENT
CHRIS DAVITT, ON THE COMPANY'S
USE OF SOLAR POWER

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plant material, and the theory behind it is that indigenous plant material is acclimated to our weather or our climate,” Grover says. “The problem is, many urban landscapes are not similar to the native environment.”

Non-native plants that can adapt to soil and exposure perform better and



“ ”
 We’re trying to show people that by selecting the right plant materials and maintaining them in a certain way the garden will have long-term viability.

— PACIFIC LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT
 PRESIDENT BOB GROVER, ON THE
 COMPANY’S OFFICE
 RAIN GARDEN



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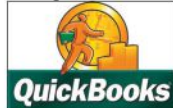
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require less maintenance than some native plants, Grover asserts.

“We’re trying to show people that by selecting the right plant materials and maintaining them in a certain way the garden will have long-term viability,” he says.

Rainwater harvesting

In October, Dallas, TX-based Lambert Landscape Co. was one of three companies awarded The Professional Landcare Network’s (PLANET’s) 2011 Sustainable Company Award. The award is given to companies that show environmental consciousness at their workplace through things like water conservation, waste management and pollution reduction.

Lambert has been an entirely organic company since the 1980s and employs many ecological practices — including recycling and forbidding the use of plastic bags.

Though some of those practices are common throughout the industry, rainwater harvesting is less common. And Lambert has been practicing it for



Lambert Landscape Co. collects its rainwater in this 30,000-gallon holding tank then uses it to make compost tea.

two-and-a-half years now.

“We collect all of our own rainwater in a 30,000-gallon holding tank,” explains Lambert Director of Garden Services Jodi Joseph. The reclaimed water is added to Lambert Landscape’s compost tea to make a concentrate. Then, seven times a year, the concentrate is applied to all of the 224 properties Lambert maintains.

Lambert’s ecological advocacy “comes from the top down,” says Lambert Director of Garden Development Jud Griggs. “We try to mini-

mize our carbon footprint on the world.”

Ruppert, too, practices rainwater harvesting, at both its corporate headquarters and its facility in Lilburn, GA.

At its Lilburn facility, Ruppert installed a well and a 10,000-gallon cistern

to collect and store captured rainwater and runoff from its roofs and existing irrigation systems. The reclaimed water is used to irrigate the Lilburn facility’s nursery holding yard and landscape, and to wash company vehicles.

The project, completed in June of 2009, took one week to install and cost about \$26,000. Ruppert expects the project to “completely pay for itself in just over three years’ time,” Davitt says.

With the rainwater harvesting project, the Lilburn facility went from using 2 million gallons of water annu-

ally (and spending an average of \$9,000 annually on water bills) to using just 96,000 gallons of water annually (and spending \$500 annually on water bills).

Over the next seven years, Ruppert expects to save nearly \$47,000 and approximately 13 million gallons of water.

“Our average monthly water bills before the project were around \$1,400 and have dropped to just \$60 a month since the project’s completion,” Davitt says.

Whether landscape companies show their environmental consciousness through large-scale company projects like solar fields and rainwater harvesting or smaller ones such as recycling and gardening doesn’t matter. What does matter, DeSantis says, is “everyone’s looking to get on board, which is good. We want to see the industry shift a bit. And we’re starting to see it happen.” **LMI**

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