

BY DAVID WEINSTOCK & CURT HARLER

TEXAS DROUGHT TEACHES (BUSINESS) SURVIVAL SKILLS

Three Lone Star State LCOs learned an important marketing lesson: **Focus on irrigation.**

The summer of 2011 was a record breaker in Texas. Texans experienced the longest stretch of the highest daily temperatures, accompanied by the least amount of rain, in recorded weather history.

In East Texas, for example, there was not a single day in July in which the maximum temperature failed to rise above 100° F, nor was there any instance of rainfall. All segments of the growing industry — landscape, agriculture, cattle and turf farms — were scorched. Water became more precious than oil. By summer's end, the state's bellwether Green Industry — cattle — was looking at one of its lowest inventory levels ever. With no grass for animals to graze on and precious little surface water to drink, even the wizened cattle producers were hanging it up.

For the most part, the Texas land-

scape industry fared better. As fears over dwindling water supplies increased, numerous communities passed water-use restrictions, limiting lawn watering from once or twice a week to once or twice a month. But a number simply made adjustments, moving into other enterprises that cushioned the losses the water scarcity created.

True, some Texas landscapers pulled their horns in — laying off crews, parking trucks, waiting for rain. And yet one Dallas firm, Southern Botanical, actually did well because of the drought.

Drought-intensive profits

"It made us real busy," reports Alan Richmond, the company's vice president of irrigation, drainage and lawn treatments.



Drip irrigation installation has become increasingly popular.

Founded in 1995, the company has 150 employees and a fleet of approximately 50

vehicles. Its business is derived from Dallas Metroplex residential and commercial properties.

Southern Botanical gained a lot of its drought-season revenue servic-

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Randy Mase of Tyler, TX, had fewer landscaping contracts than normal this summer. Lawn fertilization, seeding and some construction work helped keep one of his three crews busy during the drought season.



ing customer irrigation systems. “The drought exposed a lot of irrigation system flaws,” Richmond says. “We do a lot of maintenance work on existing irrigation systems.”

They also made time to add water-retention materials to their clients’ landscapes. Expanded shells and commercial soil additives were among some of the materials they use, though Richmond declines to identify which brands they employed.

The company’s new strategy is to “water deep and less frequently,” Richmond notes that when watered less, turf tended to probe more deeply into the

soil with its roots for moisture.

In addition, they installed a lot more evapo-transpiration (ET) controllers on irrigation systems. Costing \$1,500 and up, the controllers self-adjust soil moisture to make up for the portion removed by the plants, while accounting for evaporation and transpiration on the sites. They began the ET-controller installations last year on both residential and commercial properties.

Southern Botanical employees saw a lot of sunburned plant material while in the field this summer. It caused them to focus more on plant materials and to make more visits to do so. It was as

a result of the increased visits that they spotted the coverage issue.

Shift in emphasis

Yet another Dallas firm simply redirected its operational emphasis from planting to construction.

“The early part of the summer was not easy,” admits Lambert Landscape Co. Director of Garden Development Jud Griggs. “By the beginning of August, we stopped all our planting operations and focused on construction.”

A succession of replacements and negative client complaints forced the switch, he says.

“Most of the smaller groundcover plants fried in the heat,” Griggs adds. “Lawns everywhere were scorched. There was just no point in taking plants out of the greenhouse and placing them into an environment of incessant heat.”

The most telling damage he recalls seeing was a large, mature red oak that was healthy and vibrant in the spring — and covered with flashing yellow and brown leaves, a sign it was dying, by summer’s end.

Founded in 1919, the privately held Lambert Landscape Co. normally employs 180 people and has a fleet of 82 vehicles, plus equipment. It derives nearly all its income from residential accounts in the Dallas Metroplex, although reduced income brought the company some projects from the Austin and Wichita Falls areas.

The summer slowdown in residential business caused Lambert Landscape Co. to reduce work hours to 32 hours a week, and then resort to layoffs. The good news is that, by mid-October, nearly everyone had been rehired.

Designing and building patios, fountains and walls normally make up about 55% of the company’s summer revenues. This past summer, it comprised two-thirds of capital intake.

“We did a lot of irrigation repair and maintenance as well,” says Griggs. “Any turf without irrigation took a beating this summer.”

The hotter weather forced them to use a number of dry-weather con-

struction techniques, such as pre-wetting stone and using additives to make sure concrete didn't set up too quickly.

A number of Lambert clients, faced with municipal water-use restrictions, resorted to hand-watering to keep their sensitive plants alive. The heavy clay soils in the area caused a lot of overwatering problems that company crews had to educate their clients about, and then troubleshoot.

Surprisingly, says Griggs, the landscape input industry didn't reduce prices against lagging demand.

Because of area water restrictions, Lambert has begun talking to its clients about drip irrigation. "We're also using more permeable surfaces to capture the rainwater when it does come," Griggs notes.

The region's climatologists are saying the drought could continue for as long as a year (see "More to come?"



MORE TO COME?

In late September, Texas State climatologist John Nielsen-Gammon revealed his belief that this drought resembles a mega-drought that began in 1950 and ended in 1957.

Current thinking in meteorology links southern Great Plains droughts to La Niña. A strong one emerged last fall, which fizzled in early summer. At press time, a new La Niña was emerging, according to scientists at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) — bringing with it the promise of another dry Texas winter.

The argument for this being the start of an extended drought is compelling. Nielsen-Gammon said the same warm ocean temperatures that fueled the droughts of the 1950s are present in the tropical region of the Atlantic Ocean today.

There is no guarantee this drought will last as long, but if it does, Texas landscapers have already demonstrated droughts don't faze them any more than other weather systems do. Knowing what services to sell and which varieties to plant will see them through.

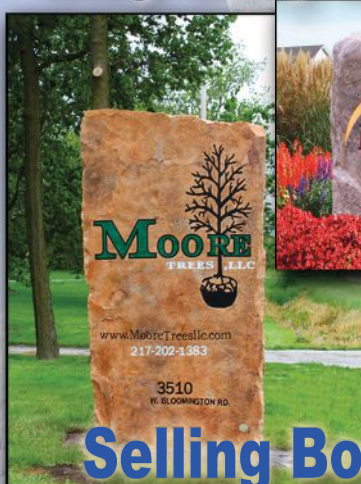
box above). Griggs agrees with their assessment.

"We've not seen the full effects of the summer drought yet," he predicts. "If we face another tough winter with

cold temperatures and freezing, things could get really bad."

That will likely bring about a lesser dependence on non-native species. Lambert crews are using native spe-

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cies wherever they can, especially drought-resistant ones.

Back to basics

“Encore azaleas,” says Randy Mase of Tyler, TX-based Mase Landscape Co., “were the worst this year.”

Instead of blooming once each year, the azaleas should bloom all year.

“But when the temperature hit 112° F and the relative humidity fell to 14%, they died, everywhere,” Mase says.

A self-described “landscape artist,” Mase’s firm serves the well-to-do of Tyler’s oil-rich population. He normally runs three crews. But this year he’s down to one.

Born and raised in Tyler, Mase got started in what he calls the Great Freeze of 1983. “I started out with one truck and one part-time employee, and projected my income at \$30,000 that year,” he recalls.

The Freeze of which he speaks was



TOP: The drought made the hard red clay of East Texas even harder to excavate this summer, making small drainage projects like this one a little longer to complete.

BOTTOM: Construction projects like this pool and hot tub kept companies like Mase Landscape Company of Tyler, Texas, and Lambert Landscape Company of Dallas busy this summer.

an unseasonal cold streak that brought March temperatures down to freezing and near-freezing levels. “The people of Tyler had dead plants all over their yards. It killed every plant in town,” he explains.

By year’s end, Mase grossed \$1 million and employed 25 people.

This year — between the delayed effect of the recession and the hot, dry summer — his company was forced out of its artistic pursuits and into more mundane tasks, such as lawn seeding and fertilization.

He’s been selling some of his clients on the virtues of zoysia grass. Heat-resistant, thick sodded, and wear-tolerant, he said it’s an easy sell once customers see an established turf. **LM**

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