

Hands-on approach

A Texas irrigation company makes water conservation its top priority. *By EMILY SCHAPPACHER*

The drought that hit Texas in 2006 was a wake-up call for Patty Sipe, co-owner of Heads Up Sprinkler Co. in Plano.

It was time to look at some aspects of her irrigation business differently. That drought and the ones that have ensued almost every year since have been catalysts for the company to rethink everything through the lens of conservationists and teachers versus a mere service provider, says Sipe.

“It was at that point we started to recognize water waste a lot more preva-

lently,” Sipe says. “We have always been water conscious, but the 2006 drought and the ones that have followed really helped raise the public awareness with respect to water.”

The \$500,000 company, co-owned by Caryn Walz who founded it 18 years ago, primarily services residential clients, offering irrigation system repair and long-term care services. It also provides irrigation system auditing services for commercial properties—a service it introduced in response to tightened water-use restrictions. Sipe expects this service to

expand in the coming years. That growth isn’t necessarily the goal for Heads Up Sprinkler, though, Sipe says. The goal is to save as much water as possible while educating clients about why it’s so critical.

“There are 7,000 licensed irrigation techs in North Texas—many of them are just trying to make a dollar and don’t care about water conservation,” she says. “For us, it’s not about making money, it’s about saving water.”

And save water it has. In 2012, Heads Up Sprinkler won the City of Plano’s Environmental Star of Excellence award for saving an estimated 1.2 million gallons of water that year by repairing broken or inefficient irrigation systems and teaching homeowners how to properly manage them. The company continues to save hundreds of thousands of gallons of water each year by providing leak repairs, hydrozoning



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and station retrofits, improving head layouts, using performance-enhancing nozzles and utilizing drip irrigation “like there’s no tomorrow.”

EDUCATION IS THE KEY

Sipe says the most important piece of the puzzle is educating the homeowner. Each Heads Up Sprinkler technician is trained to spend as much time with each client as necessary, explaining the issues, listening and answering questions. This method builds trust between the company and the client and helps clients make a connection between the irrigation system controller, or “that thing in their garage,” and their water

Above: Heads Up Sprinkler Co. co-owners Patty Sipe (left) and Caryn Walz focus on saving water for clients. Right: Drip irrigation is one way they do so.



bill, Sipe says. Once clients see that wasted water equals wasted dollars, they begin to pay more attention.

“We are the connection point between the automatic sprinkler system and the water bill,” Sipe says. “When you are the connection, you are more than an irrigation company. You are an information base that can help customers.”

Customers typically understand or have the “aha moment” when they see their water bill go from, say, \$300 to \$125, Sipe says.



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“Whether I spend an hour or an hour-and-a-half with a customer, it’s all billable, so I don’t have to race from one customer to the next,” Sipe says. “The customer always wants more knowledge. We take the time we need to take with each one.”

With that, Sipe recognizes water conservation is a long-standing issue in Texas, which is why she says, now more than ever, it’s important to spread the knowledge. Alongside its hands-on approach to repairing irriga-

tion systems and educating clients, Heads Up Sprinkler continues to educate people about water conservation on a larger scale.

For instance, as a member of the Water Efficiency Network of North Texas, Sipe voluntarily teaches water management techniques to homeowners as well as heads of city water management programs—many of whom are required to meet 10-percent conservation goals annually throughout their regions.

“The future of Heads Up Sprinkler is going to include giving a lot more of our time back to the community, teaching more classes and helping the water users of the world use less,” Sipe says. “But the focus of what we do has never changed. We work with the homeowners, we fix what’s broken and we educate.”

Schappacher is a freelance writer based in Charlotte, N.C.



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Ewing promoted **Warren Gorowitz** to vice president of sustainability. Gorowitz will head the company’s outreach programs as well as evolve its sustainable product mix.



Warren Gorowitz