

An Irrigation Gold Mine

THE WAVE of the future? It's the spray of water from underground irrigation systems that automatically sprinkle hundreds of residential lawns throughout Palm Beach County, according to Jack Kouns.

Kouns is president of Jack Kouns, Inc., one of the most successful residential irrigation contractors in the country. He believes his marketplace — Florida's east coast — is the forerunner of the boom in the irrigation industry that officials have been predicting for the nationwide homelawn irrigation market.

"What we're experiencing here is similar to the early years of the television boom," Kouns said.

"We don't have to sell the concept of a time-saving, money-saving irrigation system for a home lawn. Everybody wants it. We concentrate on selling our products and service as the best available."

He continued: "We operate in an area of affluent homeowners whose

lawns must be watered 52 weeks of the year. Most of them either don't want to — or can't — spend the time and energy to do it manually. Additionally, the high cost of water here makes everyone conscious of the need to use it efficiently.

"All of these conditions add up to a growth market for residential irrigation systems. While they do not apply with the same intensity everywhere in the country, the differences are only a matter of degree."

Kouns got into the irrigation business quite by accident. He moved to Florida in 1957 after selling his interest in a company that manufactured steel scaffolding in Missouri. "I was looking around for something to get into and ran into a fellow who had a small irrigation business he wanted to sell," he said.

The company had two full-time employees. Now it has 40, a fleet of 25 trucks and a modern office and warehouse facility in West Palm Beach.

"For the first several years we were like everyone else in the business: selling manual systems with plastic pipe. Our business started to grow dramatically when we got into automatic controllers," Kouns said.

The big breakthrough came, he said, with the availability of automatic variable timing when the Irrigation Division of The Toro Company (then Moist-O-Matic) introduced the first of its Monitor series of controllers.

He's been using Toro irrigation equipment ever since.

Before the development of automatic variable-time controllers, he explained, most people felt an underground irrigation system was practical only if they could draw the water from a well. "They reasoned that if they were on municipal water, their water bill would be horrendous, especially if they forgot to turn it off," he said.

Most of the company's installations today, he said, are connected to municipal water systems. "With automatic variable-time con-

trollers, the amount of water — and the water bill — can be governed precisely and varied according to weather conditions."

Kouns reported that until about a year ago, the cost for a residential system kept dropping steadily. "Inflation changed that. But we're still able to provide a system with better performance for less money than 15 years ago."

Although the effects of inflation are uncertain for the future, Kouns said, he expects other technological breakthroughs for irrigation equipment will help keep costs reasonable and expand the market for residential systems.

Kouns has been planning for several years to establish branch operations elsewhere on the east coast of Florida. "We've been growing so fast here, we have not been able to spare any of our experienced people for a branch office," he explained.

But his three sons, all of whom work with him — Andy, in the company's well drilling operations; Cam, in irrigation sales; and Todd, in installation and service — are expecting to help implement the expansion plans.

Kouns was born and raised in Huntington, W. Va. He received his B.S. degree in aeronautical engineering from Georgia Tech in 1943 and a master's there in 1947 after serving as a commissioned officer in the U.S. Navy.

Before moving to Florida, he worked mainly in engineering — for a chemical company, a concrete block manufacturer and manufacturers of scaffolding and folding bleachers in Charleston; Detroit; Warren, Ohio and St. Louis.

Although he eschews a philosophical approach to the advantages of automatic irrigation for water conservation and environmental improvement, he made this observation:

"Unless we want to get covered over with concrete, with people living wall-to-wall, we must have green spaces. We need the beauty of growing things and their help in keeping down noise and air pollution, and we must learn to use wisely our finite natural resources, including water, even where it seems to be plentiful. Modern underground irrigation systems offer the best available technology for water management for maintaining our urban and suburban green spaces."



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