

# CONTRA COSTA: GENERAL LANDSCAPING AND HYDROSEEDING

Landscape contractors in the Oakland/San Francisco area have contended with drought for nearly three years. Until recently, lack of rainfall placed a damper on business, but Ken Gerlack (CLCA), president of Contra Costa Landscaping Inc., in Martinez, discovered some relief by being one of three Bay Area contractors offering hydroseeding for erosion control.

The rain finally returned this winter and Gerlack, and vice president Burt Harrington anticipate a boom this spring.

Contra Costa depends primarily on commercial construction and maintenance for its \$750,000 business volume. Nearly 90 percent of construction is derived from bidding on public and private work. Currently, construction represents 40 percent of gross revenue, maintenance 35 percent, and hydroseeding the remaining 25 percent. Maintenance

**Athletic fields** and park areas are two specialties for Contra Costa.



nance business should jump with favorable growing conditions this year.

Gerlack and his permanent staff of 12 keep tabs on new construction by subscribing to a local construction newspaper and participating in the local builders' exchange. Since most work is based on architectural specifications, only a small amount of design work is necessary.

Contra Costa's seasonal staff numbers 25 from March through October. During the off season, Gerlack does much of the hydroseeding work to maintain a healthy cash flow.

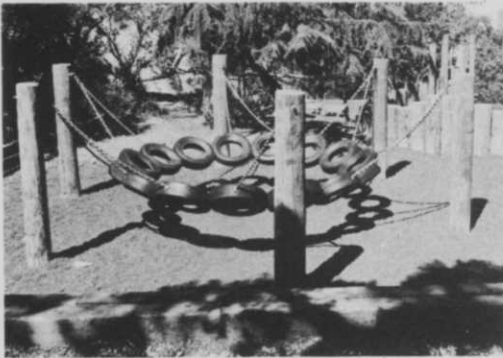
In the Bay Area, exposed soil from any type of construction is highly subject to erosion since the topography is hilly and the rainfall great. Consequently, the revegetation market is larger than normal and hydroseeding is playing an increasingly significant role in it.

Contra Costa does relatively little residential work, primarily large estates. The Bay Area is one of the last holdouts of the estate gardener. There are a significant number of very wealthy homeowners in the San Francisco area who invest more than \$200,000 in a home. A small percentage of these still have full-time gardeners and many have part-time gardeners.

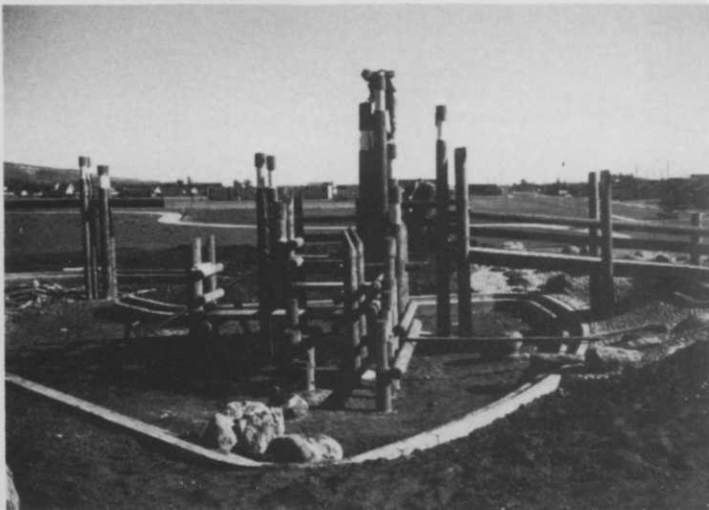
Another factor is the large number of uncertified, generally untrained individuals who, because they are enamored by outdoor occupations, are willing to do basic maintenance chores at below standard rates.

Types of work subcontracted out by Gerlack are large earth moving, much of the irrigation and drainage installation, and structural jobs such as construction of patios, decks, sidewalks, and fences.

The company has not experi-



**Playground equipment** should be a part of the park, not just structures placed there. Here are a few of Contra Costa creations.



## Contra Costa

enced a great demand for interior landscaping service although it has completed a number of inside jobs. Gerlack is especially proud of an indoor landscape he did for the Marin County Courthouse. The company does not aggressively seek indoor maintenance contracts at the present time.

One growing area for Contra Costa is maintenance of public athletic fields. Getting the fields in shape for the football season and repairing them afterward are two tasks more school officials are giving to professionals. Often, much of a school's athletic budget is derived from gate receipts of games played in its stadium. Consequently, the production of athletic contests is as much a business as it is a public service. Gerlack is currently working with a number of school systems for their stadium maintenance.

Contra Costa has a greenhouse for some of its plant stock. No retail selling of nursery stock or wholesale selling to other landscapers takes place.

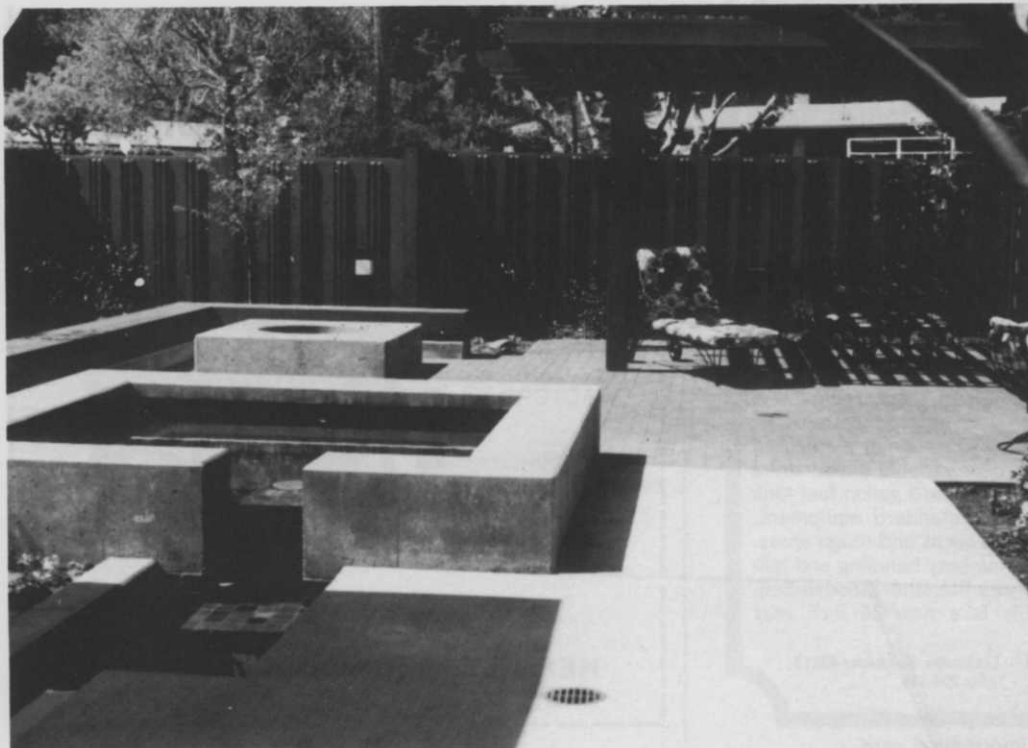
Shunning large inventories, Gerlack purchases most chemicals by the job. Except for fertilizer, he makes monthly purchases of herbicides, fungicides, pesticides, and conditioners. These purchases total roughly \$15,000 per year.

Equipment expenditure per year averages \$25,000. He buys all vehicles rather than lease them. An inventory of Gerlack's equipment shows the following:

passenger autos — 8  
pickup trucks (¾ ton or smaller) — 8  
dump trucks — 2  
tractors — 2 Massey-Ferguson 40 hp, 1 MF 65  
hydroseeder — 1 Finn  
riding mowers — 6  
push mowers — 6  
rototillers — 3 walk behind

1 tractor drawn  
dethatchers — 2 walk behind  
1 tractor drawn  
forklift — 1 tractor attached  
aerators — 3 walk behind  
1 tractor drawn

Gerlack estimated his repair and maintenance costs at \$5,000 per year. He keeps an inventory of problem parts such as belts, pulleys, etc. He does not keep a large inventory of backup equipment and stresses the importance of proper equipment care to his men. If a mower does break down Gerlack has to drive 70 miles to get service.



**Residential landscaping** entails combining manmade structures with nature's to provide a relaxing atmosphere.

## Contra Costa

When asked about prices for certain types of work, Gerlack said nearly all his prices are bid according to specifications and costs. Rates for sod installation, he said, can be as little as 20 cents/sq. ft. for large areas with little soil preparation or

as much as 40 cents/sq. ft. for small jobs with considerable soil preparation.

Contra Costa does little advertising. It carries an ad in the state's landscaping magazine for its hydroseeding service. Beyond this, it has

brochures for selling maintenance service. Most of the job seeking is done by staying on top of the local building scene to be included in all available bidding.

If Gerlack has one single concern, it is the abundance of untrained and uncertified landscape contractors in the area. He anticipates the number of such people to jump when the market takes off this spring. He is a certified landscape contractor and thinks anyone spending money on landscaping should check the credentials of any individual claiming to be a contractor before giving the go ahead. Gerlack dreads competing with the "have pickup truck, will do anything" firms. They are the only negative aspect of what he anticipates to be a banner year for the landscape contracting business in the Bay Area this year.



**Only three landscapers** offer hydroseeding in the San Francisco area. Contra Costa is one.

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