

# LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT



Partners Mike Baty (left) and Tom Ayers of Chem-Spray, Stockton, Calif.

## Thinking small

A Stockton, California, firm still services the first client it gained in 1975. Ten years growth hasn't led to a decline in attention to the little details.

Success as small custom applicators in the competitive weed control field was just a dream, back in 1975, for two young Californians.

Today the dream is a reality. And it's in Stockton, Calif., that Tom Ayers and Mike Baty first established and have now developed their quality-minded firm known as the Chem-Spray Co.

Chem-Spray targets its operations at the industrial customer. The firm controls weeds and grass on plant sites, fence lines, roadsides, parks, school sites, housing developments, curbs, ornamental plantings, and similar areas.

Much of its business is close by, in California's central valley but a good chunk is also as far away as Reno, Nev. (200 miles east), where a difference in climate means an extended treating season for Chem-Spray applicators.

### Humble beginnings

The small firm began as a boot-strap

organization, with \$1,000 invested by each partner and a \$13,000 stake from a friend (which took five years to repay).

But Chem-Spray has grown, because Ayers and Baty know that chemical weed abatement is more economical than pulling weeds manually or controlling them mechanically.

"We had an idea," reflects Ayers. "It was to give a one-year guarantee with every job we do.

"We started out selling weed control—not weed treatments. We've developed satisfied customers by delivering performance. In the first year, we had only 50 customers and we grossed about \$30,000.

"Today we've got over 600 customers, many with multiple sites that need annual care. A few of these customers ask for help on good-sized areas—up to 100-150 acres, for example. But the average is quite small—a few acres or even less. And we still serve our very first customer, a custom-builder of looms," says Ayers.

The Chem-Spray partners recall their early days when they shared the use of a single spray rig they had built themselves.

Today their three rigs are operated by Chem-Spray employees, men who have joined the business to work on an incentive system, so that precise application results in few call-backs and added compensation for the employee. It's a system that's built loyalty and stimulated results.

Ayers and Baty handle sales, paperwork, and management. They get along without secretarial help. "We aim at maintaining quality at reasonable cost," say the partners.

They've used a wide array of herbicides, both residuals and contact materials, and have kept intricate records with various products and rates.

### Computerization

But it was in 1983 that Chem-Spray took two big steps that have helped build business success at a faster rate than in earlier years.

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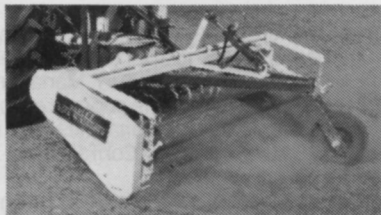
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The Tagalong sprayer, designed by Ayers and Baty, is used for fertilizer application on garden apartment turf.

First, the partners switched to a computer system to handle the records. "We use our computer to schedule work, to bill our customers, to keep records and file reports," says Ayers.

"It helps in a bid situation, giving us confidence we're working on an economic level. It tells us when to check up on specific jobs and when to follow-up on customers for another year's business."

Ayers notes the company has a computer program geared specifically toward small business needs in industrial weed control.

"It saves time every day. Initially, we indexed the computer to help evaluate our herbicide experience with various problem weeds and guide us on application rates. The idea was to point the way toward the right products in repeat applications."

Secondly, Ayers and Baty took a look at some early trials with Dupont's Oust herbicide.

Chem-Spray reports this new herbicide has been effective in controlling a very wide range of tough weeds.

In addition, the few "escape weeds" from Oust are easily controlled. Says Baty: "With Oust, you also get a much broader application window than with the earlier residuals. We treat in California from October to March, and we've found that by working with Oust, we've reduced our call-backs for follow-up contact treatments by well over half."

### Innovation

Chem-Spray has developed specialized equipment for applying

herbicides and also fertilizers (a minor part of their business).

A "Tagalong" spray rig, for example, can be hooked up with a three-wheeled Honda or with a four-wheel pickup.

The spray boom is controlled by the light switch on the Honda. The vehicles are very maneuverable, and hence they're ideal for tight turns and small jobs.

Bare-ground weed and grass control is a standard customer expectation on most Chem-Spray jobs.

In the West, local lawmakers consistently set up tight specifications on weed growth to minimize or avoid fire hazards in the summer, when vegetation dries up on unirrigated land. So the "clean look" in a vacant yard or open-air storage facility means no heavy vegetation stands during the winter growing season.

### One product

It's problem species like ryegrass and Russian thistle that have often triggered two or more chemical treatments in years past. One herbicide spray took care of the winter weeds; another, the summer species.

"Now, we can get away from that routine," Baty says.

"We've been able to use Oust at a number of different rates, on a single site, depending on what we have to control. We always survey our new sites before we start with any weed control program. Then we set up the treatment on our computer and our team follows through. We've never stopped thinking small. It's helped us grow," says Baty.

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