

LIQUI-LAWN KEEPS ROLLING

Like the neighboring mountains near Lewiston, Idaho, Liqui-Lawn's profit line is rock-like. It's also painted black.

The banks of the Snake River lie just across the street and as the river rolls, so does Duane Saxton's Liqui-Lawn operation.

"Phenomenal" growth has been followed by some "mediocre" growth years of 20 to 30 percent for the Lewiston, Idaho, lawn care operator.

He combines a five-year-old chemical lawn care business with the company foundation—a pest control operation dating to 1947.

"Pest control is a far slower growth-type business. Lawn care has proven to be the fast-growth industry," says Saxton.

The pest control operation accounts for two-thirds of company revenues, he notes, but that figure is shrinking.

He entered the lawn care industry through granular application then switched to chemicals three years ago. In wide-open Lewiston, where the average lawn runs 7,000 sq. ft., the switch to efficient chemical applications has worked.

Saxton's three state-licensed applicators roam the Snake and Salmon River Valleys around Lewiston and neighboring Clarkston, Wash., where some homes feature 30,000 sq. ft. of turf. (Explorers Lewis and Clark are said to have set up camp in the area during their excursions to the Pacific Northwest in the late 1700s and early 1800s.)

The Liqui-Lawn lawn care program consists of five applications every 6-8 weeks, beginning in mid-March. Special care is given to billbug control and to decreasing the soil's alkalinity to a more neutral 6.5 or 7 with a granular sulfur application in the fall.

Liqui-Lawn was the first chemical lawn care company in the area and remains the largest. Two competitors



Owner Duane Saxton (right) and general manager Dennis Spickler have seen five-year-old Liqui-Lawn grow at least 20 percent each year.

have sprung up but neither poses a threat, says Saxton.

No maintenance for him

While Saxton isn't feeling much competition in chemical application, he says he would feel it in the maintenance end. That's why he stays away.

"We've decided not to get into maintenance because it's hard to compete with the Sunday guy with one truck and a low overhead," he notes.

Instead, he looks to other areas for growth and expansion. One such area is Walla Walla, Wash., some 70 miles to the west. (One wry Lewistonian noted the area's founding fathers liked the area so much they decided to name the town twice.)

Liqui-Lawn has an office there, run by general manager Dennis Spickler, that has demonstrated quiet growth in its two years.

Within a 15-mile radius of the Lewiston and Walla Walla offices, there are 100,000 people. That's more than enough for Saxton and his 10 year-round employees.

"The Lewiston area is a good market because more people are increasing their recreational expenditure levels which means they are hiring more services, including lawn care," says Saxton.

One problem is a potential lack of

water. The area receives just a scant 13 inches of rain a year. During an abnormally dry year, homeowners reduce lawn watering, making Liqui-Lawn's job no easier.

In some cases, Clarkston residents flat-out refuse to water lawns because of high water rates, says Saxton.

Even higher rates

While residents wrestle with high water rates, Saxton worries about even higher rates—his insurance premiums, which have risen 746 percent in two years.

"One company would have handled the whole thing (pest control and lawn care) but they required a \$50,000 premium," says Saxton.

Instead Saxton was fortunate enough to find a company that requires just a 40 percent down payment. He finances the remainder on a monthly basis.

Saxton has been a member of the Professional Lawn Care Association of America since 1981. He's also a member of the National Pest Control Association.

"I believe you have to stay ahead of the people who want to see us doing something else for a living," he says. **WT&T**

—Ken Kuhajda