COVER STORY

SELL... INSTALL... MAINTAIN

It's not the easiest job in the world selling irrigation systems to commercial establishments in the East and Midwest. But it can be done, as this dealer's representative has found out.

by Jack Simonds, contributing editor

The assignment: Market irrigation systems in an area which usually enjoys a robust mixture of sunshine and rainfall. The added challenge: A good moisture-retaining clay soil also is common throughout northeast Ohio.

It isn't the easiest way to go for George Reese, director of irrigation sales at North Coast Distributors. But he hasn't done badly on his 22-county beat. Not for an area where commercial and residential irrigation systems are sometimes considered a "prestige" item in new constructions.

"When I started 15 years ago, irrigation was not exactly a household word," remembers Reese. "This is a tough market to sell. Irrigation is not considered a 100 percent necessity item here when compared with other states in the South and West.

George Reese: irrigation systems not just for prestige clients.

"It has been a very difficult road. What you sell is a concept, and the timing has to be right," says Reese on a warm, moist spring day where every planting in sight is lush and green. "You're not handed anything in this market. You have to hard work at it," he says.

Many projects are already under his belt and others on the way. But none is likely to compare with Reese's largest ongoing design job: equipping Goodyear Tire and Rubber Co.'s world headquarters in Akron, Ohio with as much irrigation as needed on 400 of the firm's 600 city acres.

Underground obstacles

Reese works closely with Goodyear's grounds maintenance manager Tom Riccardi, a veteran green industry

Green space along the Ohio Canal is fully maintained by Goodyear maintenance crews. The canal is one of three sources of water for irrigation and plant operations.

professional who oversees all outside areas around the complex. The two have teamed since the early 1980s; to date, installing 25 miles of piping, 4,400 sprinkler heads, 50 miles of wiring and 40 automatic control centers on 100 acres.

"Tom first had to sell the idea of irrigation to Goodyear's corporate side. I sat down with Tom and we laid out a presentation package; a five-year plan," says Reese of the $2.5 million ongoing project.

"I sold Goodyear with the image of the outside corporate grounds; the psychological image Goodyear projects as people pass by. The key was the beautification of Akron and it is nice to see a company like Goodyear take this kind of responsibility toward the community," says Reese.

Sloping green acreage alongside the Goodyear Technical Center headquarters is well-irrigated. The reclaimed area once sported coal piles and unused rail tracks.

Tom Riccardi: maintain quality control.

Goodyear green spaces, situated directly in the center of Akron's east side with other rubber company giants as neighbors, stretch over a mixed terrain with both sandy and clay conditions, high winds, rail tracks and a manmade canal, older unused buildings and old submerged building foundations—all to be landscaped and kept green by Riccardi and his 16 full-time and 10 seasonal crewmembers. He credits the success to his crew, many of whom were former production workers now retrained in landscape maintenance techniques.

"Our main philosophy is to have a well-manicured lawn throughout the complex. We always go for total quality control. In order to do that, we need as much of the area irrigated as possible. We try to keep everything green under very harsh urban conditions. Goodyear is committed to this," says Riccardi.

Sandy soil gets less attention

Although their initial goal was to keep things as standardized as possible, Reese and Riccardi found they must be flexible in design specifications. In some shallow sandy soil conditions, for instance, the two found a limited number of sprinkler heads works best.

Other areas dictated different responses. Green space around an employee parking lot, for example, requires sturdier golf course style heads to combat wind, heat and soil conditions and even vandalism.

The front of corporate headquarters, which stretches along a city block, is adorned by a half-acre flower bed which combines bulbs, ornamental shrubs and a Kentucky bluegrass blend found throughout the complex.

The irrigation system is supplied by five deep wells on Goodyear's property, the Ohio Canal or "Little Cuyahoga," as known locally, and city water. About two-thirds of the water comes from the wells and canal.

Reese and Riccardi continually find they must maintain an open mind while planning for each new irrigated area.

"Originally, we wanted to keep sprinkler heads standardized, for instance," says Riccardi. But differing soil levels and compositions, proximity to trespassers and vandals, closeness to employee parking lots and even turf installations over razed building foundations all played a case-by-case role in setting out systems.

In some areas, sturdier golf course heads proved more effective; others, like the high ground adjacent to Goodyear's Technical Center, needed 240 smaller heads spaced 38 feet apart to combat wind drift.

That 13-acre green space adjacent to Goodyear's Technical Center was the first area tackled by Reese and Riccardi in 1983. It has proved successful. Once not-so-attractively adorned with rail tracks and coal piles, the site now gently slopes to corporate headquarters and shores up to a brick promenade complete with a modernistic water fountain.

Another four-acre area has been reclaimed as a buffer zone between nearby interstate traffic and Goodyear's five-story machine shop. That site posed special problems because a massive building foundation still sits beneath the surface and in some spots, topsoil is as shallow as two inches.

Irrigation is also in place on the company softball field, which hosts 22 day and night games a week in peak season.

"Even with Goodyear's wells and river, water conservation is important," says Reese. "The investment here is in landscaping, trees and plantings. You've got to deliver that water or you may totally lose it all."

The next challenge for Reese and Riccardi will be irrigation for Goodyear's test track, where tires are driven under different wetness conditions to gauge responsiveness. The system could play a part in varying wetness levels for the pavement.

Riccardi says the conversion to underground irrigation has "absolutely paid for itself," with lower man-hours and water use.

Why install irrigation?

Reese works closely with area landscape contractors, providing training seminars for Toro's systems. It is no accident that 30 area landscape contractors recently took intensive training to become familiar with the Toro line.

"There needs to be education to the end user (to show) irrigation is more than a prestige item. Irrigation increases the value of a home and preserves the investment in landscaping," says Reese. **LM**