



EXPAND INTO irrigation contracting

By BRUCE F. SHANK/ Irrigation Association

Never before has knowledge of irrigation been more important. It can help you take advantage of competitive pressures in the marketplace while expanding your service mix.

Opportunities knock for contractors who install commercial landscapes that include irrigation.

While our dependence on automatic irrigation varies by region, even systems for supplemental irrigation are more common at the commercial and high-end residential level. The connection between image and landscaping has never been stronger.

There are three ways to protect a landscape investment:

- ▶ install adapted plant material according to a practical design;
- ▶ hire skilled maintenance personnel;
- ▶ and install an automatic irrigation system. Exclude any of these three from the landscape budget and you risk the entire investment.

From a landscape contractor's perspective, whether or

not he hires subcontractors for irrigation, a knowledge of irrigation is increasingly important. Growing competition among manufacturers and suppliers is depressing prices and shrinking margins. Smaller margins often translate into less design and technical support from the distributor. The contractor with irrigation expertise, who stays in touch with irrigation distributors and designer/consultants, has the advantage because he is aware of opportunities for profit.

"Irrigation represents almost a third of the cost of most landscape projects for us," says **Jon Ewing**, president of Landtrends Inc., of San Diego, CA. "You either accept the consequences of subcontracting irrigation or make the decision to buy the equipment and learn the business yourself. Most landscape projects that go out for bid include an irrigation plan and

specifications. From our standpoint, the most important thing is to make sure our landscape installation is backed up with a reliable irrigation system, one we can both install and maintain."

Trust has a lot to do with it, says **Glenn Moore**, owner of Glenmore Landscape. "We install primarily golf course irrigation systems. If I hadn't grown up on a golf course (as the son of Sherwood Moore, former golf course superintendent at Winged Foot and the Captain's Club) and installed and retrofitted systems since the age of 18, some people would question my credentials. Superintendents don't hire me because they don't understand irrigation. They hire me because they do, and they'd prefer that my company do it."

"We got tired of losing jobs to contractors with irrigation crews," states **Jerry Maldon-**

◀ The connection between image e and landscaping has never been stronger. Properly installed irrigation builds strong curb appeal.

▶ Jon Ewing, Landtrends, San Diego: "Most landscape contracts that go out for bid include an irrigation plan and specifications."



ado, vice president of Maldonado Nursery & Landscaping, Inc. of San Antonio, TX. "Coordinating our schedule with an irrigation contractor's schedule was frequently complicated. A package deal carries more weight when bids are compared. But, once you commit to a contract that includes irrigation, you'd better have the equipment and skill to pull it off. Just remember to judge irrigation as a separate profit center that stands on its own.

Unfortunately, on the small residential end of the landscape

business, irrigation is still considered so simple that anyone with a can of glue and shovel can do it. On any given Saturday morning, you can find a line of unlicensed "irrigation contractors" lined up at the special contractor check-out line of the discount hardware store. Forget about local building codes and backflow prevention device regulations. Who's going to inspect a homeowner's irrigation system to see if it meets code?

The do-it-yourself and pseudo-contractor market can't

Billion-dollar business

More than 20 million acres of residential and commercial landscaping are irrigated in the United States, according to the Irrigation Association. This includes more than 10 million single-family residences and 450,000 commercial establishments. Each year, contractors receive \$1.2 billion to install residential and commercial landscape irrigation systems, not including another \$600 million spent by retail hardware store customers (many of whom are small or part-time contractors).

Each year, irrigation systems are installed on more than 15,000 new commercial projects and 500,000 new residential landscapes. This does not include installations on existing commercial and residential properties or retrofitting older systems. While the number of companies that concentrate primarily on irrigation installation and maintenance is small (roughly 8,000), about half of landscape contractors either install or maintain irrigation systems. From a regional standpoint, involvement with irrigation ranges from 15 percent in the Northeast and north central United States to 80 percent in the Southeast and Southwest.

Reliance on landscape irrigation is obviously greater in warmer regions of the country. However, irrigation contractors and consultants in cooler regions of the country have found a comfortable business niche. Supplemental irrigation systems are gaining respect and popularity. Landscape architects in these regions are not as familiar with irrigation system specifications as those in the South and West, so they depend more on irrigation consultants and experienced irrigation contractors. This reduces the number of low-budget, under-designed systems.

The prospect for irrigation is bright for both cool- and warm-season regions of the country. Higher standards in housing development favor quality landscaping and irrigation. Even though the number of housing starts is greater in warmer climates, the percentage of existing homes and businesses without irrigation in cool regions represents a great opportunity. Retrofitting older irrigation systems has considerable potential in all regions.

The 600 irrigation distributors in the nation are undergoing the largest transition in the industry. Irrigation contractors used to depend heavily on distributors for product and design support. Today, contractors buy irrigation components from three or more different wholesale sources in their area. Competition is consequently greater and distributors' profit margins won't allow for the type of support they used to provide.

Retail stores that offer wholesale prices to contractors are also putting pressure on prices of irrigation components. *on next page*



"Once you commit to a contract that includes irrigation, you'd better have the equipment and skill to pull it off," says Jerry Maldonado, left, president of Maldonado Nursery & Landscaping, Inc.

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nents. Brands fight for shelf space like supermarkets. To compete in the retail outlet, manufacturers frequently produce a second, lower-priced grade of product. Check model numbers before you buy. If you need commercial-quality components, stick with the wholesale distributor. You can match mass merchandisers' prices and still get the support of the distributor by buying case lots instead of individual components. Retail outlets rarely have a sufficient assortment of controllers, valves and nozzles for commercial or larger residential work. They also might not have knowledgeable personnel on staff to provide accurate information on meeting codes for irrigation in your area.

Many irrigation distributors offer training seminars for their customers. These are frequently co-sponsored by manufacturers and focus on specific products. Distributors can also introduce you to design software so you can generate plans and takeoffs for common irrigation projects. In other words, you'll need to develop a good relationship with one or more irrigation distributors.

Irrigation as a profit center

Irrigation is a specialty type of contracting more than a separate business. Most irrigation contractors have the word landscape in their company name and treat irrigation as a division, even though irrigation represents the majority of their income.

Irrigation installation typically begins after rough grading. Any changes between plans and the final landscape must be resolved before irrigation crews start. Plant location will be limited by the irrigation in place. Changes add to cost.

One reason to treat irrigation as a separate profit center is to gauge and reduce the cost of changes. A change on the landscape installation might not be worth the resultant cost of the change on irrigation. One way to control these types of changes is to manage both landscape and irrigation portions of the project. Close coordination between the landscape contractor and irrigation subcontractor also can produce a higher profit.

As a contractor, you have the option of training one crew or all crews for irrigation installation or maintenance. If your landscape installation business is running at full speed, you might want to limit the diversion in energy and attention to a few key irrigation specialists. Of course, it is always very important for an irrigation specialist to have a superior knowledge of plant materials and

be ignored. Retail sales of irrigation components almost matches sales of professional landscape irrigation components through distributors. Sales clerks are designing irrigation systems on paper bags, soon to be filled with fittings, glue, pop-up sprayheads and a four-station controller. If you're lucky, he'll remember to include valves that include pressure vacuum breakers to provide some level of backflow protection. Ask yourself, is it worth chasing a \$600 irrigation installation job?

The purpose of this special section is to put all this into perspective for the landscape

▼ Irrigation is a specialty type of contracting more than a separate business. Many contractors also do landscaping.



landscape construction. Mistakes or misjudgments in irrigation can cause maintenance problems later. Unique plant water needs must be considered in all irrigation systems designs. Also be alert to "microclimates" that impact water use, such as shade, slope, soil, or wind exposure.

The difference between landscape crews and irrigation crews is mainly the vehicle and specialized equipment, such as trenchers or borers. The vehicle has to carry many different tools and fittings not generally needed for other landscape work. Efficiency and profit are based on having the materials with the crew at all times so trips back to the office are eliminated.

contractor. Concede the small residential work installed with disregard to local water protection regulations.

Focus on the high-end residential and the commercial work around you, the jobs that go out for bid and are inspected during and following installation. Work in concert with irrigation designers and consultants, distributors, and busy landscape contractors. Develop a record of successes to gain the attention of those who prefer not to be bothered by irrigation.

Most importantly, think like a modern landscape contractor. Consider the profit and repeat work of service contracts. Create an atmosphere of dependence between you and your customers about everything that has to do with landscaping. Be the conduit of knowledge during times of drought, pest infestation, and color, whether flowers or fall foliage. If you can do that, you will have won the battle and built a business foundation that assures a lifetime of prosperity, or at least personal fulfillment, for you and your firm. □