

# Tree specialist to the stars



*For Salinas Landscaping and Tree Preservation, success comes from the pursuit of excellence and new challenges.*

By DON DALE

Carlos Salinas' landscaping business in Los Angeles specializes in tree care. Anything you want done with a tree, his crews can do it for you. They are that versatile and skilled.

He does it so well he is in demand in the upscale suburbs on the west side, where some of his clients are stars and some of the houses he tends are as big as city halls. Yet the aspects of the business that Salinas loves are the aspects that challenge him personally and offer major potential for the company in the future.

A case in point, and a big development for Salinas Landscaping and Tree Preservation, is the addition last year of a tree nursery. It's modest in size

now — about 1,500 trees — but gives him a chance to not only reduce costs, but also introduce a retail potential.

"When we do installations we'll put in our own trees," Salinas says. "There's a lot of money in trees."

But this is only the latest news from a company that has specialized in trees for the 20 years it has been in operation. Carlos' father, Antonio Salinas, started it after working for other companies for years, and Carlos kept the focus when he started running the company about five years ago (his father now is semi-retired).

The company installs trees, moves trees, trims and maintains trees. Salinas estimates that maintenance is 30% of his business, with about 30% new installations and 40% one-time tree-trimming jobs.

"We have a tree-trimming crew, which we sometimes break in two," says Salinas, who employs 15 people on a full-time basis. "We have four

**Antonio Salinas II waters nursery trees until drip irrigation can be installed.**

climbers on a regular basis and we have a guy on installation who can be a climber."

His normal tree crew for a large residential tree job — many of his jobs in Bel Air and Brentwood are large houses and large jobs — is six men. At any one time, he might actually have three crews doing trees, especially if he has small, two-man jobs waiting.

"We do mowing," he says. "We do landscape touch-up." But he tries to keep his other landscape maintenance work to a minimum in order to do justice to the huge demand for tree work. The company has also done large jobs, for example trimming trees at UCLA, but he focuses on residential work for clients such as Goldie Hawn and Pat Boone.

But that focus may change somewhat as the trees that the company planted early last year mature. Salinas hopes to grow the tree farm into a lucrative ancillary business.

"We're just putting a variety of trees in there now," he says, pointing out that they are planted in boxes on the Malibu property of a client who grows wine grapes and citrus there. Salinas' father and the owner, George Rosenthal, decided to go partners on the venture.

"He supplies the land, we supply the labor," Salinas says. The landowner and Salinas each invest half of the cost of purchasing small trees and the 24-inch boxes they are planted in. Rosenthal supplies water, and Salinas will do the moving and transplanting when the trees are sold.

The tree farm takes up only about an acre now, and has plenty of room to expand. The incentive is entirely economic.

Trees have become so expensive that in the past Salinas has been paying up to \$200 for a 24-inch boxed tree — and possibly \$1,000 for a 48-inch box. Specialty trees are even more expensive. Palms are sold for about \$150 per foot in this area.

Of course, he passes that expense along, but a typical nursery makes a lot of profit that he would like to get. He bought his first trees for \$15, and added \$10 for each box with soil. By the time he sells them a year or so later, Salinas estimates that he will have about \$35 invested in them, which adds up to a \$165 profit if sold in the 24-inch box (half of that profit going to his company).

But he will certainly "box-up" some trees, re-

potting them into ever larger boxes for buyers who want a more mature tree. That should increase the profit margin.

Salinas says he is also providing a good recycling location for the tons of tree refuse he chips every year. He not only gets good potting and ground mulch, but he saves \$30 per ton in landfill fees that he would pay every time he sends a truck to the dump.

"The hardest part is to know which trees to grow," Salinas says. His experience and preliminary research led him to sycamore, oak, pepper, white birch and Chinese elm, which are well adapted and common to the California coast.

"We'll probably have them a year, a year and a half, to get the roots established," he says of the bare-root trees he bought. Some species will obviously take longer. "I'm not sure how long we'll have the oak."

One of the advantages that Salinas had is the company has been around long enough to have some surplus capital. That, plus having a partner go halves, gave him a big boost over someone who would have to borrow the investment money.

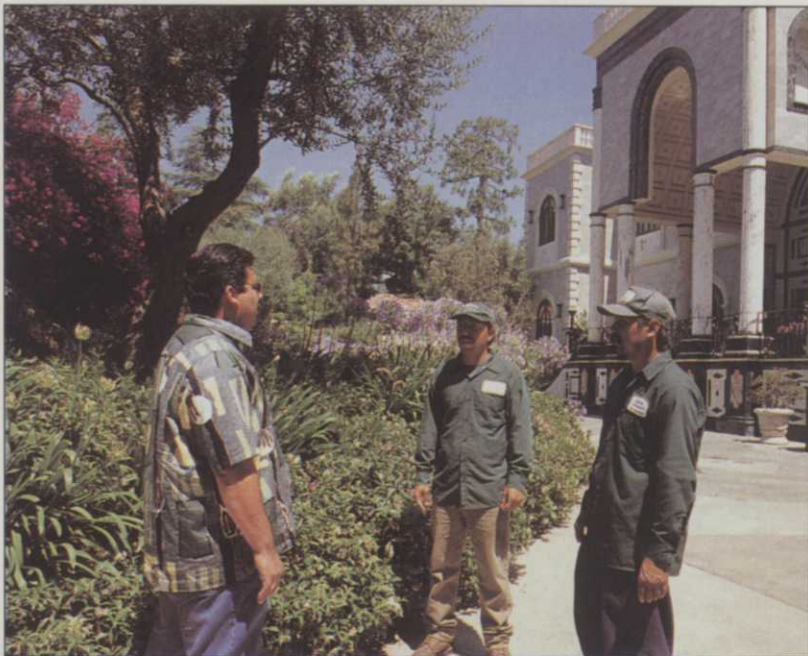
There is still more to do, obviously. He is accumulating the pipe required to put the trees on drip irrigation, for example.

In addition, Salinas will soon be looking at hiring a man to tend the trees full time. And the equipment required to move large trees is going to be ex-

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Salvador Miramontes (left), a long-time employee of Salinas Landscaping and Tree Preservation, with Carlos Salinas.



Carlos Salinas, on the left, talks over the job with employees Pedro Cabezas and Adalberto Nieves at an upscale residence in Bel Air.

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pensive. He'll need a crane and another truck.

But he figures he can make money on all the steps along the way. Instead of renting a crane for large installations, he'll furnish his own. The same philosophy will apply to the delivery, the box and, of course, the tree itself. He will also sell to other landscape contractors.

The obvious next decision, Salinas says, will be whether to open a retail outlet somewhere in Los Angeles. That would open the door to selling plastic-potted trees in various sizes, as well as other landscaping supplies. There are a lot of unknowns. Salinas, despite taking some college horticulture classes, is not experienced at growing trees.

For a landscape company to specialize in trees in this day and age is expensive. Salinas has invested in two wood chippers, the largest taking up to 12-inch diameter trunks, and a smaller unit.

"It's hard to get the big chipper in, at some residences," he says. In addition to his six pickups, Salinas has two dump trucks for hauling trash. He also has a stump grinder.

But he says it's not the equipment that makes a good tree company, it's the workers. First, it takes more manpower to trim trees than to mow lawns. Salinas Landscaping has a very stable work force, with two workers being with the company since it started. His newest worker has been with him two years. Maybe that's because he pays well — \$15 to

\$20 per hour for a good tree man.

With such dangerous work at hand, and the possibility of damaging property, another cost that Salinas incurs is liability insurance. He carries \$2 million worth just to be on the safe side, and that is in addition to worker's compensation.

With jobs all over the west side, Salinas says his company has to be light on its feet. He accomplishes that in a couple of ways. First, the crews are fluid. The three or four men who make up the installation crew, for example, will be switched to maintenance if needed. And their irrigation man can also climb trees.

One way that Salinas assists in this flexibility is by being proficient with a computer. He not only does his scheduling and other company business on the computer, he also very effectively uses a street guide program to print out maps to new jobs so a worker can carry them with him.

In short, the secret to having a good tree business in an upscale area is attention to detail. **LM**

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## Deep-root feeding

Salinas recently added deep-root fertilizer as a service. The SDI 50-gallon unit cost him \$6,000, but he has picked up a lot of business because of it.

"It's a sprayer/root feeder," he says. "We do more of the root feeding than spraying."

Using water soluble fertilizers, usually a 20-20-20 formulation, Salinas charges \$150 per hour/per bag of fertilizer used. On an average home he will use one or two bags, but on larger homes he might earn up to \$600 with the machine.

"It aerates, loosens up the soil and fertilizes," he says, and the unit is very portable.

Salinas says the feeder is designed to be mounted on a truck or small trailer, but his is not permanently mounted. Since it can be lifted by two men when the tank is empty, they simply keep it in the yard and put it in a truck when needed elsewhere.

He has spread the word to his clients that he has the machine, and his workers keep an eye out for trees that seem nutrient-deficient. "It is a good business," Salinas says happily.