

Get serious about irrigation

Ready to expand an existing irrigation contracting business? Read how to make it work better, smarter and more profitably

By BRUCE SHANK

For many of you, it may make perfect sense to include irrigation installation, expanded maintenance or related services in your mix.

There are advantages to being both the installer of the landscape and the installer of the irrigation. After all, you're already familiar with change orders and the site. In fact, you install landscapes realizing the limitations of the irrigation system.

What equipment will you need?

If you will perform a significant amount

of irrigation installation, use custom-designed trucks to carry pipe, fittings and a trencher. Drawers will organize fittings by pipe size. A complete range of fittings will reduce trips to the distributor or the shop. Consider a walk-behind sod cutter too, along with a small bilge pump and an electrical fault detector. You will run into cases where you need to burrow under sidewalks or driveways and proper equipment can save hours and reduce the disturbance.

If you're expanding current irrigation maintenance services, pay attention to the equipment that you use. Many irrigation repairs can be performed without expensive equipment, as long as you pay attention to details. Sprinklers might look alike, but they can have different nozzles and different patterns. Adjustment screws, on both sprinklers and valves, can change precipitation rates and disrupt uniformity.

Stick with the same brand and model sprinklers on irrigation zones. Look for brands that offer matched precipitation.

Do not mix sprayheads with rotors on the same zone. Be aware that elevation affects pressure and pressure impacts flow rate. Pipe size also influences flow rate.

Drip zones will require pressure regulators. The irrigation controller should provide enough zones to separate plants by their water needs.

Cheap controllers don't offer the expandability, the reliability or features like multiple starts, longer run times or sensor feedback.

You're an irrigation contractor if ...

1. You like to play golf in the rain
2. You leave the windows open at the car wash
3. You know how many gallons are in an acre-foot
4. You don't think of ET as a movie character.
5. You have a pitot tube in the glove box of your truck
6. You call the sticky liquid in the can 'cement' instead of 'glue'
7. You notice the roots of plants when digging a hole
8. You have words for 10 different shades of green
9. Your feet detect extremely minor differences in the hardness of the ground as you walk
10. Your favorite dog is a Labrador



Arm your irrigation tech with knowledge and communication.

Seek training before you attempt to install commercial or complex residential systems. Also develop a working relationship with local water agencies and the plumbing contractor on the job to make sure backflow prevention and cross-connection problems are covered by the book. These are issues best resolved by an irrigation consultant, especially in regard to sizing of the irrigation supply line.

Forget those callbacks

Callbacks are a money loser for all contractors. A buried valve installed backwards or a leak from a poorly cemented joint can cost you precious time and rev-

continued on page 42

continued from page 38

enue. Don't cut corners. Have the right tools and the right parts, and take the time to do the job according to specifications or accepted practice.

Bill irrigation work at a rate calculated to cover all equipment, labor and advisory costs. Your costs for irrigation might be higher than conventional maintenance or landscape installation. There is some logic to having irrigation crews do low-voltage lighting installation work as well. Power and controllers for these two specialties need to be addressed similarly.

With skilled labor being relatively scarce, you will hate to train someone and lose them to another company. Stay competitive with your wages and benefits.

However, there is something good to be said about getting employee participation in benefits. Just like they participate in a 401K, employees can invest in their future through training. You can provide a solid base of training, and offer to share in the expense of additional training, providing the employee also contributes to the



Granular matrix soil moisture sensor from Irrrometer can make a system more efficient.

cost. Once employees "buy in" to their professional advancement, they've made a commitment to staying in the field.

Reward employees regularly and frequently. Don't overlook hard work or smart work. And respect their family needs.

Troubleshooting and service contracts

One of the most popular classes taught by the Irrigation Association is electrical troubleshooting. There is more to irrigation than cementing pipe, fittings and components. Properly designed, a system works

only if controllers and valves communicate properly. Technicians need to be able to detect electrical faults and to use all the features of controllers. Note that many controllers today can be expanded with four-station modules. This enables you to add zones for surface and subsurface drip, wick irrigation, and, in some cases, control night lights and pumps for water features.

Have at least one person who understands backflow prevention devices. You might be restricted from working on backflow devices in certain areas, but you still need to recognize failures and alert the proper person for correction.

Learn more about service contracts and how to sell them with new installations. These contracts pay you monthly for a service you should probably perform anyway. No system is free from vandalism or traffic damage. Without sensors to inform someone when a pipe breaks or a head is damaged, you must visually inspect irrigation systems during operation. Proper operation is in your best interest, whether you get paid for it on a regular basis or not.

Service contracts give you frequent customer contact and allow you to recommend improvements. This enables you and your customers to take advantage of the latest technology in irrigation. You're also helping your customers meet local conservation requirements.

More expansion ideas

Consider offering maintenance contracts that include spring start-up and fall winterization. Install drain valves during installation so you can blow out water in the fall before the soil freezes to the depth of your irrigation lines. A summer performance check-up lets you meet with your customer when the system is operating full tilt.

There are huge differences in water requirements from season to season. Be aware of these differences and help your customers adjust their schedules each season.

Additional projects to sell to your customers might include installing fertigation equipment, adding filters and algae treatment for drip lines, installing rain or moisture sensors, designing a gray water system,

Take training seriously

Get trained and certified, whether or not it's required by your state.

▶ Work with your local irrigation suppliers to set standards and encourage professionalism among fellow irrigation contractors.

▶ Invite local irrigation consultants to address meetings.

▶ Work together in helping your local government determine the best way to implement conservation programs.

▶ Join the Irrigation Association through affiliated local organizations under a new special membership category for contractors. Attend the annual IA show held each November to take classes and see the latest technology.

▶ Become involved. Work with landscape contractors in submitting entries for award competitions. Alert the local press to professional recognition you receive for your work.

and providing an as-built irrigation plan if they don't have one. A handy tool for many customers is a report that tracks their yearly water use for irrigation.

Strut your stuff

Be visible. Create signs for job sites, decals for your trucks, uniforms for your staff and newsletters for customers. Make people aware of your company. Use flags with your company name and phone number to notify owners of malfunctioning irrigation heads. Boast that your irrigation systems are saving water as they make the environment green. Put floats in local parades. Write a weekly column for your local Sunday newspaper. Present awards to your customers for taking the effort to conserve water. **LM**

—The author is owner of Irricom, a publication consulting firm in Palmdale, CA. He can be reached at 800/455-4320.