

Success in irrigation

BY VICKY POULSEN

Three irrigation contractors discuss the keys to making irrigation installation work for you

Irrigation design, installation and maintenance is an exact science that some say is best left to the experts. That's why the American Society of Irrigation Consultants (ASIC) urges landscape contractors and architects to consult them before embarking on an irrigation project. They have experience, and they stay abreast of the rapid changes in irrigation technology through industry contacts and continuing education.

Still, many contractors go it alone and do quite well because they've developed competent irrigation crews. Crew members have taken a proactive approach to learning everything there is to know about

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irrigation systems and their components. Their superiors, in turn, have provided them with intensive training and "real world" experience by sending them to job sites all over the country, seminars, trade shows and manufacturer training classes.

Knowledge is the key to success in irrigation, and those who have a vested interest in this market don't take their jobs lightly. Mistakes can be costly and ruin the reputation of even the best companies.

We wanted the inside scoop on what today's contractors are up against when it comes to servicing the irrigation market, and here's what they had to say:

LARGE CONTRACTOR

Name: Todd Huston
Title: Vice president
Company: Terrain Systems, Inc.
Location: Phoenix, AZ
2000 revenue: \$14.6 million
Business mix: Mostly commercial
Employees: Between 180 and 300, depending on the season

Company profile: Founded by current owner Dale Micetic, the company has provided landscape and irrigation contracting services to commercial and industrial clients since 1974. Landscape Care, LLC, an affiliate company of Terrain Systems, Inc., provides landscape and site maintenance services to commercial and industrial sites throughout central Arizona. In mid-1998, Terrain purchased DKS Land Design, another local landscape design/build company that provided new leadership and a tree nursery now called Southwest Tree Growers, LLC. Each of the three companies operate as separate profit



Huston

centers and serve to increase profit through vertical integration of horticultural products and services. Terrain Systems fields 18 crews with Landscape Care, adding another 14 maintenance crews in the field daily. Approximately 35% of its landscape/maintenance services are devoted to irrigation installation and repair.

Product information sources: "We obtain most of our information through our vendors and trade-related seminars. We also have three large distributors who continually update our product knowledge and provide us with new catalog information on a regular basis."

Equipment arsenal: "We own all our equipment, everything from tractor-type trenchers to walk-behinds, backhoes, grade tractors and skid steers. Additionally, Terrain Systems operates a crane and water truck service for commercial construction sites. We have our own in-house mechanics to repair our equipment and keep the preventative maintenance up-to-date."

Picking a supplier: "Service is a major aspect of ordering irrigation parts. We can't afford to have our parts back ordered. Without materials, we can't meet our production schedules."

Biggest challenges: "One is all of the documentation and field plans you have to study before beginning a project. In our region, the weather is arid and dry, and local government regulations prevent new development from installing any new turf along right-of-ways. So it's an absolute must to know your county and city water regulations before embarking on an irrigation project. In the Phoenix area, drip irrigation prevails. We are hardly ever allowed to use bubblers and shrub sprays to water planter beds. Design guidelines require that plants be irrigated with low water use emitter systems (called xerigation in other areas of the country). Under this system, each plant is watered independently to insure each gets the proper amount of water."

Products to watch for: "Solar-controlled controllers are up-and-coming."

Word to the wise: "Look at and understand the complete project before coming up with and submitting the final bid. Also, buying the best irrigation products on the market is the best investment you can make for your client."

Teamwork is key in making irrigation installation work.

MEDIUM CONTRACTOR

Name: Takeshi Yamamoto
Title: Irrigation division manager
Company: Del Conte's Landscaping, Inc.
Location: Fremont, CA
2000 revenue: \$6.5 million
Business mix: Mostly commercial (HOAs)
Employees: 115 (90 year-round and 35 seasonal)

Company profile: The 29-year-old firm, which offers mostly commercial landscape installation services, is located south of the San Francisco Bay. The development of analytical methods of water management is a personal passion for owner, Tom Del Conte, who pioneered the use of technology to effectively manage irrigation zones. The company employs both central computer-



Yamamoto

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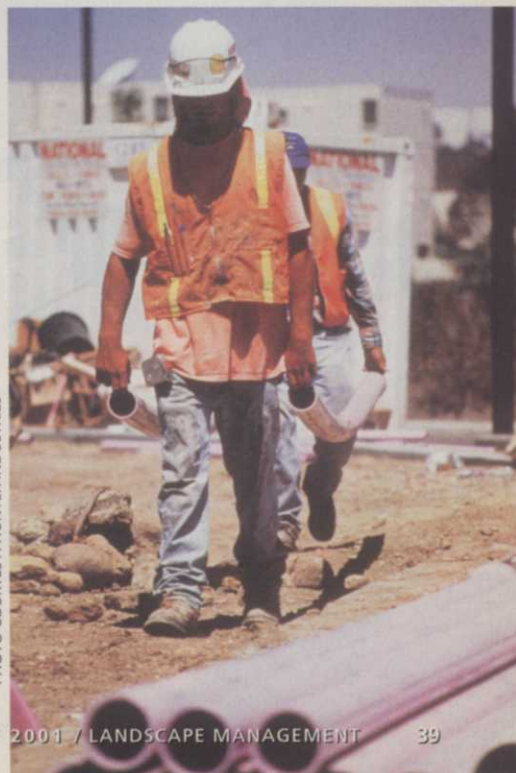


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ized irrigation water management via phone modem and conventional timing management by use of its own proprietary software developed by Yamamoto. Irrigation maintenance and construction services contributed more than \$1.7 million to the company's gross profit revenue of \$6.5 million in 2000.

Product information sources: Trade shows, magazines, catalogs and distributors. Yamamoto takes a proactive approach to learning about products and systems on the market. He interacts frequently with water conservation staffs so he can keep updated on what they're encountering in the field.

Make sure that you're carrying only the best products onto your project site.

Picking a supplier: "A lot of products look good on paper but don't work in the real world. For example, when the trend towards drip irrigation was increasing, there was an onslaught of products in that market. Many of those manufacturers at the time came up with products that weren't worth putting into the ground because of poor workmanship and design. But because that market has matured, contractors are figuring out what works, and the learning curve is catching up. We use only what we know works and invest only in the best."

Equipment: "We own all our equipment,

including several large excavators, back hoes, loaders, dump trucks, vibratory plow machines and trenchers of all sizes for installation jobs. For maintenance, we use customized compact vans fully equipped with all sorts of rack and irrigation components. Every tech also has a wireless remote control to activate the system as they walk around."

Biggest challenges: "My biggest challenge here is that the price of water is so cheap. To convince a client that a computerized, centrally-controlled irrigation system is going to save him a tremendous amount of money and conserve a tremendous amount of water is difficult with where water rates are right now. Until water is in short supply, the rates won't increase because of all of the political pressure surrounding this issue."

Products to watch for: "Wireless will be the wave of the future. Control valves will be in the field, and you'll simply have a wireless receiver on each one. The controllers will talk to the valves as well as send power to them. When its name is called, the valve turns on."

Word to the wise: "Knowledge is the key to running a successful irrigation operation."

SMALL CONTRACTOR

Name: William L. Wollett, Jr.
Title: Owner
Company: Golden East Lawn Service, Inc.
Location: Rocky Mount, NC
2000 revenue: N/A
Business mix: 100% residential
Employees: 5 during peak season
Company profile: Founded in 1989, the



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company is a full-service landscape/maintenance provider with 40% of its services devoted to maintenance, 50% to landscape design and installation and 10% to irrigation repair. Average crews consist of two people.

Product information sources: As a member of ALCA, Wollett attends the organization's annual trade show. He also has a top-notch supplier who has kept Wollett updated on important maintenance and product information.

Equipment arsenal: "With irrigation maintenance, the tools are pretty basic. Electric volt meters and wire locators are the most important pieces of equipment you need."

Picking supplier: "Same-day delivery is critical, and that's what we get from our supplier. We also want someone who's knowledgeable about the products they sell."

Biggest challenges: Although Wollett isn't faced with any water restrictions in his city, he sees them forthcoming in the next five years. In the meantime, he's already taken steps to conserve water by making sure all heads are adjusted properly, installing rain sensors and using a drip irrigation system on all planting beds.

Products to watch for: "For the type of work we do, I think the products we use are pretty cut-and-dried. We stick to standard equipment and keep things simple."

A word to the wise: "Before getting into the irrigation field, work for an irrigation company first. You can go to school to learn the basics, but working in the field is the best teacher there is."



Wollett

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