

# Get into irrigation

**Find the right niche and start increasing your bottom line by creating an irrigation service for your customers**

BY JIM DAVIS

**M**any landscape contractors handle nearly every aspect of creating beautiful landscapes — except irrigation system installation. This is usually because it makes more sense to focus on their specialty, which is landscape design and planting, and subcontract the irrigation to others who specialize in that trade.

The presence of too many irrigation contractors in some markets makes it not feasible to start an op-

eration within your company to compete against them. However, there may be niches in the marketplace that encourage you to start that irrigation branch. The questions you need to ask yourself in considering whether to add irrigation installation to your service offerings are:

- Are there gaps in the irrigation industry in my marketplace?
- Are existing contractors doing mostly residential or commercial work?
- Do those contractors offer irrigation services exclusively, or do they also install plant material and lighting?
- How many other companies offer a full spectrum of services: planting, lighting, water gardening, decks/patios and irrigation?

## Start with servicing

One of the first things contractors do to begin their irrigation installation service is get involved in the "service" side of the business. When requested by a homeowner or builder, offer to repair an area that was disturbed by sitework modifications. This type of involvement requires few, if any, extra tools or equipment, yet may serve as a springboard for further work. Soon, you'll learn

several tricks of the trade and eventually gain the confidence to take on a new installation job.

## Capital investment

Because of market conditions or the availability of key people, some companies decide to jump right in and activate a crew devoted solely to irrigation. If you want to do this, there's a minimum of six things you need:

1. Crew of two or three workers, one of them to be a team leader.
2. Trencher/vibratory plow (and trailer) with plow blade, one or two pipe grips and boring rod/attachment.
3. Truck or van with pipe rack, or an enclosed box van.
4. Hand-tools, including shovels, pipe cutters, hoes, saws, drills, rakes, crowbar and tamps.
5. A relationship with a distributor and a line of credit.
6. Someone capable of making sales calls, visiting the site and understanding the scope of work, and developing and presenting a thorough, profitable bid/quote.

Numerous training opportunities offered by irrigation distributors or the Irrigation Association (703/536-7080) throughout the country cover design, installation



Are you considering adding irrigation services to your landscape operation? You'll need skilled employees.

# Typical components of irrigation systems

and service issues. These classes are the best source of irrigation installation information and technical training.

## Bidding and estimating

Once you learn how to install irrigation properly, learn how to do it profitably. One way is to learn from consultants who focus on landscape and irrigation operations. In addition to providing energetic and enlightening seminars, many of these groups have workbooks that show how to analyze your

- Water tap & meter (municipal water source)
- Backflow preventer
- Ball valves (for shutting off the system)
- Quick coupling valve or coupling for compressed air connection (winterization)
- Booster pump (if necessary)
- Mainline pipe (usually PVC)
- Schedule 40 PVC fittings
- Electric remote control valves
- Valve boxes
- Lateral pipe (either PVC or poly-pipe)
- Gear-driven rotary sprinklers (large areas)
- Spray heads (small areas)
- Drip tubing (optional for planting beds)
- Control wire (between valves and controller)
- Solid state controller (clock/timer)
- Rain sensor (connected to controller)

company's specific equipment and work habits so that you can profitably bid on projects. A few of the basics you'll learn are:

- Allowing for "mobilization" time/labor (planning, coordinating, loading, driving).
- The four basic compo-

nents of a bid: cost of materials, labor rates (public jobs may require prevailing wage rates), equipment costs (includes depreciation expense for each piece of equipment to be used on the job), profit and overhead (usually figured as a percentage — 10% to 20%).

■ Remembering to allocate time for: site clean-up, punch-list corrections, compilation of "as-built" drawings and system review/training with the owner.

**Project budget parameters**  
Evaluate project-specific vari-

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- LANDSCAPING PROPOSAL**: A form with a header for Cascadia Landscaping and a section for 'Proposals Laser & Manual'.
- Lawn Maintenance Invoice**: A form with a header for Cascadia Landscaping and a section for 'Lawn Maintenance Invoice'.
- LANDSCAPING WORK ORDER/INVOICE**: A form with a header for Cascadia Landscaping and a section for 'Work Order/Invoices Laser & Manual'.

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ables before submitting your bid. Ask yourself:

- Is the water source easily accessible?
- Does the municipality require a licensed plumber to make the water tap?
- Is there power available in case a booster pump is needed?
- Where will the client want the controller?
- Where will the backflow preventer be located?
- Is there existing turf, or will your crew be performing work prior to sodding?
- Who will be responsible for site repair/final grading?
- What time of the year will the project take place?
- Are all parts of the site accessible?
- Will it be clear where all the utilities are before you start digging?
- What is your gut reaction toward the project overseer?
- Will there be an irrigation consultant overseeing the project?
- Will any delay affect materials and labor costs?
- Will this one project create future additional work for your company?

#### Network like crazy

As with any service, your best advertising is word of mouth. To get established, though, be assertive with the people you meet by letting them know your company installs ir-

Hand tools are just one category of products you'll need to start an irrigation service.

rigation. Potential customers are those already on your mailing list. Eventually, you will get irrigation installation work by:

- learning of a project and contacting a general contractor,
- being contacted by a general contractor to bid on a prepared plan, or
- being asked by a homeowner or builder to develop a plan and submit a quote.

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