

# WIN WITH Water

Progressive Atlanta company devises a proactive strategy to keep customers from drying up

BY RON HALL/ EDITOR-IN-CHIEF



**T**he aging rocker twisted and wailed on the outdoor stage as an exuberant knot of adolescents slid baseball-style in a gummy bog they had created. Ahh, the sweet smell of a rock & rap concert: sweat, mud and spilled beer.

The 3.5 inches of rain released onto the revelers during the weekend rockfest provided only temporary relief to the area's lingering water shortage. Pulsating, expanding Atlanta metro, with its four million people clustered in a ring of 20 surrounding north Georgia counties, is sucking up the area's fresh water supply.

The water shortage also has the potential to threaten Atlanta's reputation as one of the nation's most attractive and progressively landscaped regions.

The 100-plus communities within the metro area are working (often, it seems, at cross purposes) to make every last drop of water count. It's a challenge the Green Industry — here as well as elsewhere — can help them face.

#### **Meeting the challenge**

Indeed, the lingering water shortages in the Atlanta market have caused landscape companies like The Morrell Group, a division of Omni Fa-

cility Services, Inc., to focus more intensely on installing, maintaining and managing efficient irrigation systems. They, like increasing numbers of landscape companies across the nation, must deal with landscape watering restrictions that differ from community to community.

But, the way the Morrell Group managers see it, droughts create opportunities as well as challenges for enterprising landscape firms.

Over a recent breakfast in a packed country-style restaurant just north of Atlanta, they shared their thoughts on dealing with ongoing water woes. Meeting LM behind plates of grits and eggs and cups of steaming coffee were:

▶ Atlanta regional manager **Kirk Talgo**, who oversees three operations managers and three field supervisors,

▶ Irrigation Director **Bert Wood**, CLI, responsible for one operations manager and five service crews;

▶ water management director **Bill Beckley**, who supervises three technicians; and

▶ business development director **Bart Parker**.

As the managers' titles suggest, their company takes a multilayered approach in promoting efficient landscape irrigation.

"Our entire company has to be focused on what's going on, starting with the designers providing designs with native and

drought-tolerant material, our maintenance group that handles just about everything on a site, and all the rest of us," says Parker. "Otherwise, we're defeating our purpose as a landscape company."

As always in landscape maintenance, the employees with the most contact with each property are the crew members who, as part of their duties, monitor the effectiveness of each site's irrigation.

"We are the ones who are actually managing the irrigation systems on a property," says regional manager Talgo. "We set the clocks and make minor repairs if we can. We also have to keep track of the restrictions from one area to another because they vary depending on the location of the properties.

"A lot of the irrigation systems are 10 to 15 years old and we sometimes have Bert (Wood) and Bill (Beckley) come in and make these systems as efficient as we can make them, either with a redesign or going to other water sources," says Talgo.

Irrigation director Wood provides the second level of service when a client's irrigation needs attention. The third level is provided by water management director Beckley, who gets the call when a customer's irrigation needs exceed the ca-

## Landscape industry assists with Florida BMPs

BY HERMAN "GENE" YEARTY

Preventing non-point source water pollution involves more than just state-of-the-art stormwater management systems. Reducing urban landscape pollution of water resources requires wise landscape management, pollution source controls and a great deal of public education.

It used to be that when we talked about Best Management Practices (BMPs) that would reduce pollution of surface and groundwater by stormwater runoff, the implication was that agriculture industry practices needed better management. But that's all changing. Residential and commercial

landscapes, sports fields, recreational grounds and other urban landscapes have been identified as the largest crop in the State of Florida, covering more than an estimated 4.5 million acres.

Minimizing excess nutrients and other pollutants carried in stormwater runoff that make their way into surface water is a challenging task. Excess nutrients include fertilizers, grass clippings, plant debris and phosphorus bound up in soil. Other pollutants are pesticides and even the drops of oil from your automobile

engine. Despite the fact that Florida boasts more stormwater treatment systems than any other state in the nation and upholds some of the nation's most stringent water quality permitting regulations, pollution caused by excess nutrients and other pollutants carried by stormwater remains the greatest threat to Florida's ground and surface waters.

### It's the law

After the drought conditions and mandatory water use restrictions of the late 1980s, the state legislature enacted a law (373.185.F.S.) in 1991 that required the state's five water man-



*continued on page 24*

*continued from page 23*

agement districts to encourage local governments to pass landscape ordinances to eliminate pollution and conserve water resources. As a result of state stormwater rules and regulations that are now citing communities as the source of surface water pollution — not to mention the drought of 2001 — local governments are enacting ordinances.

To implement urban landscaping BMPs at a statewide level, representatives from the landscaping industry, state agencies and universities, water management districts and environmental interests have developed a manual, as well as a Model Landscaping Ordinance. The manual, "Florida Green Industries' Landscaping Best Management Practices for Protection of Water Resources in Florida," and the new model ordinance address both traditional and Xeriscape landscapes.

**Let's base decisions on science**

The Model Landscape Ordinance will assist local governments in developing a sound, science-based program. It contains language that local governments may adopt as is or modify.

It's estimated that more than 100,000 Florida landscape maintenance providers will be impacted by implementing urban landscape best management practices. To train the small independent landscape providers, the model ordinance contains proposed language that urges local governments to require these businesses to provide proof of training by either the extension service or through a professional organization in order to obtain an occupational license. Continuing education will be required annually in order to renew their license.

*The author is a former pest control business owner who lives in Jacksonville, FL, and assisted in developing the BMPs.*

pabilities of other company resources. Often, the customer is having trouble getting enough water for the landscape. Beckley, an expert on computerized systems like the Rain Bird Maxi-Com, often proposes alternative water sources, system modifications or management plans that can save owners of large properties up to \$1 million a year in water costs.

"Upgrading an irrigation system is almost always a wise investment considering how much money some of these properties have invested in their landscapes," explains Beckley. "Some property management companies understand that and some don't."

The problem, Beckley believes, is tied to customers' perceptions of the role of irrigation



PHOTO BY RON HALL

**The Morrell Group,  
a division of Omni Facility Services**

**The Omni team approach:** Pictured from l to r: Bert Wood, Kirk Talgo and Bill Beckley of The Morrell Group

**Established:** 1989 by George Morrell as a full service landscape provider

**Purchased:** Dec. 1999 by Omni Facility Services, Inc.

**Locations:** Atlanta; Destin, FL; Bessemer, AL

**2001 sales:** \$23 million

"The irrigation system is hardly ever treated as a crucial piece of a property's infrastructure or a utility, with some exceptions," he explains. "Usually, it's treated as a support system for the landscaping, not as a higher level of engineering."

Irrigation director Wood agrees that many property managers are unaware of the latest irrigation technology that could greatly benefit their properties as well as save water. For instance, most properties

are still watered with systems operated by manual or older electro-mechanical clocks. The tendency is to overwater rather than underwater with systems that rely heavily upon human judgement, he says. "People want to make sure the landscape stays green."

By contrast, a computerized system with digital controls has the ability to report real-time operations to an irrigation manager. Adjustments can easily be made through a computer

*continued on page 26*

## Conservation efforts bring rewards

Being recognized as a company that provides exceptional service to clients in spite of scarce water resources is good business. Las Vegas-based Yards 'R' Us Landscape Services, a J.R. LandCare Group company, promotes this expertise.



This past year, the Southern Nevada Water Authority (SNWA) honored the company with special awards for the maintenance it provides to two beautiful, water-efficient landscapes.

"Being recognized for these projects pumped us up. It was a big morale

booster within the company," says President Rob Diaz, who operates the company with his wife, Joyanna. "I think it builds credibility with our customers, too."

The seven-year-old company maintains a 24-hour irrigation hotline for its customers. "An emergency is any kind of running water," explains Diaz. "We're always on call to get the water turned off."

He says his company prides itself on educating customers on proper irrigation and on the importance of following the SNWA's stringent water regulations.

*continued from page 24*  
monitor or hand-held unit. These sophisticated tools take the guesswork out of irrigation, including optimizing zone irrigation and efficiently watering areas of a landscape that have different moisture needs.

"Basically, it's like the difference between the AM radio in your '66 Olds with its two knobs and today's car audio

system with its 20 different preset stations, auto seeking and all the other modern features," says Beckley.

As impressive as this technology is, people are still in control, Beckley admits. "It takes a person with horticulture, mechanical and computer knowledge to operate it," he says. Once a property owner or manager makes a commitment



Modern irrigation systems keep landscapes healthy without wasting precious water.

PHOTO COURTESY: HUNTER INDUSTRIES

to installing such a system, they also have to make a commitment to hiring a knowledgeable person to manage and use it to its full potential.

"If they don't, it's like buying a Ferrari and driving it up your driveway to get the mail and then back into your garage," he says.

Technology is just part of the answer to water conservation.

### Not just technology

Technology is just part of the answer. Taking a more active role in shaping customer water use habits and helping mold water regulations are other parts.

Wood, who also serves as president of the Atlanta Chapter of the Irrigation Association, says that government agencies are quick to implement watering restrictions because they don't fully comprehend the importance of attractive and healthy landscapes. Healthy, attractive landscapes are a key factor in a marketplace's economy.

This is particularly true of Atlanta, headquarters of 14 "Fortune 500" companies and dozens of other national companies.

Wood says that a group Green Industry professional have been meeting at the Ag Extension Office in Griffin, GA, to stay abreast of water the water issue.

"We chose to become involved and find out for ourselves and have some ability to provide input," he explained. **LJM**