

HOLDING YARDS HELP

Growing and maintaining your own plant materials makes sense for some landscape businesses.

BY JAMIE J. GOOCH

THERE ARE many benefits to maintaining and growing plants in a holding yard. Most landscape firms already have the expertise needed to maintain the plants as they grow, which can save a considerable amount of time and money compared to buying larger plants to install. Quality and inventory can be tightly controlled in a holding yard, eliminating last-minute searches for high-quality plants.

But there's a downside as well. "I'm a landscaper, not a nurseryman," is probably the most cited reason for not starting a holding yard. It's a sound argument. A holding yard can quickly turn into a private nursery complete with all the work that entails, including greenhouse,



disease and irrigation management. It's no wonder some landscape professionals would rather concentrate on designing and installing great landscapes rather than growing and/or maintaining their own plant materials.

Residential reasoning

Wayne Whittier, owner of WDS Landscape & Design, New Braunfels, TX, says at a certain point in a landscape business holding yards are a logical addition. Whittier, who has been in the landscape indus-

Keep weeds down with landscape fabric, and arrange plants based on their irrigation requirements.

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try for 25 years, once managed a nursery and now focuses on high-end residential design-build.

"There's a line that you hit where you really need to grow the stuff that you know has a better than 50/50 chance of not being available, and then buying the rest," he says.

Though Whittier admits growing and holding plants would be significantly more difficult if he didn't have nursery experience, having what he needs when he needs it is worth the effort. His holding yard — which includes about 6,000 plants, 350 tons of limestone for water gardens, leftover flagstones, landscape lighting inventory and equipment — allows him to outbid competitors who have to buy all of their plant materials, while keeping quality high.

Commercial quantities

Holding yards can also help landscapers who focus on commercial landscapes. The huge numbers of plants needed on a large commercial job can make them difficult to obtain economically.

Lavon Webb, owner of the maintenance division of Sterling Landscape Design & Construction in Nampa, ID, often used 5,000 or more shrubs on commercial shopping centers and subdivisions when the economy was booming. Webb, who has been in business for more than 30 years, says his 5-acre holding yard had about 4,000 trees and 20,000 shrubs when his commercial/residential mix was 75%/25%. Now he holds about 1,000 trees and 5,000 container-type shrubs as he focuses more on residential work and waits for the commercial business to return to Nampa.

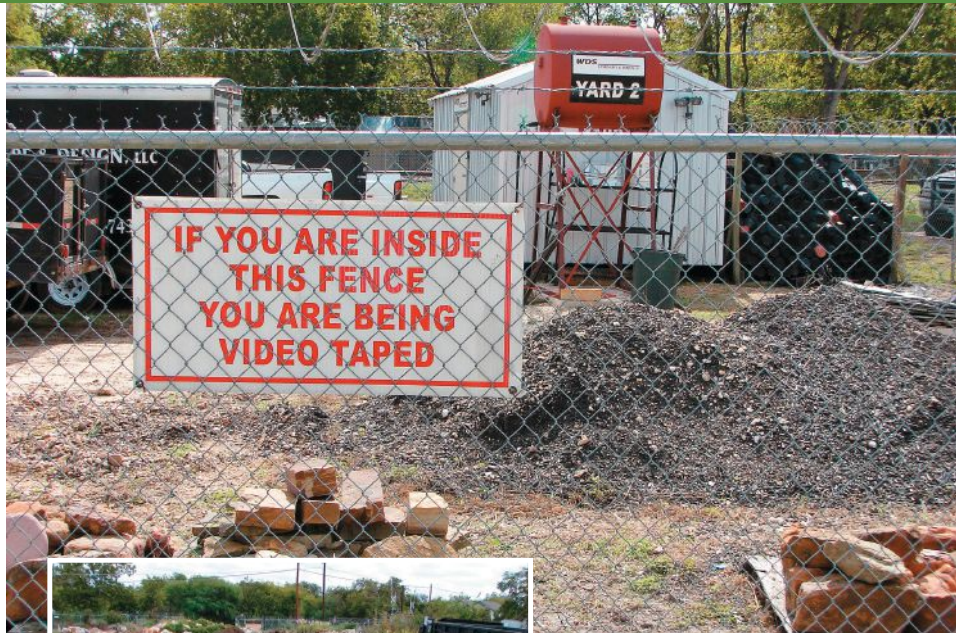
"We left the holding yard in place so that when the economy comes back we'll be ready," he says.

In its heyday, Webb had two full-time employees working to maintain it and manage the inventory.

Before you build

Landscapers who want to build a holding yard can benefit from advanced planning. Know what to expect when it comes to maintenance.

"Maintenance is all year long," Webb says. "There's a lot of weeding. There are



Above: Security is an important expense to consider when building a holding yard.

Left: To save time, arrange materials for easy pick-up by landscape crews.

rows of sprinklers between two rows of trees and the misting system sprays out 8 ft., so a lot of weeds grow up. Every week and a half we have to mow weeds down. It's almost like a tree farm operation."

Spraying for insects, pruning and fertilization are also maintenance musts. But Webb says the trees especially help him control costs.

"A 2-in. caliper tree might cost \$60 to grow, but \$90 to \$100 to buy," he says. It helps us get additional work. A holding yard is a good thing to have if you have a lot of commercial business."

As with any property purchase, holding yards come down to location. Appropriately zoned acreage is often only available on the outskirts of town, but the closer you can build to your customer base, the less you'll have to spend in travel time and fuel. Thinking about leasing land? Think again, says Whittier, who had to move his leased holding yard to property he purchased.

However, purchasing land and everything that goes with it is a significant investment. Whittier paid \$20,000 for a secure fence around his holding yard, for example.

Other pitfalls to avoid include haphazard inventory management that makes the landscape foreman's job more difficult, weed-infested plant materials that can't be saved and a lack of zonal irrigation.

Webb learned the importance of multiple zones when he realized his old zones were too large. He was wasting water and spending time turning off and on individual spray heads.

"Now we have it much more zoned so we can control the water better," he says. "Different plants have different requirements, so we can water them accordingly now."

Webb's new holding yard is also graded so that water runs to the center to drain. It is also covered with thick fabric to help minimize weeds.

In the right situation, with the right planning, the benefits of holding yards can outweigh the maintenance headaches.

"You really have to design it and know what you're doing," Whittier says. "If you don't, it'll put you out of business." ■■■

Gooch is a freelance writer and editor based in Northeast Ohio.