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In College Station, Texas, Texas A&M AgriLife Research scientists are trying to utilize evapotranspiration (ET) to help develop simple formulas for watering lawns.

Operating on the principle that history is a good teacher, Charles Fontanier, AgriLife Research associate, and Richard White, Ph.D., AgriLife Research turfgrass physiologist, are conducting studies at the Texas A&M AgriLife Turfgrass Field Lab to determine if historical ET data can be used to predict water needs when irrigating St. Augustine grass.

The goal is to create a message that's easy to understand for both homeowners and landscape contractors and also will promote water conservation and healthy turf, Fontanier says.

"From the reference ET, we can adjust it to the different types of grasses we are growing, as well as perhaps a microclimate—if it is a sunny spot or a shady spot," Fontanier says. "So we can adjust the number accordingly. If the number for a warm-season turfgrass in Texas is 0.6, then 60 percent of the weather station output is what we should be applying to our grasses.

"But keeping up with real-time ET data can be too time consuming," he says. "So our goal for this study was to demonstrate and quantify the effects of using historical average water needs as a predictor of actual plant water needs."

Fontanier and White have used historical averages to set the irrigation system run times each of the last two growing

Texas A&M researchers seek a simple turfgrass watering formula.

By KAY LEDBETTER

seasons. For example, on average over the past 47 years, St. Augustine grass has needed about 4.25 inches of water in July. They have used that number to irrigate the grass each July.

Their four treatments in the study were: reference ET from the weather station or 100 percent, which would be an over-watering scenario; turf coefficient, which is what's theorized that the turfgrass actually needs; and two deficits, 40 percent and 60 percent of the turf coefficient.

"Looking at the two years we've had recently and comparing the differences, in 2011 when we really had severe conditions, our main goal with any irrigation was really just bud and crown survival," Fontanier says. "If we kept enough plants alive, we could get regrowth once rains did come. In fact, that is what we found. Even though we lost a tremendous amount of density in our deficit irrigation treatments, the grass survived, and by March, we had close to 100 percent stands."

Superficially, all the plots looked the same, he says. That's the important message for areas that can tolerate that seasonal reduction in quality—that St. Augustine grass will survive "if you just moderate your irrigation and keep it moist enough that we have enough buds to stimulate regrowth," Fontanier says.

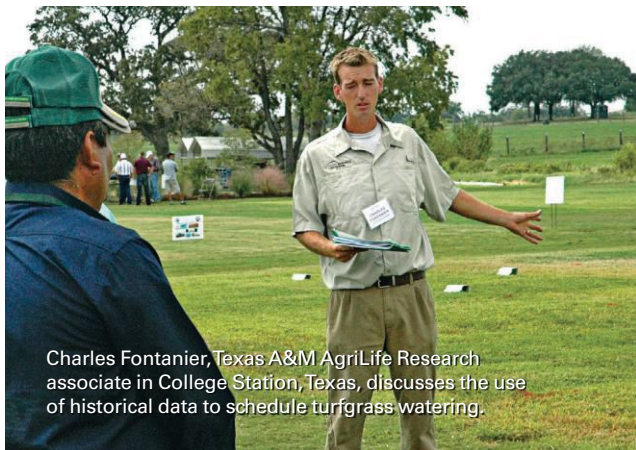
FERTILIZER IS KEY TO RECOVERY

A second aspect determined from the study is that nitrogen fertilizer is key to the speed of that recovery, Fontanier says, and the high fertilizer experiments show greater recovery.

"If you look at 2012, where we did get occasional rains, our water conservation treatments or deficit irrigation treatments not only survived, they actually look pretty good," he says, adding the researchers under-irrigated in 2011 by about 20 percent and over irrigated in 2012 by about 10 percent.

"But if you look at the long haul," Fontanier continues, "we think we will be right on the money—or at least promoting some level of conservation utilizing historical ET as a base for irrigation."

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Charles Fontanier, Texas A&M AgriLife Research associate in College Station, Texas, discusses the use of historical data to schedule turfgrass watering.

MAINTENANCE

No longer an “alternative”

At Sebert Landscaping, propane- and battery-powered equipment are business as usual.

By JONATHAN KATZ

Seibert Landscaping could be less than two years away from converting its entire mower fleet to propane power. The effort is part of the Bartlett, Ill., company's goal to eventually end its reliance on gasoline by utilizing some form of alternative energy for all of its equipment, including handheld products.

“That means no transfer of gasoline or diesel into gas cans, mowers or handheld equipment,” says Steve Pearce, general manager of Seibert Landscaping.

Seibert Landscaping, with estimated annual revenue of \$25 million, embarked on a journey about four years ago to reduce its environmental footprint, Pearce says.

“The No. 1 reason why we're so proactive in this movement is because it's responsible within the industry, responsible to our clients and responsible to the environment,” Pearce says. “The cost savings is second, which is a very important part of our business, because that's another benefit to the client.”

The company already has swapped out approximately 40 percent of its 150-plus gas-powered mowers for Exmark propane units and has not purchased a gas mower in three years. The switch comes at a premium, with propane mowers costing \$800 to \$1,000 more per unit, Pearce says. But in the long run, propane should save Seibert money, partly because propane is significantly cheaper than gasoline. Further savings are possible through longer service life, Pearce says. He expects to gain an additional 500 to 800 hours per mower engine with propane units.

To refuel the mowers, Seibert's propane supplier arrives two to three times per week with a propane transfer truck to refill the tanks. The company stocks up to three extra tanks per mower. In the future, Seibert plans to purchase its propane in bulk and refuel its own tanks, which will lead to additional savings, Pearce says.

One of the inherent disadvantages of a propane mower is its loss of horsepower. Seibert compensates for that loss by upgrading to 24-hp engines rather than the lower 20-hp engines it would purchase for gas mowers, Pearce says.

“So we're actually seeing no difference in performance when it comes to the mowers,” he says.

The company is in the process of studying how fuel efficient the propane-powered mowers are compared to traditional gas mowers. Seibert's initial study showed a slight increase in fuel consumption with propane, Pearce says.

CHARGED-UP FOR HANDHELDS

The company also is migrating to battery-powered handheld equipment. About two-and-a-half years ago company owner Jeff Seibert challenged employees to develop a solar-powered trailer to charge batteries for handheld equipment.

Pearce and other employees installed a solar film on top of the trailer that feeds energy through an inverter, which in turn charges a battery-pack system. This setup allows employees to charge batteries continually rather than waiting until the end of the work day.

The company recently learned about

a development by handheld equipment manufacturer CORE Outdoor Power that could mean eliminating the inverter, which costs about \$6,000. With the new system, power would travel from the solar panels to a voltage regulator—costing only a few hundred dollars—to the charger.

Moving to battery-powered handheld equipment is a work in progress, Pearce says. The company currently is testing about 25 battery-powered blowers and trimmers from CORE and Stihl. It will be another five years or so before Seibert replaces all of its handheld equipment with battery-powered units, he adds. Performance issues and wide-scale availability are the greatest hurdles.

“There has to be industry interest in these pieces for the manufacturers to produce and engineer the equipment that we're going to expect, and that's been lagging over the last few years,” Pearce says.

The battery-powered handheld units cost approximately 20 percent to 25 percent more than traditional equipment. The units perform as well as gas-powered blowers and trimmers when used for routine maintenance tasks, but they're less effective in heavier maintenance applications, Pearce says.

Manufacturers have rapidly improved the reliability and performance of the machines, and Pearce expects further advancements soon.

To other companies looking to make the switch, Pearce says, “You have to be innovative, you have to think outside the box, and you have to be a leader in your own organization.”

Katz is a freelance writer based in Cleveland.



Seibert staff built a trailer to recharge handheld equipment batteries.

DESIGN/BUILD

A patio with “exquisite furnishings” enhances a company’s portfolio, says John Algozzini.

Park it here

Ramp up your designs by offering seating options. *By JOHN ALGOZZINI*



PRICE IT RIGHT

Everything designers do outside is part of the design process and the profit process. Furniture is an integral part of both.

“I have a design responsibility to my client and also a financial responsibility to my employer to explore all possibilities in the landscape,” says designer Anna Smailus of Thornapple Landscapes in Batavia, Ill. “While seat walls are incredibly popular, I also like to include furniture groupings and bench seating in those jobs where budget will allow it. By doing so, I’m providing a professional service that helps complete the design thought.”

Small furniture purchases made by landscape contractors may not be high-margin items, but they don’t have to be loss leaders either. Pricing varies from project to project, but I recommend including a 15 percent to 20 percent mark-up on materials only. Delivery, assembly and set up are done on a time and material basis.

A lower profit margin on furniture may be a reality, but there is an upside: There are almost no post-installation issues since it doesn’t require water and any warranty issue is with the manufacturer. Also, when a company decides to photograph a project a year or two after the installation, it knows its furniture selections will be in place as part of the design. Arriving to find plastic furniture from a big-box outlet on a patio you designed can be a bit deflating, but a patio with exquisite furnishings enhances any company’s portfolio at point of presentation.

A good landscape is always about utility *and* aesthetics. One of the more expressive ways to accent any garden is through seating options. Seating in the landscape is a definitive expression of style. Whether it’s wood, metal, wicker or composite, the furniture in our landscapes helps define, embellish and provide the outdoor living space with enduring character. Almost any landscape I design today includes seating, whether it’s seat walls or furniture groupings.

What led me to start integrating furniture and other site amenities was a class I attended by landscape architect Leo Kelly. The class was not on furniture, but on wood structures. He referred to one of his arbors as a “visual pause.” It made me think not so much of arbors or pergolas but of other garden elements that gave the eye and the user points of reflection beyond the patio or the plantings. More specifically, it led me to think about seating and furniture in the garden beyond its basic utility.

VARIETY AND PLACEMENT

Whether the space is strongly formal or randomly casual, I like to incorporate a variety of seating elements into designs. My designs have included wide-ranging seating choices, such as seats from Wrigley Field in Chicago and a tribal council stump from the TV series “Survivor.” But even a solitary chair in the right place on the patio or in a garden bed works wonders from an aesthetic and practical standpoint.

Beyond Kelly’s “visual pause,” sometimes furniture is a “visual stop.” A thoughtfully placed grouping, chair or bench at the end of an axial view works wonders to create impact. The terminus of an axis is not completely developed from a design standpoint unless there’s something located there to catch and hold the eye.

SELLING SEATING

Not all clients are receptive to the idea of having furniture selected for them. It takes a subtle and educated approach to engage clients and gain their trust. Locating the furniture on the drawing is a good way to start; it shows clients that you’ve considered scale and how the space can be used for the family and for entertainment.

Talking about seating provides a competitive edge. It involves the designer in a more meaningful way. Early in the process that discussion assists the homeowner in a way that distinguishes the designer as more concerned, informed and holistic than the competition.

The landscape market evolves constantly and being part of the evolution is preferable to watching it pass you by. Whether you park it here or park it there, furniture in the landscape provides pleasure, profit and possibilities for every designer and contractor looking for an edge in their business.

Algozzini is director of design at K & D Landscape Management in the Chicago area. Reach him at jalgozzini@kdlandscapeinc.com.

LAWN/TREE CARE

6 ways to make your website sell

Don't just set it up and forget about it.

By ANDREW POTOTSCHNIK

Your website is your most important salesman. In fact, making sales is the only reason to have a website.

Here are six great ways to give your website the tools it needs to close sales.

1 Start with a professional design. Hopefully, no one reading this would ever let a member of their team show up at prospective client's home or business wearing cutoff jeans, flip-flops or a tank top. Like it or not, our image projects an idea of how we operate. If your website looks sloppy, hard to use or is just a glorified business card, it says something about your business. Make it professional and project the image you want to portray in your market.

2 Display certifications, licenses, awards and memberships. In a sense, every salesman presents a resume of qualifications to a prospect; your website should do the same. Letting the world know your business is licensed, insured, a member of important trade organizations and even an award winner shows you're serious about how you do business and that you strive to be (or are) the leader in your industry. Companies that aren't in it for the long haul don't go to the trouble.

3 Offer a strong guarantee. Giving a salesman the ability to guarantee your work is the ultimate counter to any objection a customer would have to using your services.



Testimonials and reviews are important elements for your website, Andrew Pototschnik says.

If you currently don't advertise a guarantee, are you not going to fix a job when a client is unhappy? If you are, then you already have a guarantee. The only thing you're not doing is telling people that you have a guarantee.

Advertise it. Make it public. Let people know that they're not going to make a bad decision if they choose you and they're going to be happy with your service, no matter what.

4 Show off your public recognition and media coverage. Those who sell services for popular or publicly recognized companies have an easier time selling and often can charge a premium. Maybe you've been featured on the local news or in other media outlets; this recognition adds a lot of credibility to your business. It lets people know that you have a good reputation, you're trusted and you're a leader in your market.

5 Share positive reviews and testimonials from satisfied customers. Seventy-two percent

of consumers say online reviews are as trustworthy as personal recommendations. More than half of them say positive online reviews about a local business make them more likely to give it a try. Showing positive reviews and testimonials on your website from real customers proves you have a reputation for high-quality service and choosing your company is a safe bet.

These also serve to diffuse the inevitable negative review you'll receive from competitors and former customers who can't be satisfied.

6 Present before-and-after photos of your successful projects, staff and fleet. A salesman who can demonstrate he's successfully completed hundreds of different projects, just like what his prospects need, has an easier time getting a contract.

Before-and-after photos of your work go a long way. Showing that you have a large staff and a fleet of trucks demonstrates you run a real business, you've been doing this for a long time, you have the resources to deliver and you're not going anywhere.

Your website is a salesman, and just like a salesman it should get better and better over time. So don't just set it up and forget about it. Continually update it, add new content to it, improve it and focus on converting visitors to customers. That's why we have websites in the first place. **LM**

» WEB EXTRA

Visit the Web Extras section of LandscapeManagement.net for a link to download Pototschnik's free guide on lawn care marketing mistakes to avoid.

Pototschnik is founder of LawnCareMarketingExpert.com, a website-optimizing consulting firm. He spoke at the 2013 Lawn Care Summit, presented by the Professional Landcare Network (PLANET) and the National Pest Management Association (NPMA), in Orlando in January. This article is a snippet of his keynote presentation, "How to Get Found on the Internet and Make Your Website Sell."