

MARKET WATCH

IRRIGATION

Water reincarnated

Use of recycled water in landscaping is slowly catching on, researchers say.

By BETH GERACI

When Rain Bird's 2013 Intelligent Use of Water Summit took place in January at Michigan State University, the focus was on water conservation in the golf course and sports turf industries. But that doesn't mean there weren't takeaways for landscape contractors.

A speaker at the event, University of California researcher Ali Harivandi, Ph.D., urged golf course superintendent attendees to consider using reclaimed water—water that's treated and cleaned at sewage treatment plants—instead of potable water for irrigation in the face of a worldwide water shortage.

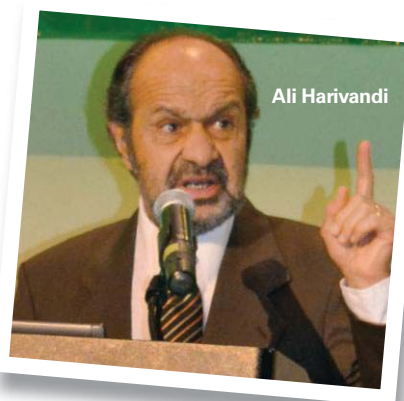
It's a growing trend in the golf course industry, and in a recent phone interview, Harivandi told *LM* that it's slowly catching on in the commercial landscaping business too, especially out West.

All you need is for a pipeline to run from the sewage treatment plant to someplace near the commercial property and you're in business. And in states such as California, Florida, Texas and Colorado, "they're getting more into it," Harivandi said. "As people learn more about it and

the infrastructure is built and as treatment plants remove more salt from the water, within 30 years I wouldn't be surprised to see that all the water in Los Angeles Basin were being reused."

Sewage treatment plants are highly regulated by a government or quasi-government body, Harivandi said, and the water is disinfected heavily by chemicals or different types of gases. Still, reclaimed water use in the commercial landscaping industry is problematic on two levels, he stressed. For one, the infrastructure to irrigate with it in many cases has yet to be built. And not many sewage treatment plants remove saline from the water, because doing so is expensive and requires much energy and fossil fuel use.

Because commercial landscapes generally are home to a diversity of plants, shrubs, flowers and turf that have different levels of saline tolerance, irrigating them with reclaimed water is complicated. On the other hand, if the water is going to a golf course where the acreage is all turfgrass, "it's more straightforward than if it goes to a mixed landscape or botanic garden where plants have different salt tolerances," Harivandi said.



Ali Harivandi

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IRRIGATION Reclaimed water use in landscaping is on the rise

PG 40

DESIGN/BUILD One owner finds the perfect work/life balance

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MAINTENANCE Lawn clippings do have their benefits

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LAWN/TREE CARE Meet Ohio's Applicator of the Year

FLORIDA WATER SURVEY SAYS...

Despite the challenges, a new survey out of Florida shows Floridians are interested in recycled water use, too—residentially.

The University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences conducted a water survey in December, the results of which were released last month.

The survey, which had nothing to do with the Rain Bird Summit, was done on behalf of the Gainesville-based Center for Public Issues Education (PIE Center). It asked nearly 500 residents for their views on 16 water-related topics.

"We were pleasantly surprised by the water conservation efforts Floridians are willing to make," said Alexa Lamm, an assistant professor at the University of Florida, who headed up the survey.

The survey showed that 65.3 percent of respondents were willing to use recycled wastewater for irrigation—more than administrators expected. But only 20.3 percent of them said they have access to recycled wastewater. Survey results did not indicate what type of recycled wastewater residents do or don't have access to, however.

"We're hopeful that if decision makers know that the public is willing to use [recycled wastewater], they'll be more proactive in trying to make it more readily available," said Lamm of the encouraging results. "We're always optimistic. Any time you can provide research-based information, hopefully that can influence decision making."

DESIGN/BUILD

Finding *balance*

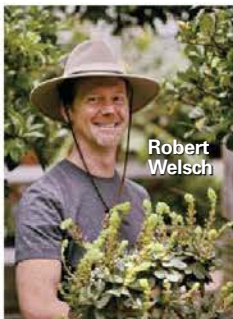
Instituting a few changes improved business—and quality of life—for one Green Industry owner.

By MARISA PALMIERI



In 2010, Robert Welsch was “dog tired and chasing every lead.” The year before, his landscape design/build firm, Westover Landscape Design in Tarrytown, N.Y., had lost money for the first time since opening its doors in 2004. Welsch felt like he was spinning his wheels and knew he needed to make some changes.

The first step was clarifying Westover’s position in its (high-end) market. The company, which declined to disclose its annual revenue, has a 98 percent residential client base just outside of New York City. Typical projects are \$25,000 and up. Welsch, with the help of Green Industry consultant Jeffrey Scott, was able to institute some changes that drastically improved his company’s net profit and average sale size, while decreasing the owner’s stress level and time spent on the business. Finding that balance was enlightening for Welsch, a former publishing executive for whom landscaping is a second career.



Robert Welsch

A few tweaks, including the ones detailed below, helped Westover and Welsch find balance and boost business.

1 Prequalifying leads. Before, Welsch was working about 80 hours a week during the season (April to June), and was meeting, in person, with most prospects, “chasing anything and everything.” Now, his business partner prequalifies all leads over the phone, explaining the company’s process and walking them through a questionnaire. That checklist includes questions covering budget and scope, whether the prospect ever has worked with a designer before and his or her address. “We look it up right away on Zillow.com to determine the neighborhood and size of the property,” he says. “If they just want a few shrubs moved, we’re not the right firm for them,” he says, explaining the company now refers those who aren’t a good fit elsewhere. “I don’t want to waste their time or my time, either.”

2 Setting parameters on prospect meetings. “Now we only do new client meetings on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, and never more than three in a day,” Welsch says. “When those

slots are full, I don’t care who the client is, we’re putting them off.” The company now knows it can process only nine follow-ups and proposals per week with its current infrastructure, so setting a limit and choosing only prospects who seem like the right fit has helped eliminate chaos. “Before, I was doing meetings all week—probably 15 a week. I was doing proposals late at night and at 6 a.m. It was unsustainable,” he says.

3 Changing the subcontracting process. Westover used to handle masonry estimates and billing, even though it subcontracted out the work. “It was a tremendous amount of back and forth,” Welsch says. “Now, we’re agnostic. We have a variety of masons we work with, and we bring them on and introduce them to clients and we cut ourselves out as the middle man.” Doing so has freed up a lot of time for Welsch. “We have high standards in the quality of work we do and our clients love our subs,” he says. “If anyone doesn’t give Westover quality, they’re out.”

4 Adding bench strength. Previously, Welsch was the only one doing estimates. Since reorganizing, he’s added two landscape designers who also serve as project managers. They join him on sales calls, and after the fact they own the projects through their life cycles.

5 Adding recurring revenue. Westover used to be 100 percent design/build; today 5 percent of the firm’s business comes from a fine gardening service it created over the last two years. Adding this division was a way for the company to bring in a new revenue stream, take care of its current clients’ needs and nurture relationships with them that may lead to referrals.

Of all the changes, Welsch says not chasing every lead was the most difficult thing to get used to. “As a small business owner, you get very hungry and you always think it’s going to dry up,” he says. But today Welsch works about 60 hours a week during the season—a 25 percent drop from before. That’s not bad for a company that’s improved net profit 100 percent and increased its average sales size by 45 percent over the last two years.

MAINTENANCE

Free food

Educating clients about the benefits of leaving lawn clippings is an obstacle.

By STEVE THOMAS

Mike Maddrell, owner of Echelon Landscape Maintenance, Dublin, Ohio, knows the favorable attributes and science behind allowing leaves and clippings to decompose naturally on lawns. Maddrell studied turf management at The Ohio State University Agricultural Technical Institute, Wooster, Ohio.

But he also knows his customers. "I've tried in the past to explain the benefits of leaving some residue on the lawn, but most people I've taken care of prefer clippings and leaves be removed completely," he says. "I prefer to not bag clippings, as they're good free food for the lawn."

Echelon employees typically cut once and leave the clippings, double mulching only when lawns are unusually long, due to springtime growing conditions. Clumps or clippings are then bagged or crews use a blower to disperse the excess residue.

Kyle Cooper, CEO of Property Masters in Marietta, Ga., understands that some customers always will prefer having their clippings removed. "We currently mulch the majority of our properties, unless customers request them to be bagged," he says. "When bagging, we calculate that cost and figure the charges by square feet and bill accordingly."

After collection, grass clippings are taken to Property Masters' facilities to begin the composting cycle, along with hedge

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PVB LOCK BOX

PVB LOCK BOX

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CLOCK BOX

The **CLOCKBOX** will come in one size 14x17x10 this will fit most outdoor irrigation controllers, this unit will also be powder coated hunter green and come with a removable front cover for access to the unit the locking mechanism will be (2) security hex pin locking bolts and will come with two unlocking bits one for the owner and one for the irrigation or maintenance tech. This unit wholesales at \$259.99 and the MSRP is \$439.00. Our contractors installed pricing is \$539.00 and this also installs in less than 20 minutes. By installing this product this assures that no unauthorized person or persons are tampering with the irrigation controller and will also protect it from being stolen.



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trimmings, leaves and other debris. The materials are then taken by Dumpster-load to composting sites, where they're recycled into mulch and topsoil.

Because "grasscycling" (allowing clippings to decompose on site) is the most efficient and least expensive method of handling clippings, educating customers is the real challenge, says Andrew Gembecki, co-founder of Natural Greenscapes Inc., Yorktown Heights, N.Y.

"We're starting to find customers trending to a more natural approach," he says. "We do a lot more mulching on properties and try to convert the non-believers," he says.

When properties are not mulched, Natural Greenscapes' employees blow yard waste into a pile and vacuum clippings.

"At that point our costs go up," he says. "Dumping fees, the costs of operating additional equipment and added labor costs all contribute to higher maintenance pricing, which is passed on to the client."

It's difficult for Gembecki to determine the added expense involved in picking up clippings and leaves, as opposed to mulching the clippings, because there are so many variables.

"Rates of grass growth in May are quite a bit different than October," he says. "Then again, there's a lot more debris and leaves in October than in May. And tipping fees have been rising steadily over the last several years because of lack

of space in landfills."

An informal survey finds a wide divergence in tipping fees across the country, from \$6 per ton in Dublin, Ohio, to \$42 per ton in Red Bluff, Calif.

"We've been offering the mulching as an option for about three years now and our clients love it," says Gembecki. "Not only is it more cost effective for our customers, but they feel like they're giving back by not sending their clippings and yard waste to some dump."

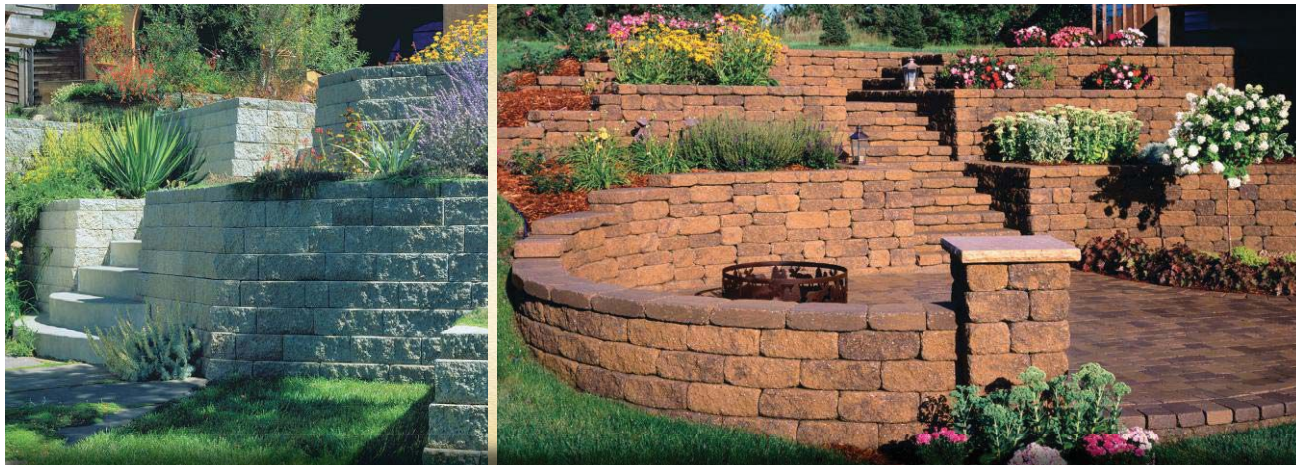
Mulching clippings and debris makes less work for crews, too. It also enables workers to complete their tasks efficiently.

Mulching mowers are designed to cut the grass blades several times by suspending the clippings above the bottom of the deck and allowing the grass to be sliced into very small particles.

The cutting feature allows for having less visible clippings and faster decomposition from shredding.

"In the fall, when leaves and clippings are heavy, I double mulch before I vacuum them," says Maddrell. "It reduces them substantially, and I can fit much more onto my truck. It also composts much faster, and I can then use it as a soil amendment the following season to till in beds."

Thomas is a Columbus, Ohio-based freelance writer.



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LAWN/TREE CARE

The grass master

Ohio's Applicator of the Year proves there's more to quality lawn care than fertilizer.

By BETH GERACI

Matt Tyler takes out the trash. He rakes the leaves, mows the lawn, even brings in the groceries.

No, that's not life at home. Those are some of the extra steps Tyler takes for his lawn care customers on the job. And they're just a few reasons why the Ohio Lawn Care Association (OLCA) named him its 2012 Applicator of the Year.

The award is designated for a lawn care applicator who demonstrates professionalism on the job and leadership at his or her company, and there's no doubt Tyler embodies both of those things, says Matt Ellis, Tyler's boss at Grass Master Inc., who nominated Tyler for the award.

"Once he started working for the company, he raised the bar for everybody else," Ellis says. "He's humble. He demonstrates a level of professionalism that we consider old school now." For example, Ellis says, Tyler watches out for his older customers, knows his clients' dogs and even spent an hour repairing a client's lawn mower.

"I've blown out their garages for them, just little things like that," Tyler says of his old-school style. Why? "I don't know. If they need help, they need help."

Tyler, 49, has worked as a lawn care professional for 24 years, 10 of them at Grass Master, based in Canal Fulton, Ohio. He's both honored and humbled by his Applicator of the Year award. "It's

really, really appreciated," he says. "It's nice to be recognized as an individual who cares and works hard."

THE VOTES ARE IN

Applicator of the Year nominations are voted on by a nine-person board consisting of chemical manufacturers, distributors and lawn care companies from around Ohio, including Ellis—who serves as the board's vice president.

At first, board members could not nominate their own employees for the award, but that has since changed. "We thought, 'We've got these fantastic nominees and it's really not fair that they wouldn't be considered,'" Ellis says.

Nominations pour in from any of 300 Ohio Lawn Care Association members statewide. The award also is advertised through the Ohio Turf Foundation and at John Deere Landscapes locations around the state so that non-members can nominate candidates.

Tyler is the fourth recipient of the award—a plaque in the shape of Ohio.

Through his professionalism, honesty and willingness to do more than his job requires, Tyler has acquired

quite a fan base on his route. Unfortunately for some of those fans, Grass Master recently changed up its routes to increase its density.

To some of Tyler's customers, it felt like a cruel joke. Says Ellis: "I told one customer, 'Tyler's not going to be your guy anymore. We're changing the routes.' And the customer said, 'No way!'"

IN-HOUSE IMPACT

Tyler has made an impression not only in the field, but also at the office.

"He's great. He is a pleasure to work with," says Grass Master office manager Carolyn Swinehart. "He's very cooperative. If you ask him to do something, he will do it."

Swinehart is so impressed by Tyler's work ethic that she was eager to share a complimentary letter from one of his customers. "We have been customers of Grass Master for 14 years," the letter stated. "The great looks of our lawn are mainly due to your products and your service technician Matt Tyler."

Tyler takes such praise in stride, saying he's just an ordinary guy who listens to his customers and uses common sense.

"I mean, yeah, I work long hours some days and it's a little much sometimes," he says. "But if you pace yourself it's all right. It's satisfying. It's gratifying. It makes it all worthwhile." **LM**

"I've blown out customers' garages for them, just little things like that. I don't know. If they need help, they need help." —Matt Tyler

