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# Tree specialist to the stars



*For Salinas Landscaping and Tree Preservation, success comes from the pursuit of excellence and new challenges.*

By DON DALE

Carlos Salinas' landscaping business in Los Angeles specializes in tree care. Anything you want done with a tree, his crews can do it for you. They are that versatile and skilled.

He does it so well he is in demand in the upscale suburbs on the west side, where some of his clients are stars and some of the houses he tends are as big as city halls. Yet the aspects of the business that Salinas loves are the aspects that challenge him personally and offer major potential for the company in the future.

A case in point, and a big development for Salinas Landscaping and Tree Preservation, is the addition last year of a tree nursery. It's modest in size

now — about 1,500 trees — but gives him a chance to not only reduce costs, but also introduce a retail potential.

"When we do installations we'll put in our own trees," Salinas says. "There's a lot of money in trees."

But this is only the latest news from a company that has specialized in trees for the 20 years it has been in operation. Carlos' father, Antonio Salinas, started it after working for other companies for years, and Carlos kept the focus when he started running the company about five years ago (his father now is semi-retired).

The company installs trees, moves trees, trims and maintains trees. Salinas estimates that maintenance is 30% of his business, with about 30% new installations and 40% one-time tree-trimming jobs.

"We have a tree-trimming crew, which we sometimes break in two," says Salinas, who employs 15 people on a full-time basis. "We have four

**Antonio Salinas II waters nursery trees until drip irrigation can be installed.**

climbers on a regular basis and we have a guy on installation who can be a climber.”

His normal tree crew for a large residential tree job — many of his jobs in Bel Air and Brentwood are large houses and large jobs — is six men. At any one time, he might actually have three crews doing trees, especially if he has small, two-man jobs waiting.

“We do mowing,” he says. “We do landscape touch-up.” But he tries to keep his other landscape maintenance work to a minimum in order to do justice to the huge demand for tree work. The company has also done large jobs, for example trimming trees at UCLA, but he focuses on residential work for clients such as Goldie Hawn and Pat Boone.

But that focus may change somewhat as the trees that the company planted early last year mature. Salinas hopes to grow the tree farm into a lucrative ancillary business.

“We’re just putting a variety of trees in there now,” he says, pointing out that they are planted in boxes on the Malibu property of a client who grows wine grapes and citrus there. Salinas’ father and the owner, George Rosenthal, decided to go partners on the venture.

“He supplies the land, we supply the labor,” Salinas says. The landowner and Salinas each invest half of the cost of purchasing small trees and the 24-inch boxes they are planted in. Rosenthal supplies water, and Salinas will do the moving and transplanting when the trees are sold.

The tree farm takes up only about an acre now, and has plenty of room to expand. The incentive is entirely economic.

Trees have become so expensive that in the past Salinas has been paying up to \$200 for a 24-inch boxed tree — and possibly \$1,000 for a 48-inch box. Specialty trees are even more expensive. Palms are sold for about \$150 per foot in this area.

Of course, he passes that expense along, but a typical nursery makes a lot of profit that he would like to get. He bought his first trees for \$15, and added \$10 for each box with soil. By the time he sells them a year or so later, Salinas estimates that he will have about \$35 invested in them, which adds up to a \$165 profit if sold in the 24-inch box (half of that profit going to his company).

But he will certainly “box-up” some trees, re-

potting them into ever larger boxes for buyers who want a more mature tree. That should increase the profit margin.

Salinas says he is also providing a good recycling location for the tons of tree refuse he chips every year. He not only gets good potting and ground mulch, but he saves \$30 per ton in landfill fees that he would pay every time he sends a truck to the dump.

“The hardest part is to know which trees to grow,” Salinas says. His experience and preliminary research led him to sycamore, oak, pepper, white birch and Chinese elm, which are well adapted and common to the California coast.

“We’ll probably have them a year, a year and a half, to get the roots established,” he says of the bare-root trees he bought. Some species will obviously take longer.

“I’m not sure how long we’ll have the oak.”

One of the advantages that Salinas had is the company has been around long enough to have some surplus capital. That, plus having a partner go halves, gave him a big boost over someone who would have to borrow the investment money.

There is still more to do, obviously. He is accumulating the pipe required to put the trees on drip irrigation, for example.

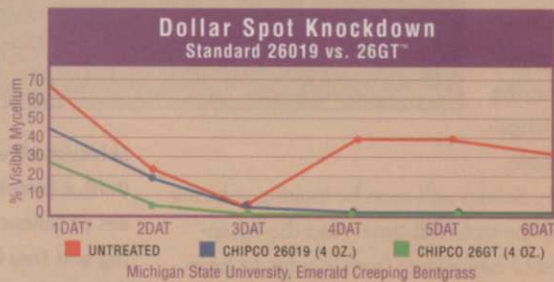
In addition, Salinas will soon be looking at hiring a man to tend the trees full time. And the equipment required to move large trees is going to be ex-

*continued on page 66*



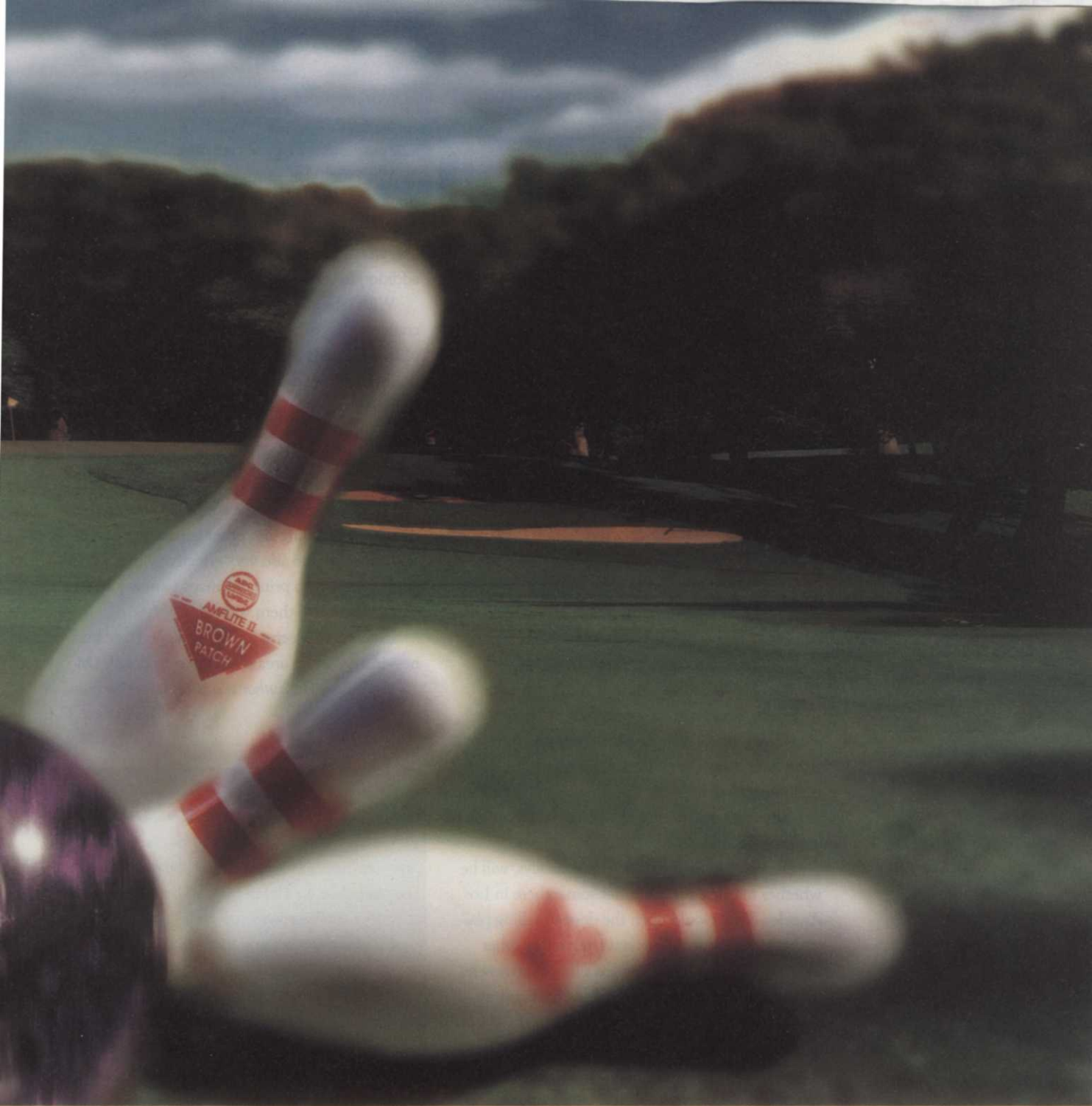
**Salvador Miramontes (left), a long-time employee of Salinas Landscaping and Tree Preservation, with Carlos Salinas.**

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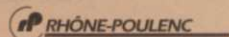
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Carlos Salinas, on the left, talks over the job with employees Pedro Cabezas and Adalberto Nieves at an upscale residence in Bel Air.

*continued from page 63*

pensive. He'll need a crane and another truck.

But he figures he can make money on all the steps along the way. Instead of renting a crane for large installations, he'll furnish his own. The same philosophy will apply to the delivery, the box and, of course, the tree itself. He will also sell to other landscape contractors.

The obvious next decision, Salinas says, will be whether to open a retail outlet somewhere in Los Angeles. That would open the door to selling plastic-potted trees in various sizes, as well as other landscaping supplies. There are a lot of unknowns. Salinas, despite taking some college horticulture classes, is not experienced at growing trees.

For a landscape company to specialize in trees in this day and age is expensive. Salinas has invested in two wood chippers, the largest taking up to 12-inch diameter trunks, and a smaller unit.

"It's hard to get the big chipper in, at some residences," he says. In addition to his six pickups, Salinas has two dump trucks for hauling trash. He also has a stump grinder.

But he says it's not the equipment that makes a good tree company, it's the workers. First, it takes more manpower to trim trees than to mow lawns. Salinas Landscaping has a very stable work force, with two workers being with the company since it started. His newest worker has been with him two years. Maybe that's because he pays well — \$15 to

\$20 per hour for a good tree man.

With such dangerous work at hand, and the possibility of damaging property, another cost that Salinas incurs is liability insurance. He carries \$2 million worth just to be on the safe side, and that is in addition to worker's compensation.

With jobs all over the west side, Salinas says his company has to be light on its feet. He accomplishes that in a couple of ways. First, the crews are fluid. The three or four men who make up the installation crew, for example, will be switched to maintenance if needed. And their irrigation man can also climb trees.

One way that Salinas assists in this flexibility is by being proficient with a computer. He not only does his scheduling and other company business on the computer, he also very effectively uses a street guide program to print out maps to new jobs so a worker can carry them with him.

In short, the secret to having a good tree business in an upscale area is attention to detail. **LM**

*—The author is a freelance writer based in Hollywood, CA.*

## Deep-root feeding

Salinas recently added deep-root fertilizer as a service. The SDI 50-gallon unit cost him \$6,000, but he has picked up a lot of business because of it.

"It's a sprayer/root feeder," he says. "We do more of the root feeding than spraying."

Using water soluble fertilizers, usually a 20-20-20 formulation, Salinas charges \$150 per hour/per bag of fertilizer used. On an average home he will use one or two bags, but on larger homes he might earn up to \$600 with the machine.

"It aerates, loosens up the soil and fertilizes," he says, and the unit is very portable.

Salinas says the feeder is designed to be mounted on a truck or small trailer, but his is not permanently mounted. Since it can be lifted by two men when the tank is empty, they simply keep it in the yard and put it in a truck when needed elsewhere.

He has spread the word to his clients that he has the machine, and his workers keep an eye out for trees that seem nutrient-deficient. "It is a good business," Salinas says happily.

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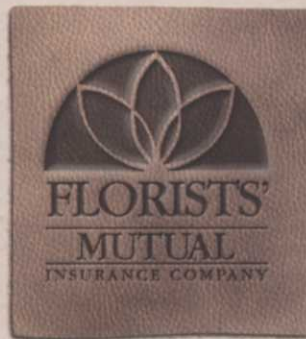
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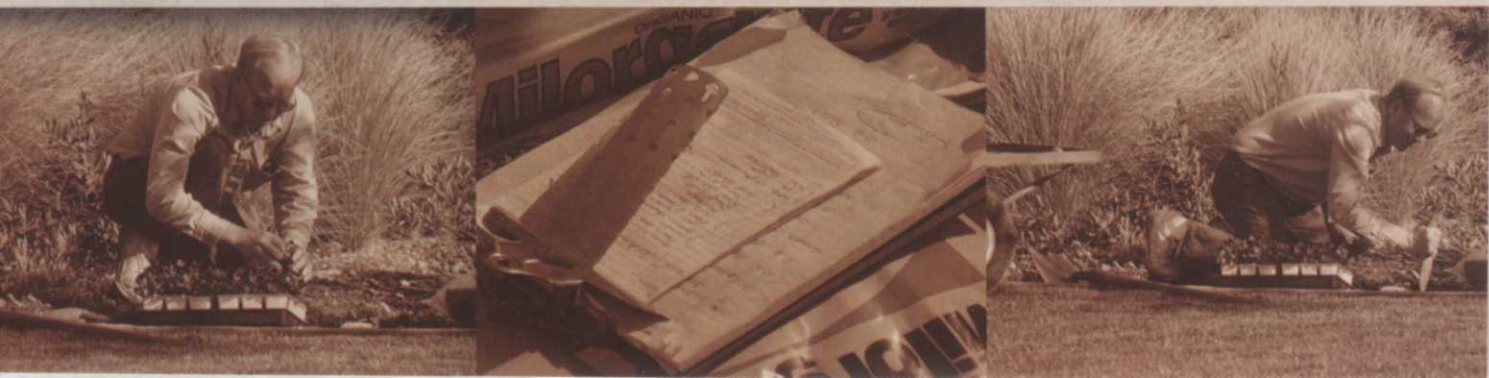
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# Make sure you schedule for maintenance

*Scheduled preventive maintenance is the best way to prevent unscheduled breakdowns and costly stops in your production.*

By MARK NEIDICH

**W**hat's that saying about an ounce of prevention beating a pound of cure? A little early expenditure of time and money, through scheduled maintenance, can save your operation from far greater expense later. Scheduled preventive maintenance (PM) is the best way I know to prevent unscheduled breakdowns.

PM is a series of regular inspections and equipment adjustments to catch problems early, before they have a chance to develop into major costly repairs. The preventive maintenance inspection program is one aspect of scheduled maintenance; other key parts are operator inspections and planned component replacement.

An effective preventive maintenance inspection is a systematic servicing and inspection of trucks and equipment at a predetermined interval, based on time, mileage or hours. The interval varies with the type of equipment and its use.

### It's the system that counts

The primary objective of a PM program is to maximize truck and equipment availability. Remember, PM is a scheduled operation and it produces scheduled repairs so you have maximum use of your mechanics and minimum downtime of your equipment. A good PM program will also minimize unscheduled repairs and unexpected breakdowns.

Diagnosis and correction are vital to any PM program, so necessary repairs should be scheduled by time and planned accordingly. Obviously, it is more cost effective to execute a "planned" repair in the shop than to fix a breakdown in the field.

The preferred method of servicing is usually by the mechanic according to a routine schedule. I break out PM into three general schedules, ac-

ording to mileage, time between service and the maintenance performed.

The operators themselves are key to a good inspection system, and inspections should be done routinely by them. Mechanics, too, should make inspections periodically. The inspection should include the following preventive maintenance checks:

## PREVENTIVE MAINTENANCE CHECKLIST

### PMI Vehicle Inspection:

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Accident kit           | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Engine oil level   |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Gauge                  | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Running lights     |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Automatic transmission | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Fire extinguishers |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Headlights             | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Tire pressure      |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Brake                  | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> First aid kit      |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Hydraulic oil level    | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Truck inspection   |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Dashboard light        | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Four-way flashers  |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Radiator               | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Turn signals       |
|  | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Two-way radio      |

### PMI Trailer Inspection:

- Ball coupler
- Equipment tie-down
- Running lights
- Safety chains
- Turn signals

### PMI Equipment Inspection:

- Engine oil level
- Lubrication
- Radiator
- Tire pressure
- Transmission/hydraulic oil level

### Routines that work

When it is time for servicing, make sure your mechanic is performing this according to a routine schedule. The maintenance plan should be broken out into categories, according to mileage or time.



Make sure that all defects are noted and scheduled for repair during the servicing and inspection process. Notify the production department or team so they can adjust the workload. You can't rush these things — the fleet mechanic(s) should be given the time to properly complete repairs.

A good PM program consists of several department levels. Responsibility starts with the operator, who is the cornerstone of an effective program, and then progresses up through the chain of command:

- ▶ Operator
- ▶ Crew leader
- ▶ Mechanic
- ▶ Fleet manager
- ▶ Account manager/operations manager
- ▶ Vice president operations/president/owner.

#### Smart maintenance management

Applying this information to the green industry can be a challenge. Someone has to implement the program and monitor its progress. Paper is important to the program because it provides structure and accountability. But the types of paper forms you use and how and when they are monitored determine the success of your system. Don't forget that operation and training are as important to the success of the program as the system itself.

It takes a certain amount of time to perform a service. Knowing this, and multiplying it by the number of pieces of equipment, will help you determine the time schedule (when the equipment will be serviced) and how much labor will be needed.

Spare equipment also plays a role in the program. Ideally, a fleet should have 115% of truck and equipment needs. Spare equipment will keep your workers going, even while maintaining your routine maintenance schedule.

Flexible scheduling of maintenance and repairs may be needed to allow you to reduce the time that your trucks and equipment will be out of service. For example, during normal work hours (7 a.m. to 5 p.m.) trucks and equipment could be out producing revenue. This means service time is either before 7 a.m. or after 5 p.m. You can see how production affects the fleet's service hours.

### EQUIPMENT MAINTENANCE SCHEDULE BASED ON MILEAGE OR TIME

#### Trucks

Based on manufacturer's recommendation:

3,500 to 5,000 miles/ 3 to 6 months

200 to 400 hours/ 1 year

- Lubrication
- Minor repairs
- Oil change
- Tire pressure

#### MAJOR SERVICE/WINTER

Based on manufacturer's recommendation:

15,000 to 30,000 miles/ 1 to 2 years

1,200 to 2,400 hours

- Belts
- Brakes
- Cooling system  
(Check radiator hoses)
- Exhaust
- Suspension
- Fuel filter
- Testing battery/charging system
- Tires
- Tune up

#### Equipment

Based on manufacturer's recommendation:

25, 50, 100, 200 hours

1 to 3 months, 6 months to 1 year

- Lubrication
- Minor repairs
- Oil change
- Tire pressure

#### MAJOR SERVICE/SPRING

Based on manufacturer's recommendation:

250, 500, 750, 1000 hours

3, 6, 9 months, 1 year

- Air-cooled engines
- Belts
- Cooling fins
- Decks: Belts, pulleys, stress cracks
- Drive systems
- Frame: Stress cracks, bearings, bushing
- Hydros: hoses, fluid leaks
- Water cooled engine: radiator/hoses

The fleet department should be working on trucks and equipment ahead of their seasonal production needs. This gives ample time to perform the work and not delay production.

*Mark Neidich is fleet manager at Groundmasters, Cincinnati, OH, where he is responsible for 45 trucks and 400 pieces of equipment, including tractors, turf spraying equipment, commercial mowers, small power equipment, snow plows, salt spreaders, trailers and landscape renovation equipment.*

# Fertigation:

## *Precise control, surprising solutions*

*Think fertigation's just for golf courses? Think again. It may be the cost-effective alternative a property needs.*

By ROBERT E. REAVES

Depending on whom you ask, there are four major reasons why the landscape trade has not rushed to use fertigation:

- ▶ high comfort level with granular fertilizers;
- ▶ higher cost of fertigation equipment;
- ▶ lack of education or misinformation about fertigation; and
- ▶ unwillingness to move toward alternative management practices.

But contractors are always looking for ways to increase revenue and at the same time improve the quality of the customer's landscape. Managers of commercial landscapes and sport complexes need ways to maximize the efficiency of their crews.

Surprisingly for some, fertigation — the application of fertilizer through drip and sprinkler irrigation systems — could be the answer. Not only does fertigation deliver labor and fertilizer savings, it also can mean a healthier landscape and environment through micro-doses of nutrients.

In the commercial landscape trade, myths about fertigation have slowed its

use, which is unfortunate. Did you know that the golf course market represents approximately 15% or less of the turf market revenues in the United States? That means sports fields and landscapes comprise ample opportunities for the savvy landscape professional or distributor.

### **Sports fields a good target**

"Next to golf courses, the largest growth in fertigation will be the municipal and sports field markets," predicts Danny Kruse, irrigation design department manager for Storr Tractor in Somerville, NJ. He says growing suburban communities are running out of space and must use the ball fields they already have.

"Most of these parks and ball fields have major compaction and drainage problems," Kruse says. "I know of one ball field nearby that is used by more than 3,000 kids in a weekend. That's a lot of footprints. They need a fertigation system badly."

Landscape irrigation contractors have plenty of opportunity, too. "An irrigation contractor makes money two ways — when he installs and when he repairs an irrigation system," observes Michael Chaplinsky, owner of Turf Feeding Systems Inc. in Houston, TX. "Every contractor is looking for secondary income. We encourage contractors to go back to their existing customers and sell injection equipment as an aftermarket add-on."

"We are aggressively moving into the commercial landscape market. For example, we have eight units at Mandalay Bay Casino in Las Vegas, which cover all their

grounds and interiorscapes," adds Chaplinsky. "We micro-dose the turfgrass, which allows us to adjust the fertilizer rates up or down." He pointed out that for a landscape management firm or property manager, this results in fewer clippings and less irrigation.

"My biggest hurdle is getting people to use fertigation correctly and not abandoning the product," says Daryl Green, district manager for Pacific Technical Services, Laguna Hills, CA. "The contractor must take a responsibility with fertigation. It is probably the most ideal way to fertilize in drip systems and on slopes, where granular fertilizers wash away."

### **Remedy for harsh conditions**

Steve Trotter, Midwest Turf, Fort Worth, TX, provides nutrition advisory services for golf courses. "Landscape will follow the golf course market and use more fertigation systems," he predicts.

Trotter says nutrient injection is especially beneficial under tough soil and harsh environmental conditions. "Because you are spoon-feeding the turfgrass, you don't have the purge cycle seen with granulars. Fertigation can be the solution if there are mineral deposit problems with the soils or a deficiency in plant tissue. A soil-applied product can't correct these problems."

Research confirms Trotter's comments about the purge cycle of conventional granular fertilizers. G.H. Snyder, B.J. Augustin and J.L. Cisar — three turfgrass researchers at the University of Florida — presented a paper 10 years ago titled, "Fertigation for Stabilizing Turfgrass Nitrogen