

IRRIGATION ZEROES IN

**RETROFIT SPRAY HEADS
TO PUT WATER ONLY
WHERE IT'S NEEDED.**

BY JAMIE J. GOOCH

THE DAYS of irrigating sidewalks and patios with misplaced spray heads are becoming a thing of the past. Irrigation professionals know they need to separate a client's property into manageable zones to provide the proper amount of water for different areas. But with water conservation becoming increasingly important, it's time to start thinking even smaller than zones — down to individual plants. That's where micro-irrigation, also known as drip irrigation, comes into play.

Spray heads and rotors allow Green Industry professionals to deliver water over a large area. They work great for monocultures such as lawns, but trees, shrubs and flowers all have different watering requirements than turf. Micro-irrigation uses different emitters to deliver different amounts of water to, say a hydrangea vs. a rose bush. It conserves water by being more precise and losing less water to evaporation.

According to the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences Extension, micro-irrigation is exempt from some Florida communities' irrigation restrictions, and is being encouraged — and in some cases, even mandated — by several municipalities there. In addition to the



environmental benefits, saving water also equates to saving money, even more so if an installed irrigation system can be retrofitted with micro-irrigation.

Retrofitting considerations

The first rule of retrofitting an existing irrigation system with micro-irrigation is not to negatively affect the system's operation. A well-maintained system provides precise amounts of water to various zones due to a measured rate of water flow over time, which can be affected if drip emitters are installed. Micro-irrigation uses a smaller amount of water applied over a longer period of time. Therefore, it's easier to swap out an existing zone for micro-irrigation, rather than mixing spray and micro-irrigation in one zone.

Because the micro-irrigation systems operate at lower pressures than conventional spray systems, a means to regulate that pressure is required to prevent damag-

Drip emitters can be placed exactly where water is needed.

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As technology has grown by leaps and bounds, enabling us to summon water at the turn of a tap, it's easy to forget that wasn't always the case. It was once common to harvest rainwater, often using barrels under a downspout to collect and save water for later use. As homeowners become more aware of the importance of water conservation, interest in rainwater harvesting has received renewed interest.

Using gravity flow and a valve attached to the bottom of an elevated rain barrel, collected rainwater can be used to irrigate plants via drip tubing. Without electric-actuated valves, watering will not be uniform along the line. It's a manual process compared to a modern irrigation system — and may require some trial and error to set up. However, rain barrel installation is a service landscapers can market to homeowners who want to reduce their water bills and usage, but who don't want to invest in a full irrigation system.

ing the micro-irrigation system, according to UFIFAS' "Retrofitting a Traditional In-ground Sprinkler Irrigation System for Micro-irrigation of Landscape Plants" research paper. A new fitting on the old system should lead to an in-line pressure regulator to reduce the water pressure before sending the water along drip tubing to the plants in the zone. The length of the tubing and the number of emitters depends on the rate of flow.

The ease of retrofitting depends on the previous system. For example, according to Rain Bird Corp.'s "Landscape Drip Conversion Guide," its 1800 series spray body can accept a retrofit kit in the existing housing. The kit also provides 30-psi pressure regulation for a flow rate of 0.5 to 4 gallons per minute. A filter



Drip tubing allows landscapers to irrigate rows of beds where sprays are not a practical option.

can also be installed to protect downstream components. According to the company, retrofitting a spray zone for drip irrigation can result in water savings up to 60%. **L.M.**

Gooch is a freelance writer based in Northeast Ohio.

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Blast of color

According to **Garden Debut**, Orange Rocket Barberry (*Berberis thunbergii*) (PP#18411) was awarded Best Shrub for 2010 at the Oregon Association of Nurserymen's Far West Show. It offers a tight missile-shaped habit, ultimately reaching 6 to 8 ft. in height but only 2 ft. in width in 10 years. Plants have vibrant coral-orange new foliage that matures to mid-green. In early summer, pale yellow flowers are followed by small, crimson red berries that do not set viable seed. By autumn, the foliage is bright orange-red. For best foliage color, grow in full sun. **GardenDebut.com**



Peonies from heaven

Itoh Peonies are named for Toichi Itoh, who successfully crossed a tree peony with an herbaceous or garden peony. The resulting hybrid features the colorful and exotic flowers of tree peonies, with the perennial growing cycle of herbaceous peonies. They tend to resemble tree varieties, with a domed, vigorous growth habit and large double flowers with disease-resistant lacy, dark-green foliage. Once established, they have an extended blooming period, with as many as 50 blooms in a single season — thanks to their ability to produce primary and secondary buds. They offer an increased color range, greater vigor and excellent resistance to peony blight (*Botrytis paeoniae*). **Monrovia** introduced 'Takara' (treasure) and 'Misaka' (beautiful blossom, pictured) this spring.

Monrovia.com

Hardy honey

New Mahogany Splendor joins the **Pan American Seed** Fantastic Foliage lineup, adding color and, at 3 to 5 ft., height. It's ideal for landscapes, and great in containers with other vigorous sun lovers. The hibiscus features deep burgundy, maple-shaped leaves with serrated edges — a look similar to a Japanese maple. It's resistant to heat, drought and deer, and can be a great addition as a pond plant, as well. Spread is 24 to 30 in., and it thrives in USDA hardiness zones 8 to 9. **PanAmSeed.com**



Scottish celebration

The repeat-flowering Rosa 'Tam o' Shanter' (Auscrise) from **David Austin Roses** features approximately 25 petals. Its deep cerise, rosette-shaped flowers are loosely formed, held on long, gracefully arching branches that bear blooms along the full length. It has a light, fruity fragrance. It was named to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the birth of the Scottish poet Robert Burns, and the hero of one of his most famous narrative poems. It grows to 6 x 5 ft., and is hardy in USDA zones 5 through 9.

DavidAustinRoses.com



Exotic flair

Lily of the Nile Blue Storm, a patented Agapanthus from **Anthony Tesselaar International**, consistently blooms up to three weeks earlier and longer than most Agapanthus, according to the company. It flowers on average 70 days per season. It produces an abundance of stems topped with light violet-blue flowers. When mature, this vigorous plant blooms in flushes, bearing up to 100 stems on a mature plant per season. It grows to a compact 30 in.

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Safety first

In a down economy, clients cut back on many services, but they often don't cut back on anything related to health or safety. One landscape company learns how to capitalize on that fact.

WHEN CLIENTS BEGAN cutting back on their services from Fischer Environmental, owner Robert Kunst knew he had to act fast. He wanted to add a division that would bring value to his clients and would become recession-proof. Recognizing that even in hard times clients were still willing to spend money on services involving health and safety, the company turned to two of its local emergency care locations to find out what brings people to the doctor. The answer they received became the catalyst for a profitable new division: fire ants.

THE ANTS COME MARCHING

Making their homes in the South and other areas that do not freeze in the winter, fire ants are red-colored insects that not only sting but deliver a type of venom into the skin. A fire ant bite can bring on swelling, itching, puss-filled blisters, and potential scabs. But even more serious, those who are allergic to the venom may have difficulty breathing or throat swelling. In Kunst's region of Mandeville, LA, he found it's a real concern for young children playing in the grass. It was clear his target market was expectant couples or young families with children. Mothers were particularly interested. Kunst immediately began marketing the service through his 11,000 existing customers, informing them the company was now offering an annual fire ant program. He had his salespeople call existing clients and pitch the new service. He also sent out mailers. Those simple efforts paid off.

In addition, word of mouth spread among neighbors and soon he was able to add new clients to the tune of

Fire ants are a health and safety issue for many Southern states.



1,280 fresh faces, primarily because they saw value in a service that would protect their children. Kunst says because he already had the equipment needed to disperse the product, the investment was minimal: product and labor. As a result, it's been an easy source of revenue for the business.

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

The biggest hurdle Kunst faced in adding a fire ant division was from the same clientele that embraced it. "The moms, who are protective of their children and don't want them crawling around with fire ants, also worried about them crawling around in chemicals," says Kunst. "Fortunately, we had selected a product that was known for being a low toxin so we developed a sheet that showed why it was an excellent chemical. And we started addressing the issue with our sales calls to begin with, before it was even brought up as a concern."

What has also helped overcome any concerns is the company's involvement in the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Pesticide Environmental Stewardship Program (PESP), which helps ensure human health and environmental safety in pest control. "We've been named under Gold tier membership, meaning as far as the EPA is concerned we've reached the highest level of ethics," says Kunst. "So now we can send our customers a direct link to the EPA website. That's been a big benefit. I would highly recommend other companies looking to enter or are already in the pesticide industry join PESP. It may seem contradictory, but sometimes running toward the regulators — instead of away from them — can be a benefit."

The author is a freelance writer with six years of experience covering landscaping.

» SERVICE SNAPSHOT

COMPANY NAME: Fischer Environmental Services

HEADQUARTERS: Mandeville, LA

WHY FIRE ANTS? It was a service customers could see value in, even during a recession.

INITIAL INVESTMENT: If you're already in the lawn care and pest control business, to get into the fire ant business costs almost nothing. You already have a fertilizer or seed spreader and that's all you really need to disperse the granules. The product is the only purchase.

INVESTMENT RECOUP TIME: Immediately, considering it's just product, labor and existing equipment.

WHY CUSTOMERS LIKE IT: Safety. That's really the bottom line. People want to protect their health. Mothers, in particular, want to protect their children.



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Bill Bemus

Bemus Landscape president **Bill Bemus** founded the company nearly 40 years ago, in 1973. In 1982, his brother-in-law, Jon Parry, came on board. Together, says Bemus, “we made it go and grow.” Today, Bemus runs the family-owned business with his three sons and Parry, the company’s general manager. And he stops to share his views of the maintenance industry with *LM*.

INSIDE INFO

Key to being a maintenance leader: We don’t pretend to have the magic recipe, but we try hard to keep our clients happy, keep the quality up, and retain our people. Success in our business depends on executing the small details correctly day in and day out, so this is what we try to stay focused on.

The best business aphorism I ever learned was from one of my earliest (and current) customers, “If money will fix it, it’s not a problem.”

Headquarters: San Clemente, CA (with branches in Santa Ana, San Marcos and Perris, CA)

Employees: 370 full-time

TOP TRENDS

› **“Eco-marketing” is not the panacea we hoped for.** The more things change, the more they stay the same. For all the talk about going green and being sustainable, it still gets down to price. For example, we process and recycle all of our generated green waste. It gives us a slight competitive advantage, but the positive effect on the environment is underappreciated by the client community. Our clients are focused on saving dollars. Be environmentally responsible for your children and grandchildren’s sake. It might not be that important to your customers.

› **The marginalization of the landscape profession.** We as an industry have not done a good job of marketing our profession to the general public. Imagine what life would be like, particularly here in Southern California without landscape contractors. We provide a vital, valuable and necessary service to the community. Having great gardens is part of being civilized. And it’s not just the aesthetics; last I checked oxygen is still produced by photosynthesis in green plants. Beautiful landscaping drives traffic to retailers. It sustains and improves commercial and residential property values. It improves the quality of all of our lives. Why is the landscape budget the first thing that people want to trim?

TOP OBSTACLES

› **Irresponsible price cutting.** In this economy, the most important thing to remember is to begin every sentence with the phrase “in this economy.” It’s becoming a tired excuse for non-performance. This has always been an extremely competitive business. That being said, the frustrating thing now is to have projects go out for due diligence bids (no issues or complaints) and have our prices — which are competitive — undercut by large, top-notch firms who should know better. Irresponsible price cutting is driving the market down for all of us. Has everyone forgotten how good it feels to get a job when you are not the low bid?

› **Finding qualified entry-level employees at wages the market allows us to pay.** In addition to the current economic realities, our work is perceived as being low in value. In other countries, espe-

cially in Europe, being a gardener is a rewarding career path. This is tied to the previous points regarding public perception of the industry as a whole and the downward pricing spiral caused by the scorched earth policy of some of the larger players. Our industry needs to get it together. The problem is at least partially one of perception. The national and state trade organizations should work together to change these perceptions and continue to bring landscape professionals together for dialogue.

› **Commoditization.** We’re unique, just like everybody else. Everybody does everything and everybody is getting better at it. It’s good for consumers that there are so many qualified contractors, but it is bad for contractors that there are so many qualified contractors. What this means is that while the quality of our services is going up the price is going down.

TOP OPPORTUNITIES

› **Basic, simple training that revolves around a vigorous quality assurance system.** We call it our Improve Quality (IQ) Program. Since the implementation of the program we have seen vast improvements in job quality, which many of our clients have commented on. It has helped us gain additional work as well as fight the commoditization referred to above. It is also tied to our bonus structures. Our answer to the aforementioned obstacles is to keep things really simple, work really hard on quality, and to never let a customer down.

› **Our Landscape Construction division.** There has been a recent uptick in this division. This is mostly the result of an internal decision to sell more installation work. We are not looking to be volume oriented, just to maintain a healthy balance between our different offerings. We have been happy with the margins we are seeing in our Tree Division. We don’t know if the overall demand for tree care has increased, but we have increased our focus on this service offering and have been able to increase the workload and keep the margins up.



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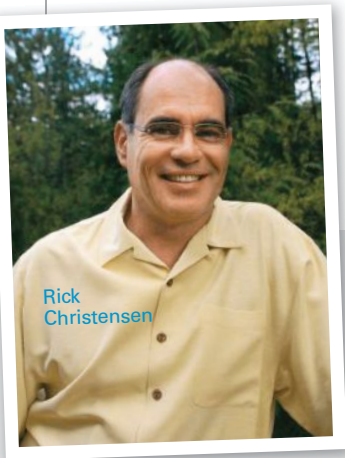
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MYBIGGESTMISTAKE

LESSONS LEARNED THE HARD WAY » BY CASEY PAYTON



In a tough economy, one company finds a long-distance lender is a critical factor.



Rick Christensen

COMPANY: Teufel Nursery Inc.

HEADQUARTERS: Portland, OR

2010 REVENUE: \$17.5 million

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 235

SERVICES: 65% construction;
35% maintenance

CLIENTELE: 90% commercial;
10% residential

TODAY'S ECONOMY HAS made business more challenging for everyone. For Teufel Nursery Inc., a close relationship with its lender was helping keep the waters smooth — that is, until an unexpected change rocked the boat.

Rick Christensen, landscape division manager of the Portland, OR-based company, says Teufel Nursery had developed a long-term relationship with its lender and, although they were long distance, everyone seemed comfortable and happy.

"We understood their business, and they understood ours," he says.

But in spring 2009, Christensen says, Teufel was alerted that the lender had decided to "get out of the lending business." It was time to look for a new lender.

"Unfortunately, spring 2009 was a bad time to start looking for a new bank," recalls Christensen. "We talked to 24 different banks, and each one was sympathetic but couldn't help us. They all said the same thing: They liked our business, but nobody wanted to start lending to someone new. And because we're also related to construction, because we do large-scale commercial and government work, it was making it even more challenging for us to find a new lender."

With rejections mount-

ing, Christensen says it felt like the situation couldn't get worse... until it did.

"When our lender had first made the decision to get out of the lending business, they had told us we'd have some time," he says. "But when they realized things were not getting any better, they called our note and said it's due. We were told our time was up. Within three days, we had to file for Chapter 11 bankruptcy for protection against our own lender."

Christensen says his company got a crash course in bankruptcy, something the profitable business didn't know much about.

"There are different classifications of bankruptcy, and we were classified as a 'solvent bankruptcy,' meaning we were a profitable business and didn't seek protection from our creditors, strictly from our lender," he explains. "Unfortunately, all creditors get pulled in. So anyone we owed money to gets pulled into Chapter 11, and a four-year payback plan to all vendors was established."

While it wasn't easy, the company fought to get back on its feet quickly. Teufel Nursery filed for bankruptcy in June 2009, and by October 2009 submitted a reorganization plan. By February 2010, Teufel exited Chapter 11.

Lessons learned

Looking back, Christensen says there are a few

things he'd do differently. While the relationship with the long-distance/long-term lender was always strong, Christensen says he now believes it's always good to deal with someone local.

"I also believe it's good common sense not to have all your eggs in one basket," Christensen advises. "That's how most businesses operate — you have a line of credit with a single lender. But today, I'd do things differently."

As the economy has improved, Christensen has continued an open dialogue with most of the banks he first talked to in the rush to find a new lender. He's focused on keeping those doors open for the future. But to this day, the company remains a cash-based business.

"For us, it's the right thing at this point and in this economy," says Christensen. "We're a much smaller business than we once were [the company had a revenue of \$45 million in 2008; it was \$17.5 million in 2010], and we have to watch our cash very closely" on a day-to-day basis."

Christensen says the experience has made the company nervous about returning to the world of banking.

"There's no question we're gun-shy right now," Christensen says. "When we do eventually have a relationship with a new bank, it will be as a partner."

Payton is a freelance writer with six years of experience covering landscaping.