

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.

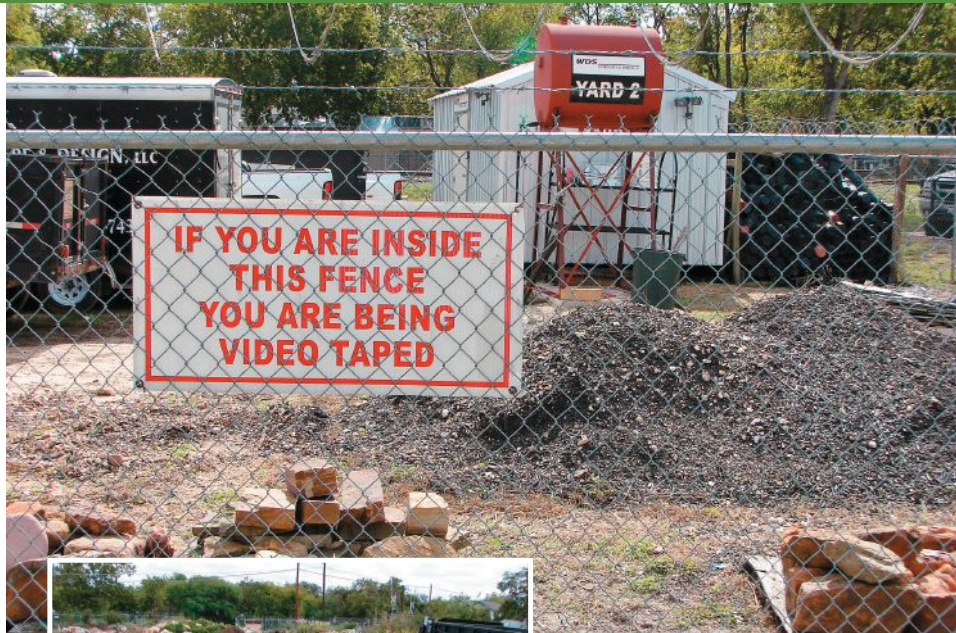
"We left the holding yard in place so that when the economy comes back we'll be ready," he says.

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.



Year of the zinnia

The **National Garden Bureau** declared 2011 as the year of the zinnia. We'll announce the Bureau's picks for flower, perennial and vegetable for 2012 in the January issue, but in the meantime, check out new *Zinnia elegans* 'Art Deco' from **Botanical Interests**. These 5-in., fully double zinnias in shades of pink, lavender and royal purple will power all through summer up to the first fall frost. At 2 to 3 ft. tall, they are suited to border plantings, in large containers, or as a backdrop to shorter plants. They can also be used for cut flower or dried bouquets. BotanicalInterests.com or NGB.org

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Tejas Originals creates and distributes outdoor kitchens like this.

Cooking up good ideas

Garett Davis helps contractors profit by building outdoor kitchens.

GARETT DAVIS WAS a design/build landscape contractor in Central Texas when he came up with the idea for a pre-finished kitchen system. His customers loved outdoor kitchens, but Davis didn't love the amount of time that went into building them. He thought if he could come up with a system that could be installed faster while still offering the same high quality product, he could keep customers happy and maintain a steady flow of new jobs as well.

Davis created two different styles of the outdoor kitchen systems through his company Tejas Originals. The first is what he calls a "ready-to-finish" solution. It's a steel-framed cabinet system with cabinets that can be connected together to create any size or shape. The system takes the place of the cinderblock type of construction method most landscapers use.

"A 20-foot linear kitchen can be ready for stone in just a couple of hours, versus an entire week using the other method with cinderblocks," Davis says. "In the end, the system is just as strong. And all the cut-outs like the door cut-outs and the grill cut-outs can be customized."

The same concepts apply to the finished kitchen product — the second style Davis offers. Some might call these kitchen systems "pre-fab," but Davis says he doesn't like that term.

"It gives it a cheap sound and it's definitely not a cheap-looking product," says Davis. "The product is handmade and top quality. We refer to it as pre-finished."

Like the ready-to-finish solutions, the pre-finished kitchen solution has all the

pieces needed to create a custom kitchen and a little bit more. The pre-finished product is already covered with veneer and is shipped with the countertops. Once assembled, it's a finished kitchen.

"All you have to do is drop the appliances in — and we can ship the appliances with it, too," Davis says.

Everything about the concept Davis has developed focuses on simplicity. He wants to keep the process as easy as possible for the contractor.

"We've engineered it so that it ships in a knocked-down fashion," says Davis. "It ships flat in a box. We can get 25 or 30 linear feet of kitchen cabinets on one pallet, which helps keep the shipping costs down for the customer."

Davis says he's also focused on ease-of-use and that all of the systems within his collections are easy to install.

By making his product efficient to ship and easy to install, Davis says he's saving contractors time and money.

While Davis started out using this product in his own landscape business, it didn't take long for friendly competition to ask if they could sell it too.

Davis opted to leave landscaping for the manufacturing industry. Today he's a manufacturer and distributor of entire outdoor kitchen systems as well as pergolas and arbor kits. "We basically want to be a one-stop shop for contractors," Davis says.

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

>> SERVICE SNAPSHOT

COMPANY: Tejas Originals, LLC

PRESIDENT: Garett Davis

HEADQUARTERS: Austin, Texas

WHY PREFINISHED KITCHENS:

"There was nothing else like this on the market for a reasonable cost. I wanted to create a system that was more efficient, and I knew I could design and build it in a way that'd be less expensive as well."

INITIAL INVESTMENT:

"Myself and my partners have invested over \$1.5 million into this company."

WHY CUSTOMERS LIKE IT:

"It's ultimately more profitable for them to use this system because of the efficiencies it offers. Profitability is the bottom line for most people."

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At Peabody Landscape Group in Columbus, OH, community involvement is as integral to the company's success as self-sufficiency and customer satisfaction are.

"It's important to try to give back to your community," says company President **David Peabody**. "We don't realize how fortunate we are in the United States, for all of the things we have available to us."

Peabody Landscape Group has been involved in community service for more than 20 years, says Peabody, who enjoys supporting Boy Scouts of America service projects and often donates materials and equipment to them.

Peabody has a lot to say about the landscape maintenance business, and he took time to discuss with *LM* the pros and cons of what he's seeing in the industry today.

TOP TRENDS

► **Our design/build segment is growing.** Outdoor living is becoming a trendy thing. People are moving away from water features and focusing more on outdoor living and pondless water fixtures. People are steering away from the ponds because of the algae and the maintenance.

Outdoor grilling is becoming more fashionable as well, and there are more sit-up bars. The outdoor fireplace is a more trendy element than fire pits are these days, because it is a focal point of the landscape and it's more elegant. Lighting is something people are doing more of. You see more lighting on the front side of a home. There's an increasing focus on the architecture — enhancing the architecture through lighting. Probably 50% of our construction has become hardscape.

TOP OBSTACLES

► **Lowball bidders.** The industry is made up of anybody who wants to get away with something, who wants to make a buck. You're essentially competing with Billy the kid next door who's got a lawn mower. That's what this industry is compared to. There's a real misunderstanding from people who see Hispanics working for a landscape company. Their first thought is that the worker is an illegal alien, that he is being paid less than minimum wage, and that's not the case.



David Peabody

INSIDE INFO

Key to being a strong maintenance leader: Integrity. With both your clients and your employees you have to be honest, whether things are good, bad or indifferent. And you've got to treat people the way you want to be treated. Be fair in business. If you make a mistake, admit it and take care of it. Everybody makes mistakes, and a lot of people try to shirk their responsibility. But you have to admit it, correct it and move on.

It's also important to keep up with safety measures. And show professionalism, both within the company and outside the company. It's important to give back as much as you possibly can within the community.

Company: Peabody Landscape Group

Headquarters: Columbus, OH

Employees: 45 full-time (plus 130 part-time)

2010 revenue: \$6.1 million

Most landscape contractors are trying to provide quality. As far as those who provide unrealistically competitive prices, some property managers are finally starting to see what they've been getting, and they're not satisfied. They're looking to go back to some of the service contractors they've had in the past as a result.

► **Rising costs.** We've had increases in health insurance, and gasoline prices have gone up, both by 50%. Equipment and labor costs have gone up. Rent's gone up. So how can prices go down? It just doesn't make any sense.

TOP OPPORTUNITIES

► **We're becoming more self-sufficient.** We're on a parcel of ground that's on 22 acres, and we have 12 acres of shade and ornamental trees.

In all, we have about 3,500 trees. By growing the trees ourselves, we eliminate the need to buy them wholesale. Buying trees can be expensive, especially if I'm looking at a big project. It's less expensive to grow them, and then we use them in our bidding.

► **Alternative fuels.** There are huge opportunities for companies if they explore eliminating the normal resource of fuel and look at opportunities in alternative fuels, which we're doing now. Next year, we're looking to decrease fuel costs by around 50%. Decreasing those costs provides me with one more way to be more competitive. We have six trucks dedicated to delivering materials to job sites so we can keep our crews working on the property continuously. Keeping fuel costs down will really have an impact on our bottom line.



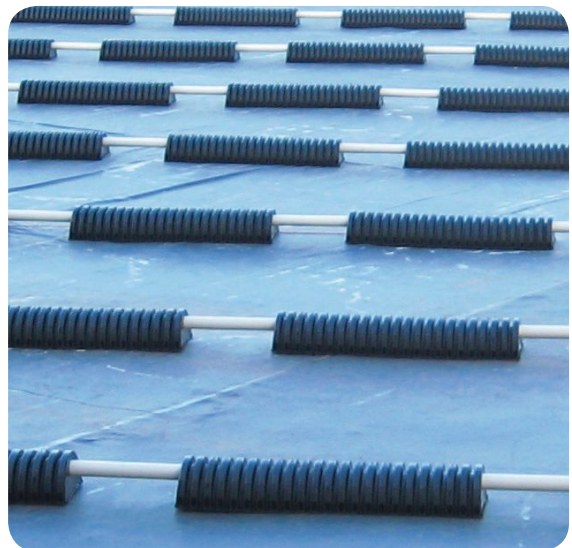
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MYBIGGESTMISTAKE

LESSONS LEARNED THE HARD WAY » BY CASEY PAYTON



This Texas business owner says that by changing her company's focus and branching out into new markets, her business has endured.

IN THE PAST Marsha Newberry, owner and managing partner for Signature Contracting Services, says she might not have been as willing to adapt to change, but the state of the economy has almost forced her to, well, change her mind about change. Now, she attributes her Texas-based company's willingness to transform as the key to its survival and success in this difficult marketplace.

"We started as a landscape company and have

basically become a commercial contractor doing work on roads, bridges, and even rail lines," says Newberry. "Being able to diversify and being willing to change has become a necessity."

But, Newberry admits, change isn't easy. "If you have a group of people that knows how to plant flowers and trees and do landscaping work, but you want to diversify beyond that, you need to find people," she says. "This economy might have produced a lot of unemployed people, but it's still not always easy to find good people."

In diversifying, Newberry says one of the biggest challenges has been

finding banking support. With that source of financing closed off, it forced the company to get creative and start looking at jobs that other companies weren't taking on.

"We are up for work that other companies don't show interest in — such as a small job that a larger contractor would say they don't want to waste their time on," Newberry says. "It might be something as small as screwing a bolt

ing," she says. "Those times are gone. We do those things, but if that were all we did, we'd be in trouble. We have even gotten into telecommunications — something that has nothing to do with landscaping or contracting but has become another avenue in these tough times to help support what we now call the 'Mother Company' because we've developed so many different divisions and departments."

While diversifying helps her company thrive, Newberry says it's important to continue to build and maintain relationships. Work continues to flow largely because the company makes an effort to build relationships, even within its diversification.

"If you don't start building relationships, work isn't going to come back to you," she says. "We've gotten some itty-bitty jobs such as drilling one hole because we were the only ones willing to do it in the middle of the night. But then when the customers see we worked in the middle of the night to help them out, they're going to come back to us when they have something else. And maybe next time it will be a bigger job. The bottom line is that you have to be willing to do whatever it takes to survive and that's what we've done. Our philosophy is that failure is not an option."

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



Marsha Newberry

COMPANY: Signature Contracting Services, LLC

HEADQUARTERS: Grand Prairie, TX

DIVISIONS AND REVENUES:

LANDSCAPE: \$2,959,921

GRADING/TRENCHING/BORING:

\$10,885,825

TELECOMMUNICATIONS:

\$608,525

MOWING: \$695,725

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 261

2010 REVENUE: \$9,205,051

PROJECTED 2011 REVENUE:

\$15,150,000

IF YOU DON'T START BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS, WORK ISN'T GOING TO COME BACK TO YOU.

onto a piece of concrete. By taking on these kinds of jobs, we became the go-to people for the extra work larger contractors don't want to do. That kind of work may be small, but it can add up and has actually supported our company during these tougher times."

Newberry advises other companies to become more willing to adapt.

"You simply can't be so rigid that you only want to plant trees and do mow-