

Industry at a Crossroads



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Roadblocks and seemingly insurmountable problems spur innovation. Creative minds seek and find practical solutions to overcome adversity and turn great challenges into opportunities. Innovators do not look to the future as an extension of the status quo. They see the future as ever-changing, demanding constant re-evaluation with fresh eyes and enthusiasm.

So it is with irrigating our landscapes and lawns. The green industry's future rests with how creatively and successfully we deal with landscape water use. As we all know, the availability and quality of water we use on our lawns and landscapes is creating much concern, especially in many of the country's largest landscape markets. Industry experts warn green industry professionals that they have one of two choices to make, each of the choices determining the level of the green industry's future growth and health.

The first choice is the status quo. Industry service providers can continue to design, install and maintain landscapes and lawns as we have for decades and react piecemeal to criticisms of the amount of water and chemical inputs required to keep these landscapes and lawns lush and attractive.

Or, we can begin providing the public with landscapes that require significantly fewer inputs—especially potable water. Once we chose this option, we must begin adopting the latest field-tested irrigation technology to provide turf, trees and other living plant material with the precise amounts of water at the right times to keep turf and other landscape plants healthy and attractive.

That's the direction the industry must go, say industry experts.

Furthermore, the industry shouldn't view this direction as restricting its growth or profitability. Rather we should view the public's emerging desire for more sustainable landscapes—perhaps with smaller or no lawns (in some regions of the country)—as an opportunity to grow the industry's size and increase the value of its services to consumers.

Industry at a crossroads

"If designers and contractors don't take notice of this, the future of the industry 10 years from now is going to look a lot different. It's not going to look like anything a landscape contractor, architect or a designer of today wants it to look like," says Richard Restuccia, water evangelist and vice president, [Jain Irrigation](#), Fresno, California.

Adds Jeffrey L. Bruce, owner of [Jeffrey L. Bruce & Company LLC](#), Kansas City, Missouri: "The future of irrigation is at a significant crossroads. I question if the industry can respond to the shifting public opinion about water use for landscapes."

Public perceptions have placed the irrigation industry under attack," Bruce continues, adding the industry must move "quickly and decisively to redefine public perception."

Bruce doesn't dispute the need for landscape irrigation. Its role remains crucial, he says. As a former president of the American Society of Irrigation Professionals and an award-winning landscape architect, he realizes how valuable irrigation is, even for so-called sustainable landscapes. Plants, like humans and all living things, require water.



Advances in the design and manufacturing of subsurface drip irrigation systems are boosting their use in lawns, as well as in ornamental beds.

PHOTO: RAIN BIRD IRRIGATION

What concerns him is the ever-growing number of consumers "buying into the perception that native ecologies do not require supplemental water."

Perhaps to the fault of the industry itself, this is occurring in spite of a vast array of innovative irrigation solutions and information to put the industry onto a truly sustainable path.

Bruce and Restuccia say the green industry, including growers and contractors, must respond promptly and decisively on two fronts.

The industry must first design and provide the public with landscape plant material requiring fewer inputs, especially potable water. The industry must also wisely use today's most advanced water-saving irrigation products and practices. Encouragingly, there are many examples of both of these happening.

Homeowner buy-in is essential

Secondly, the green industry must do a better job of getting buy-in from property owners in terms of making smart landscape and turf irrigation decisions.

"It is difficult to get people to understand this, at least to the point that we want to improve and upgrade their irrigation systems with new technology,"

says Jeff Kollenkark, Ph.D., owner of [Weed Man](#), Fresno, California. "Is it a matter of cost? Inertia? Are we too busy to pay attention?"

Kollenkark says his market is rife with irrigation systems featuring antiquated controllers with high-volume nozzles. "System upgrades are really where we (property owners) need to start," he adds.

However, educating homeowners and other property owners, including property managers, to sustainable irrigation is more difficult than merely convincing them to replace their clocks or their sprinklers. We have to understand water use in a broader context.



We use our finite fresh water resources to grow our food, generate our energy, provide our domestic needs in terms of drinking water, sanitation and, yes, to enhance our lives (and our communities) with attractive landscapes.

In spite of what most of the public perceives, the amount of water we use on our landscapes is miniscule when compared to all other U.S. water uses. That said, it's seemingly always first to come under intense scrutiny and regulation.

Because of that, many people, especially those in water-scarce regions of the U.S., are beginning to view maintaining trees, herbaceous ornamentals and turfgrass in a healthy and attractive state as the least valuable use of treated water.

Is there any wonder why water agencies are so successful in getting property owners to restrict landscape irrigation or, in the case of drought-stricken California, to remove their lawns altogether? California water agencies paid approximately \$86,000 an acre to replace turfgrass lawns with drought-tolerant landscapes.

"There was over \$300 million in rebates offered and spoken for in California," shares Restuccia. (Prior to joining Jain Irrigation, Restuccia championed [ValleyCrest](#) to a preeminent position in landscape water conservation.)



Major markets drive industry trends

Restuccia says landscape designers and contractors in regions of the U.S. that suffer only the occasional drought should pay attention to what is happening in California and the Southwest and, to a lesser extent, in Texas and Florida in regards to landscape water regulations. What happens in these huge landscape markets will influence other regions.

That would be a big mistake, considering the size of these landscape markets, says Restuccia.

Take for example, California's drive to restrict lawns to a maximum of 25 percent of properties. The U.S. EPA [WaterSmart](#) program, almost in lockstep, now recommends 35 percent across the U.S.

The issues surrounding landscape water use are easy to understand. But, what should the industry be doing to address them?

There are no quick fixes, says Bruce, especially given the competitive conditions within the landscape service industry and in an uncertain economy. These are conditions that too often lead to inefficient designs and declines in installation quality.

Even so, Bruce exhorts landscape contractors to take "a leadership role" in water management.

"In order to achieve the sustainability goals of the green movement and green infrastructure, maintaining access to water is critical," he continues. "Water is the fuel that drives all of the eco-system services and benefits. Without water there is no green infrastructure."

To meet tomorrow's landscape irrigation demands, Bruce says contractors must begin to move consumers from the use of potable water. The green industry will also have to expand the industry scope from water distribution to water harvesting.

We can meet the challenges

Restuccia at Jain Irrigation admits water-use challenges facing the lawn and landscape industry are huge. But, he's convinced that the industry will meet them as it sheds some time-honored practices and educates itself on the new market realities.

He sees the industry moving away from spray heads and rotors and toward subsurface drip irrigation because it is a more water-efficient way to water plants.



Designing and installing water-efficient landscapes give contractors new opportunities to upgrade their customers' properties with beautiful and sustainable landscapes.

PHOTO: JAIN IRRIGATION

"Having access to real-time data in terms of water use is vital, too, either a soil moisture sensor or an ET-measuring device," Restuccia continues. "We need to monitor when to water and how much to water."

"I also think we need to have some data capture and that's where we are starting to see some real advancement in terms of knowing how much water we are using on a daily basis. You can't monitor what you can't measure," he adds.

Industry adoption of irrigation systems capable of being monitored and adjusted remotely via computers, iPads, smart phones or other mobile devices is an encouraging sign. These weather-responsive, data-rich systems are becoming common in progressive HOAs, multi-site apartment, condo and commercial properties. As their cost drops and consumers become more familiar with them, homeowners will demand them, too, because they offer measurable water and cost savings, says.

“With this technology you can get access to multiple controllers on your mobile device. You can manage your irrigation in real time and you don’t have to leave the office,” he continues.

The water issue in California, and the concern and publicity it has been generating nationwide, is causing the “biggest change” Restuccia says he has seen within the industry during his lengthy career.



PHOTO: JAIN IRRIGATION

“It has been easier to talk about water conservation the last six months than it has been the last 20 years. It’s not the early adopters getting on board now; it’s everybody,” he says.

While the change is disruptive in many respects, it may, in the end, be extremely beneficial to the green industry as a whole. Or, at least Restuccia sees it that way.

“This is the biggest opportunity for designers and landscapers that’s ever been,” he claims. “Contractors who lead that charge and help their customers understand that drought-tolerant doesn’t mean you are downgrading their landscapes but upgrading them, will be the most successful contractors.”