

Moisture Management, a Profitable Solution

Water restrictions don't have to dry up business. Landscapers are realizing the bottom-line benefits of offering a product that genuinely reduces the watering requirements of turf and plants.

After installing landscapes on commercial properties, the real challenge began for Michael MacLeod and his business Precision Landscape Maintenance in greater Orlando. "The properties we maintained were starting to show drought stress shortly after installation," he says, noting how water restrictions in his county have intensified during the last few years.

MacLeod would talk to the water management boards of homeowners associations, his primary client base, to find out if there was more he could do for the property. But usually, he ended up having to go back to customers with bad news. "It's difficult to tell a client, 'Work with it,'" he says.

And that's no way to retain business either. "We had to find an alternative," MacLeod says.

Moisture management was the answer: Providing customers a service using a product that reduces the water requirements of turf and plants. That's what Ecologel's Hydretain does.

MacLeod discovered that beyond keeping customers happy, Hydretain provides a brand-new revenue stream that earns him about a 75 percent profit. The referrals keep rolling in. He can retain existing clients by providing them a valuable service - and it's an easy sell.

"People's homes are their greatest investments, and this is a long-term solution that can help protect their investments in light of where water restrictions are today and where they are headed," MacLeod says.

Moisture management is smart business for landscape contractors who are under constant



The addition of Hydretain to turf and plant applications can keep lawns green during drought.

pressure to reduce water usage, conform to stringent restrictions and please customers who want to lower their water usage and utility bills, particularly in regions where the cost of water is exorbitant.

Also, landscape contractors can grow their bottom lines and protect their client base by offering a moisture management service using Hydretain.

"Hydretain can provide a whole new revenue stream for landscape professionals, and the product is unique in its ability to pay for itself, reduce customer callbacks and lower water bills," says Rick Irwin, president of Ecologel, the Ocala, Fla.-

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based company that makes Hydretain. "In areas with high water costs or where water restrictions are in place, it's a no brainer."

And in areas where water savings is not yet an issue, Hydretain minimizes drought-stress cycles between rainfall or irrigation, promotes healthier plants and ultimately delivers a better quality landscape. "Hydretain reduces wilt and isolated dry spots that are many times the source of customer complaints," Irwin points out.

The Chemistry: How Hydretain Works

It's not a wetting agent, which affects the surface tension of water so it moves through soil more easily. And it's not a superabsorbent polymer – those materials hold on to water and then release it to plants.

"Hydretain is a completely different chemistry," explains Jim Spindler, the agronomist for Ecologel.

Hydretain is a patented blend of liquid humectant and hygroscopic compounds that attract free water molecules from the air within the soil. That water is then available to plant roots. Hydretain creates a sub-surface film that collects and stores moisture on plant roots and soil particle surfaces.

What does all this mean? Consider what happens when you fill a glass with a cold drink. Eventually, water begins to condense on the side of the glass. The soil works in much the same way when Hydretain is applied, Spindler explains. "At the time that plants would normally go into drought stress, there is a very high level of humidity in the soil that is typically lost to evaporation. Rather than allowing that moisture to escape to the atmosphere above, Hydretain attracts the molecules of water and keeps that moisture in the soil," he says.

Hydretain captures water that is already there – reducing the irrigation or rainfall required to deliver adequate water to plant and turf roots. This is what makes Hydretain a unique water conservation and landscape management tool. "It increases the efficient use of water from irrigation or rainfall," Spindler says. You can water 50 percent less with Hydretain. So for areas where water restrictions are in place, landscape contractors can maintain the integrity of properties while adhering to requirements. And ultimately, this means retaining business and earning new clients via referrals.

"We started getting referrals from clients in high-profile areas," MacLeod says. "People would drive by those properties we treated with Hydretain and ask, 'Why is your grass still alive and ours is stressing?'"

Moisture Management: A Profitable Service

Does it really work? That's the question Irwin gets from those who are newly exposed to Ecologel's Hydretain technology and wonder how it could enhance their landscape businesses. Irwin's advice: Try it on your own lawn and monitor the results. "That way, you can grow a comfort level with the product," he says.

That's what Chris Ford did. Ford, owner of Ford's Hometown Services in Worcester, Mass., had purchased a 2.5-gallon jug of Hydretain after attending a seminar. While the label suggests applying the product before drought stress appears, Ford had no choice. His lawn was already hurting. And, it was August. "I tried it anyway," he says. "In two weeks, my lawn snapped back as if I had irrigation installed."

The real test, Ford says, was using Hydretain on hanging plants. "Within 24 hours after I watered my hanging plants, they looked to be in dire need of water," he says of their stress level. "After Hydretain, my watering reduced 50 percent or more. It extended the time between watering by a half a day. I was sold."

Ford began offering the product to customers in 2011. He added \$10,000 to his revenue in the first season. "This year, we project to double or triple that," he says.

MacLeod says word of mouth about Hydretain has brought more clients to his door. Within the first 30 days of using Hydretain on some HOA properties, MacLeod picked up seven new accounts. The service complements Precision Landscape Maintenance's fertilizer program and continues to earn the company new business. More importantly, it's helping MacLeod hold on to his long-time clients. "It's an additional revenue source from our existing client base and that's always key," he says.

Even in areas where water restrictions are not an issue, Hydretain keeps customers happy – and landscape professionals know it's easier to work to retain an existing customer than to prospect and close new sales. Wesley Wilborn, president,

Peach State Turf Care, Carrollton, Ga., had a customer with an acre of land who was concerned about a dry area. “The property was irrigated, but we had real problems with this spot,” he says.

Wilborn used Hydretain on the isolated dry spot. “It wasn’t a week later and we saw a night and day difference,” he says. No more customer concern.

Wilborn began marketing the product. “It benefits my business because the customer can see better quality work without having irrigation,” he says. “The grass never gets stressed from drought – and down here it gets so hot and dry that irrigation just won’t keep up with the dry weather.”

As a service, the cost of Hydretain pays for itself in the first month and the product has a three-month residual, Irwin says. “Customers can put money back into their pockets by using Hydretain, and landscape contractors can make a profit off of the product, as well,” he says.

Marketing: A Green Sell

Ford says selling customers on Hydretain is a “no brainer” in part because of the product’s environmentally friendly nature. It conserves water, which helps homeowners honor water restrictions without sacrificing their lawns; and the product itself is primarily made from naturally derived food-grade materials.

Hydretain is easily applied as a liquid spray, Irwin explains. It can be used as a stand-alone treatment or tank-mixed with most other landscape products requiring watering-in following application, such as fertilizers, pest control products, fungicides and bio-stimulants. “Hydretain will generally enhance the performance of these products,” Irwin says.

Hydretain is now available in a granular formula that does not require watering in for up to five days following application. “That will be extremely beneficial for landscape companies,” Irwin points out.

To assist landscape contractors with their marketing efforts, Ecologel provides a variety of materials that can be tailored to a landscaper’s business. Those include invoice stuffers, door hangers and vehicle appliques.

Salespeople at McCall Service, with locations throughout Florida, educate customers on the benefits of using Hydretain, and the product is packaged with a service the company calls Hydra

Lawn. Further, if a customer’s lawn is drought-struck, technicians will suggest the product as a way to resurrect the turf from its overly dry state. “We can show clients that we can add Hydretain to their service and we’ll come back a couple of weeks later to talk about the results to get them on the Hydra Lawn program,” says Andrew Taylor of McCall Service.

Water Restrictions: A Battle to Keep Business

During drought, customers seriously consider whether their landscape investment is worth maintaining. When turf is browned out, they rethink lawn care programs such as fertilization and weed control. “What’s the point?” they figure.

Hydretain is helping Wilborn retain business. “It helps us make more money because we stay on the property and don’t have problems with it becoming drought-stressed,” he says.

Meanwhile, landscape contractors are under increasing pressure to provide low-water use options for clients. In doing so, some are retrofitting irrigation systems or actually reducing the landscape – removing plants and turf that require watering. Essentially, this “excavation” puts a landscaper out of a job, or at least limits a company’s work on a property, therefore taking money away from the bottom line.

“Hydretain allows you to maintain the landscape while still saving water,” Spindler explains, emphasizing that this is a viable alternative to removing landscape. “If landscapers are able to maintain the landscape with less water, that means he has more acreage he’s maintaining that he can charge for.”

Hydretain gives landscape contractors a new service they can provide – moisture management. “It’s environmentally friendly, saves the customer water and results in a better looking landscape,” Spindler continues. “A landscaper can charge for that and that goes to his bottom line.”