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## Small business profile

# Nowack digs his spot with Green Turf Beautification

Irrigation services drive growth to \$3.7 million in revenue

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**Business activity:** When Stan Nowack talks about his company, Green Turf Beautification Co., he uses the word "challenge" quite often — and Nowack is one who likes to meet challenges head-on.

Ever since he incorporated **Green Turf Irrigation Co.** in 1977, Nowack has looked for ways to add services to his company. In addition to irrigation, which constitutes 46 percent of the business, the company offers surface drainage (3-4 percent of the business); horizontal boring (3-4 percent); irrigation maintenance services (33 percent) and landscape lighting (15 percent).

The lighting area is growing and could be 20 percent by the end of the fiscal year, as more homeowners become concerned about safety and security.

"When we started doing this, our project manager would ask people why they wanted landscape lighting," said Nowack. "Most said they wanted the house to look pretty. Now, security is becoming a big deal and studies show the best way to prevent burglaries is to have the house well-lighted."

Green Turf was one of the first companies in St. Louis to do horizontal boring, using its surface-launched boring unit to go under Delmar Boulevard from Riverview to Hall Street for the city of St. Louis. AmerenUE and Southwestern Bell turn over directional boring work to Green Turf, which also deals with electrical and plumbing contractors on projects.

Last year, Green Turf started offering FertiGator, the liquid, organic fertilizer system that automatically injects lawn care products into the sprinkler system. St. Louis-based FertiGator has grown to a worldwide company in little more than two years.

Major commercial projects have included irrigation system installation for the UMB Bank Pavillion, Mary Institute and Saint Louis Country Day School, Creve Coeur Soccer Park, Drury Inns and several projects for the city of St. Louis.

The job at MICDS was a major undertaking, with Green Turf doing six athletic fields for the high school two years ago. Green Turf not only did the irrigation, but the irrigation design, as well. At the UMB Bank Pavillion, the challenge was to bury the sprinkler heads in such a way as not to interfere with concertgoers sitting on the lawn.

One of the ongoing challenges for Green Turf is keeping a staff that is willing to work a seasonal job. Crews for Green Turf normally work from about March 1 to Dec. 14. If there is mild weather, work can be done on a spotty basis in January and February. During its peak season, Green Turf has 53-54 employees. The firm administers a drug test, one of the few in the industry to do so, Nowack said.

"There obviously is turnover in this business," Nowack said. "The key is to have people come back a second year when they can earn a substantial wage, plus full benefits. People in the field can earn \$40,000-\$50,000 for a seasonal job. We also have a profit-sharing plan. It's the 'Stan Nowack' profit-sharing plan where I reward dedicated employees."

**Executives:** Stan Nowack, 55, is a native of St. Louis who grew up in north St. Louis and graduated from Beaumont High School. He went into the Army and served in Vietnam. After the service, Nowack went to night school at the University of Missouri-St. Louis and earned a degree in business administration, while also working during the day. He joined Boise Cascade Corp. in Boise, Idaho, and worked in the management training program until starting his own firm. He is chief executive officer.

Kathleen Nowack, 54, Stan's wife, is a native of St. Louis and president of Green Turf Irrigation. She owns the company through a family trust. She began working full-time at Green Turf about 20 years ago.

Joe Cortopassi, 43, is vice president and general manager and has been with the company for 19 years.

Ken Settle is a project manager who joined the company 15 years ago. Ed Werner is the lighting division manager who has been with the firm for 17 years.

**Company history:** Stan Nowack came up with the idea for an irrigation company in 1976 when he learned about the concept from an irrigation distributor in St. Louis. He went to Florida to talk with a contractor about the idea and saw the potential.

When Nowack started the company working out of his home, he did everything. "I was the first service technician," Nowack said. There were just two other companies in the field then; today, there are about 50 irrigation companies in the metropolitan area.

Nowack began with residential work in March 1977, but saw a demand for commercial work and set up a separate division. There were two divisions until about eight years ago when they were merged into Green Turf Irrigation Co.

The firm showed a profit every year until 1993, which Nowack said is the only year it did not make money. Green Turf grew 17 percent in 2001 after growing 9 percent in 2000.

**Revenue:** At the end of the fiscal year March 1, revenue stood at \$3.7 million. Nowack said he had hoped for \$4.3 million to \$4.4 million for the present fiscal year, but it's possible the figure will be slightly less, but will still top \$4 million. His goal is to hit \$8 million to \$10 million in about seven years.

Professional services: Susan Calist at Bank of America is the company's banker; Dan Barklage at Barklage, Barklage, Brett, Martin & Wibbenmeyer is the firm's lawyer; Mary Arnentsen, who has her own firm, is the CPA; Steve Turner at Solomon Turner handles marketing and public relations.

The future: True to his need for constant challenges to keep the company growing, Nowack said he has several ideas for the future, none of which he is ready to reveal. But, he plans to keep to his motto: "Don't be afraid of the dark."

*[rjanecke@bizjournals.com](mailto:rjanecke@bizjournals.com)*