



This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears above any article. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

Manatee's Turner Tree and Landscaping still solid as an oak

By Tom Bayles

Published: Monday, April 4, 2011 at 1:00 a.m.

Turner Tree and Landscape was shaken to its roots after the end of the Southwest Florida housing boom.

Along with scores of other construction-related companies, Turner Tree survived because it altered the way it did business.

"The industry was changed forever by the boom and bust," said Darrell Turner, president of the 30-year-old company that bears his name. "It will never go back to the way it was."



STAFF PHOTO / THOMAS BENDER
Turner Tree and Landscape employee Jose Rios works at Harbour Isle on Anna Maria Sound.

Turner, who has nearly a quarter million trees in the ground in six nurseries spread throughout Manatee County, changed the mix of his contracts from one with a heavy emphasis on commercial work to a more balanced portfolio of 40 percent government, 40 percent commercial and the remainder residential.

Most jobs during the boom ranged from \$300,000 to \$750,000. Today, Turner's normal job is \$50,000 to \$150,000 after clients trimmed expenses -- for example, landscaping the sides of a new road in phases instead of all at once, as in the past.

What Turner can charge for his products has fallen as well.

A live oak tree at the maximum size Turner sells -- 30 feet tall and weighing 7,500 pounds at about 15 years old -- cost \$7,000 during the boom; that same type of tree can be purchased now for \$2,500.

Also now, when a homeowner asks Turner for a quote, he has to do a public records check to ensure the home is not in foreclosure in an attempt to make sure he gets paid.

"That is something that never even crossed our mind before," he said.

Turner Tree began work in recent weeks on a \$10.3 million contract to landscape a Hillsborough County neighborhood of about 1,000 single-family homes that stalled out and was foreclosed upon during the bust.

The neighborhood was purchased from the original lender, and the new developer hired Turner Tree for the four years it is going to take to complete the homes.

Another of Turner's crews is working on a \$1.3 million job at Minto Communities' Harbour Isle on Perico Island.

The company was working on 68 jobs during the middle of March, 30 of which are new-home contracts -- compared with five in March of 2010.

Turner's hiring since the beginning of the year raised his rank of employees from 80

to 106 in mid-March, which puts Turner more than halfway back to his boom-time high of about 200.

Copyright © 2011 HeraldTribune.com — All rights reserved. Restricted use only.

Florida's nursery industry is a diverse mix of companies that grow trees, sod, plants, flowers and that produce fertilizer, mulch, lawn mowers, trucks, tractors and even playground equipment.

The Florida Nursery, Growers & Landscape Association says the state's environmental horticulture industry has \$15.2 billion worth of sales every year.

Ben Bolusky, the association's chief executive, has worked with Turner for years on lobbying efforts on behalf on the group's 1,800 members -- down from about 2,400 during the height of the boom.

"Darrell Turner is a mover, shaker," Bolusky said. "He is a thoughtful leader and a thoughtful industry giant who consistently walks his talk."

Bolusky said Turner is "always willing to weigh in when the weight of his word means the most" on political and other issues the group has focused on throughout the years.

"In a day and age where many businesses are failing, it's no surprise Darrell Turner is celebrating 30 years," Bolusky said.

Turner was recently named to the board of the United Way of Manatee County and already serves on the boards of Keep Manatee Beautiful, the Gulf Coast Builders Exchange, the Lakewood Ranch Business Alliance and the Manatee Chamber of Commerce. He also is the past chairman of Meals on Wheels Plus of Manatee.

Turner's rebirth is set against a national backdrop that is a "mixed bag," says Jim Lapidés, spokesman for the American Society of Landscape Architects.

"Nationally, we're seeing slow improvement in the landscape architecture industry, but it certainly isn't uniform," Lapidés said. "Some folks are experiencing rapid growth, while others are still struggling, but it appears the worst is behind the industry."

The society recently polled its members and found business improved nationally in the fourth quarter last year, with six out of 10 members reporting both a stable or higher amount of billable hours and an increase in inquiries for new work.

That is compared with roughly five out of 10 in both categories during the same time frame in 2009.

"It's certainly a good sign that a company on the supply side is seeing such rapid growth," Lapidés said of Turner Tree. "That typically means projects are already past the design phase and into construction."

Turner said the scene at the Tampa Bay Wholesale Grower's Show in February at the Florida State Fairgrounds in Tampa gave him pause and made him feel blessed at the same time.

"There were 40 percent less vendors, which is a direct reflection to me on how the nursery industry is struggling," he said. "I think that tells it all right there.

"But we're moving forward" Turner said. "We are looking forward to, and planning for, the future."