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Trimmed payroll doesn't mean less work for Turner Tree

Owner even made refinancing happen

Tampa Bay Business Journal - by [Jane Meinhardt](#) Staff Writer

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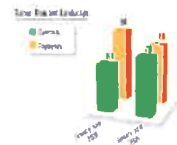
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BRADENTON — Darrell Turner is an expert at growing things — including his own business.

For Turner, current economic and other challenges represent opportunities to fine-tune strategy for Turner Tree and Landscape.

Turner, CEO and president, has diversified the full-service landscape contracting company, created self-sufficient and efficient business practices, and laid a foundation of experience that attracts repeat customers in a 70-mile radius of Bradenton.

MEDIA



Eighty percent of the company's customers are repeat clients. Some have contracted with Turner Tree for multiple projects or phased developments.

Ninety percent of the company's business is commercial, which has been fortunate because of the residential market slump. Still, the economic meltdown has not spared the company, which has been in business since 1983.

Turner Tree has had layoffs, reducing its employee ranks by almost half to 92 people, which in turn cut payroll costs. However, Turner remains committed to his employees, providing a gym at the firm's headquarters in Bradenton and paying 75 percent of medical insurance premiums.

Turner recently refinanced the company's \$17 million worth of plant inventory and its short-term debt, obtaining a [U.S. Department of Agriculture](#) loan.

"It was very good for us," Turner said. "We got a long-term loan with a lower rate."

[Horizon Bank](#) was instrumental in assisting Turner Tree with the refinancing. Turner is a founding stockholder of the bank. His wife and business partner, Mary Ann Turner, is chair of the bank's board of directors.

The company has 230,000 trees in its inventory on 1,200 acres, and the refinancing allows Turner to continue putting his effort and money into maintaining the quality of the inventory. Trees are watered several times daily with small amounts, fertilized regularly and inspected frequently.

"We refuse to sacrifice quality because that's a key to our success," he said.

Another key is expenses. Turner Tree keeps its overhead costs under control with in-house maintenance of its 230 pieces of equipment — all of which are paid for except three. The company has its own maintenance shop with five mechanics and a paint and body shop. Equipment is fabricated when necessary such as the fleet of Bluebird buses that are transformed into mulch carriers or water trucks.

The company's "Turner Green Plan" business segment focuses on preservation of trees to meet the growing interest in preserving natural foliage. Trees at construction sites are dug up, maintained at a Turner farm and then replanted when projects are completed.

Turner removed and maintained 120 trees from The Quay site in downtown Sarasota.

"It's one of the neat things we've started doing," he said. "It is cheaper to hold and maintain trees than replace them. Preservation and relocation is a big thing now."

Turner Tree also does contract growing for clients — another diversification of the company — such as growing matching royal palm trees for the Sarasota Ritz-Carlton.

Contract growing is one of the services offered at family-owned [Sun City Tree Farms](#) in Ruskin, but it has not been used much yet, said Vincent Tort, sales director.

The company does most of its growing in containers on 145 acres and brokers plants landscapers use. It, too, has been forced to layoff about half its employees.

"Once construction virtually stopped, we had to," Tort said. "We're investing money in maintaining and keeping up the quality of our plants and doing it with fewer employees."

To separate Turner Tree from its competition and garner business with repeat customers, the company instituted an incentive program. Starting late last year, the company upgraded by one size plant material for contracted projects — at no charge — and provided a free second-year warranty on irrigation systems.

Turner and his managers attend numerous community events, and he is board chair of Meals on Wheels of Manatee.

“When you give back to the community, it comes back to you 10 fold,” he said.

INFO

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