

Not sure what 2024 will bring in terms of recession and consumer confidence levels, laws and regulations that impact that industry or even extreme weather? Our experts read the tea leaves to help you prepare.

The Economy

You only have to skim recent headlines to see the constant coverage of an impending slowdown or a recession. Taylor St. Germain, an economist with ITR Economics, says that while there is a psychological aspect to causing a slowdown, leading indicators have been pointing toward a slowdown for some time now.

“It’s really important to understand the magnitude of this downturn and from our perspective, this is a very mild downturn compared to downturns in the past,” St. Germain says.

St. Germain is challenging business owners to think about this recession differently, as he is seeing a lot of economic growth coming in 2025 and 2026.

“Given how mild this recession is, we’re urging business owners to be aggressive, to be thinking about making capital expenditures, to be hiring, to really be using the slower period in 2024 to be preparing for the growth that comes in ‘25 and ‘26,” he says. “I’m not concerned about businesses surviving ‘24. We’ve been through much worse. I’m more concerned that we

won’t be prepared for how quickly the growth comes back in ‘25 and ‘26.”

He says there will be some strain on financials, but company owners should think beyond 2024 when planning.

2025 and 2026 are expected to be growth years as the Federal Reserve is expected to drop interest rates as inflation cools down. People will be borrowing and investing more as those rates come down.

“We’ll likely see the consumers find themselves in a strong financial position again, especially as inflation and rates come down,” he says. “They’ll find themselves with greater purchasing power out there in ‘25 and ‘26.”

With inflation decreasing, St. Germain says that it will be a lot harder to pass on price increases in 2024. He expects businesses to see pushback from consumers, putting pressure on company margins.

“You’re going to have people saying, ‘Well, your material costs are down in ‘24. We want you to lower your price,’” St. Germain says. “The response should be, ‘Well, we can’t lower our price because even though materials are down, we still have to pay people more.’”

He encourages maintaining your pricing through this downturn so you are in a strong financial position for 2025 and 2026.

St. Germain does expect inflation to pick back up

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Inflation May Loom Longer Than Expected

(Continued from Page 1)

in 2025 and continue through the second half of the decade. He encourages landscape companies to build their cash reserves while the markets are slowing so they are ready to deploy.

“If you need to borrow it to be investing in your business, take advantage of that borrowing because rates will go higher, likely in '26, '27 and beyond.”

Some of the factors landscape company owners can monitor to keep a pulse on the economy include the construction markets, migration trends, capital expenditure activity and retail sales trends.

St. Germain expects single-family housing to grow in 2025, while commercial construction will go through some pain in late 2024 and 2025. He says these two types of construction are counter-cyclical.

“I think that it’s important to understand what sectors of the commercial construction markets will be doing well,” St. Germain says. “You’ll probably have better success targeting hospitals and education versus office buildings.”

He notes that regionally, things will vary across the country. States like Texas, where there is an influx in the population, will naturally result in more opportunities. St. Germain says that consumer spending has been slowing down as they have less money in their savings account, oil prices remain elevated and for a significant portion of the population, student loan payments are restarting.

With the tight labor market for the past few years, St. Germain says the unemployment rate is no longer a reliable indicator of the state of the economy and potential recessions.

St. Germain says there are concerns about how conflicts across the globe could cause supply chain disruptions and drive up inflation, preventing the Federal Reserve from reducing their interest rates. He says the Federal Reserve is also still seeking a soft landing and this could cause them to stay aggressive with their rates.

“There’s this delicate balance that the Federal Reserve has,” St. Germain says. “They tried to get inflation down to a level that they believe is a healthy level of inflation for a growing economy like the U.S., but there are times where they can overdo that by raising rates too high. If they raise rates too high, then you start to get the pullback in spending, you get the pullback in capex, and that weakens the economy in terms of overall economic growth. That can pull us

into a recession because of the pullback in business investment and business spending.”

Consumer Trends

The economy is also impacting consumer trends. According to the 2023 Consumer Trends Index by Marigold, 60 percent of consumers are very pessimistic about the rising cost of living and economic outlook. Half of consumers are making less impulsive purchases with more doing research, waiting for sales and relying on loyalty benefits when purchasing from their favorite brands. When consumers are browsing online, it is increasingly on their mobile devices, so it is important to have your website optimized for those searching for landscaping companies on their phones.

The report says 59% of consumers are willing to pay more for their preferred brands. Meanwhile, 67 percent of consumers say a loyalty program is critically important to winning their lasting loyalty.

While you can’t reward long-time customers with a free drink after a certain number of purchases like Starbucks, you can develop your own program that works for your organization to show your appreciation to loyal clients. It’s also important to understand a loyalty program goes beyond offering discounts. It should foster a community, recognize customers as individuals and deliver personalized results based on this.

Consumers are loyal to brands, but a third have switched from a brand over the last 12 months due to a poor loyalty program, the online customer experience and data privacy issues. The good news is that 77% of these customers who have switched can be won back with the right encouragement.

Email remains the most effective channel for driving sales, as 52% of consumers have purchased a product directly as a result of an email they received in the last 12 months. The key to making your emails to clients stand out in their inboxes is to take personalization beyond just having a first name in the subject line.

Emailing clients about services they’ve expressed an interest in that fit their budget can be an effective touch that converts them to a sale. Truly personalized messaging is important, as 49% of consumers felt frustration when they received irrelevant content or offers.

Meanwhile, digital advertising has been declining in its effectiveness as more consumers become banner-blind to ads. Only 25% of consumers made purchases

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Political Battles May Effect Business

(Continued from Page 4)

directly from a banner ad.

The Government

2024 marks an election year, and no matter what changes or stays the same, the government will impact how you conduct business. Not only are there congressional elections and the presidential election, but there are also 48 state elections this year.

Andrew Bray, NALP senior vice president of government relations and membership, says it's hard to predict exactly what things will look like in the next four years with a Republican versus a Democratic president. While the Biden administration has been good at releasing supplemental H-2B visas in a timely manner, they are also putting forth rules around H-2B that will be negative and damaging.

"A Republican on the other side likely won't put forth rules that hurt us, but they could be terrible at releasing supplemental visas," Bray says. "We had a horrible time under President Trump each year dealing with people in the Department of Homeland Security that did not understand or appreciate the program."

Bray explains that typically, when a Democrat is president, the Department of Labor becomes difficult to deal with and the Department of Homeland Security is easier to work with. The opposite occurs with a Republican president, but both departments are necessary for the H-2B program.

Regardless of which party is in the White House, Bray says NALP has good relations with the EPA and expects to continue to be able to effectively communicate and advocate for the industry.

Bray predicts that control of both the House and Senate will flip-flop.

"Usually, when you have a divided government, it's more of a log jam," Bray says.

He says the dysfunction in the House is harming vulnerable Republicans' chances of election in districts that Biden carried. Meanwhile, in the Senate, there are more Democrats up for re-election than Republicans and they happen to be in swing states.

"I think the Senate and the president are likely going to be the same party," he says. "That's just what I'm predicting."

With a Democratic-controlled government, Bray says it is much more likely

to get cash credit for electric equipment and access to H-2B visas.

"The old days of Republicans being pro-business and Democrats not, it's just not the reality that we're living in right now," Bray says. "That is not the current state of the party right now."

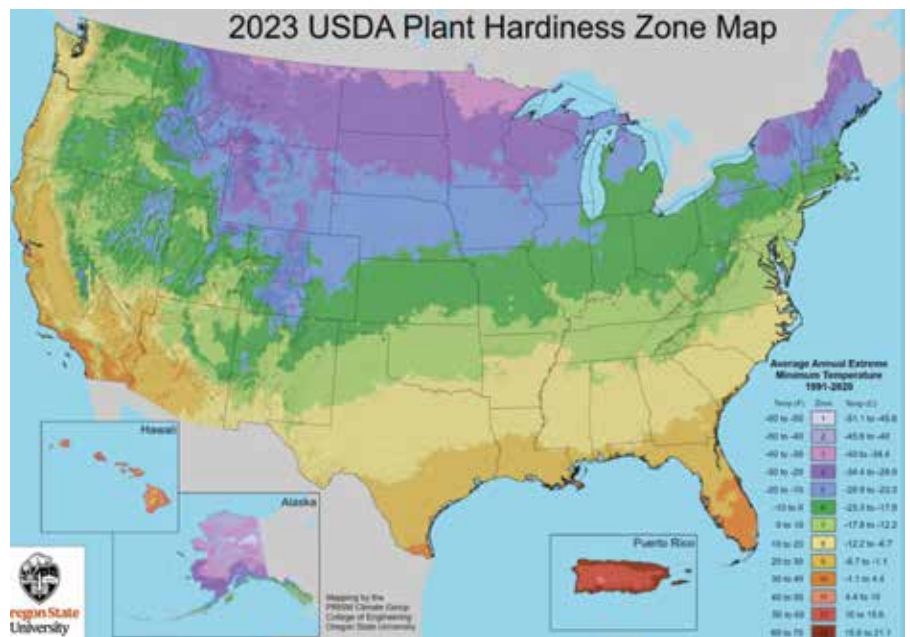
At the state level, Bray says the industry needs some of the states that are currently a Democrat trifecta to swing back to some form of divided government to serve as a check. He says when you have a divided government, it is very easy to kill a bill and very hard to pass a bill.

Bray says the most important thing landscape professionals can do is be informed and engaged. He also encourages participating in the primaries, not just the general election.

"People need to read our advocacy coverage," Bray says. "People need to read the newspaper. People need to go to various outlets. Do not get stuck in one echo chamber. Be informed and then get engaged. Get out and vote. Vote for people who are going to support policies that are helpful for you and your business."

The Climate

The country has also been experiencing climate shifts that have resulted in changing plant hardiness zones, increased natural disasters and other weather conditions that have impacted the landscape business.



The 2023 plant hardiness map is about 2.5 degrees warmer than the 2012 map across the United States. Photo: USDA

(See CLIMATE, Page 10)

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Austin declared new drought restrictions in August. Water use stayed the same.

KUT 90.5 | By [Mose Buchele](#)

Deborah Cannon/KUT

The City of Austin moved to Stage 2 watering restrictions in August due to drought concerns.

On Aug. 15, Austin was 39 days into its longest triple-digit heat wave ever recorded. The extreme heat had created a [“climate feedback loop,”](#) locking in the worst drought the city has seen in 113 years. By mid-August reservoirs on the Colorado River, which provide the city with water, were 46% full and dropping.

Following a protocol established with the Lower Colorado River Authority and state environmental regulators, Austin declared Stage 2 drought restrictions to decrease the amount of water the city used and conserve water in those Highland Lake reservoirs.

The rules [put new limits on how people and businesses were allowed to use water](#), including restricting automatic lawn irrigation to once a week.

But Austin’s water use continued unabated.

That was the message Austin Water conservation manager Kevin Kluge delivered Nov. 30 when he updated the city’s Integrated Water Resource Planning Community Task Force on this year’s drought response.

After restrictions were announced, “it was still

very hot and dry and people continued to try to water their lawns. So that continued for another month or so,” said Kluge, sharing a graph [from a slide deck](#) that showed city water consumption before and after Aug. 15.

“Our best efforts did not push water use down,” he said.



That water use continued despite a surge in 311 complaints about people violating the new conservation rules.

A graph shared at the meeting showed around 450 complaints filed with the city in the week after drought restrictions were announced, up from

under 200 filed during the first week of August. The city appears to have received more than 300 complaints each week into early September.

When people report watering violations, the city first sends a postcard to the potential violator. But far fewer postcards were sent out in August than reports received. Kluge said that could have been due to duplicate and erroneous reports.

If the city continues to receive complaints about someone violating water restrictions after it has sent out postcards, it will send someone to investigate the violation and potentially issue fines.

While the presentation showed no obvious impact from the announcement of Stage 2 restrictions, Kluge said he believed they still helped.

“We’re imagining that it tamped down that spike [in water use] that might have been,” he said.

But his presentation prompted questions from

(See AUSTIN, Page 22)

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Climate Shifts In Zones Impact Landscaping

(Continued from Page 6)

Tim Vela, CEO of United Veterans Construction and Landscape Solutions, Inc., based in Fort Worth, Texas, says they are constantly taking extremes in weather patterns into their planning from season to season and year to year.

The 2023 plant hardiness map is about 2.5 degrees warmer than the 2012 map across the United States.

Photo: USDA

“The shift to El Nino is predicted to bring a wetter winter, but not necessarily in the form of snow or ice,” Vela says. “This early indicator has our water management team preparing to dial back or, more than likely, shut down irrigation systems for winter and if this plays out through spring. That delivers savings to our clients in terms of water costs and budgets. The more you pay attention to this aspect of the business, you start to position yourself from a marketing perspective as an SME.”

In northern states, snow totals have been decreasing, with Boston losing snow cover faster than anywhere else in North America. This is significant for businesses that count on snow removal revenue when budgeting for the year. Meanwhile in the Midwest, the EPA reports that annual precipitation has already risen by as much as 20% in some areas. Future projections indicate heavy downpours will be common in the winter and spring, increasing the likelihood of flood damage and sediment runoff.

Plant hardiness zones across the contiguous U.S. have edged northwards over the three most recent 30-year periods.

“Recent years have certainly had people considering plants’ heat tolerance as well as their ability to come through sudden drops in temperature,” says Jane Beggs-Joles, landscape market coordinator for Proven Winners, based in Dekalb, Illinois. “I think it’s more volatility than a simple change in hardiness zones that we will see first. We need to be prepared for the extremes on both ends of the thermometer and for swings in temperature. Even a species that is quite cold hardy can be damaged if the temperature drops suddenly and it hasn’t had time to harden off for winter.”

Jerry Maldonado, owner and vice president of Maldonado Nursery & Landscaping, Inc., based in San Antonio, Texas, says the extreme heat and cold has had both negative and positive consequences for their business.

“On the one hand, there has been lots of enhancement work replacing dead plant material,”

Maldonado says. “On the other hand, the extreme heat has exacerbated the water issues within all our markets, causing restrictions on watering and keeping our customers from doing projects.”

Tropical cyclones, which include hurricanes, tropical depressions and tropical storms, are increasing in devastation and becoming more frequent. Drought conditions are also increasing in frequency and intensity.

Beggs-Joles says they are breeding more plants for drought and heat tolerance, as well as plants that can handle heavy rainfall. She advises landscape professionals to utilize extension services and visit trial gardens to find new plant varieties most suited for their region.

“I believe we’ve learned more about what works and what doesn’t work in these extreme weather patterns,” Vela says. “Today, more so than ever before, we are talking to our clients about having a budget line item for plant replacement every year. It seems inevitable, but our job is to mitigate that loss.”

Vela says they’ve also seen more clients adopt smart irrigation controllers as a way to improve their water

(See *INCOMING*, Page 15)



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What does the science say about the grass vs. turf debate in sports?

By [CARLA K. JOHNSON](#)

Which playing surface is safer for athletes: natural grass or artificial turf?

The question is important not just in football, but also for soccer, recreational sports and high school and college athletics — anywhere athletes make sudden shifts in direction that can twist joints and tear ligaments.

Scientists continue to study the question, but there are challenges to getting the answer right. There are variables to take into account: the player's age and physical shape, weather and surface conditions, the type of shoes and whether the injuries involved contact with other players. And surfaces have changed over the years with new technology. [The debate was revived when Aaron Rodgers](#) tore his Achilles' tendon during an NFL game on artificial turf. Although Rodgers' injury may have been just as likely on grass because of the circumstances, that hasn't stopped the wrangling.

What does science say and what are the challenges?

LOOKING BACK AT INJURY RATES

Some studies look back at injury rates, while making adjustments for other factors that could be in play. That type of study is good, but will never be able to keep up with innovation, said Dr. Calvin Hwang, a team doctor for Stanford's football players and the San Jose Earthquakes soccer team.

"There's always evolving technology, both with grass, but especially with artificial turf," Hwang said. "The newer generation turfs may be safer than older generation turfs. And so studies that were done five or six years ago may not be including some of those newer generation turfs."

Still, Hwang, who treats players who play home games on grass, said the research he's seen leads him to believe that grass is safer.

Recently, a group of researchers [reviewed studies on the topic](#). They looked at 53 articles published between 1972 and 2020, on injuries in professional and amateur sports, including football, soccer, rugby, field hockey and

ultimate Frisbee. The authors didn't specify whether the studies included injuries involving a direct blow from another player, or just non-contact injuries.

The studies suggest "a higher rate of foot and ankle injuries on artificial turf, both old-generation and new-generation turf, compared to natural grass," they wrote in a paper published last year in the American Journal of Sports Medicine. Knee and hip injuries were similar on both surfaces, they wrote. The authors noted that studies reporting a higher rate of injury on grass received financial support from the artificial turf industry.

Similar findings were reported in a separate [study that analyzed](#) 4,801 NFL foot and leg injuries during 2012-2016 regular season games. That research found 16% more injuries per play on artificial turf compared to grass. The authors concluded that if all games had been played on grass during that period there would have been 319 fewer foot and leg injuries. Looking only at non-contact injuries the risk was

even higher, about 20% more injuries per play.

THE DEBATE

In the NFL, [the players' union prefers grass](#) and has been pushing for it. The NFL says some artificial turf fields are safer than some grass fields and wants to reduce injuries on all surfaces. About half the NFL stadiums use artificial turf.

Both sides use the same data on non-contact injury rates, but have interpreted the figures differently.

The data collected for the NFL and players union is not publicly available. The company that analyzes the data, IQVIA, did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

Artificial turf is made from plastic fibers that resemble grass with a cushioning infill made of granulated rubber, sand, cork or coconut fiber.

"The upside of turf is that players feel more nimble, they feel faster," said Dr. Brian Cole, orthopedic surgeon and team doctor for basketball's Chicago Bulls. "The downside is they're faster. It's a collision sport. Velocity goes up and collisions go up."

(See *CLEATED*, Page 22)



El Niño on the way out!

Sea-surface temperatures in the Central Pacific that, in part, define the status of the weather phenomenon known as the El Niño Southern Oscillation strongly reside in El Niño conditions (Figure 6a). Projections suggest El Niño conditions continuing with a return to neutral conditions in the March-April-May season. This month's projection is lower than last month's, suggesting an earlier ending to El Niño. The official probabilities, a month newer than the projections in the graph, give El Niño conditions a 90% chance of extending through the February-March-April season, giving way to favoring neutral conditions in April-May-June and greater odds of La Niña conditions forming in the fall (Figure 6b).

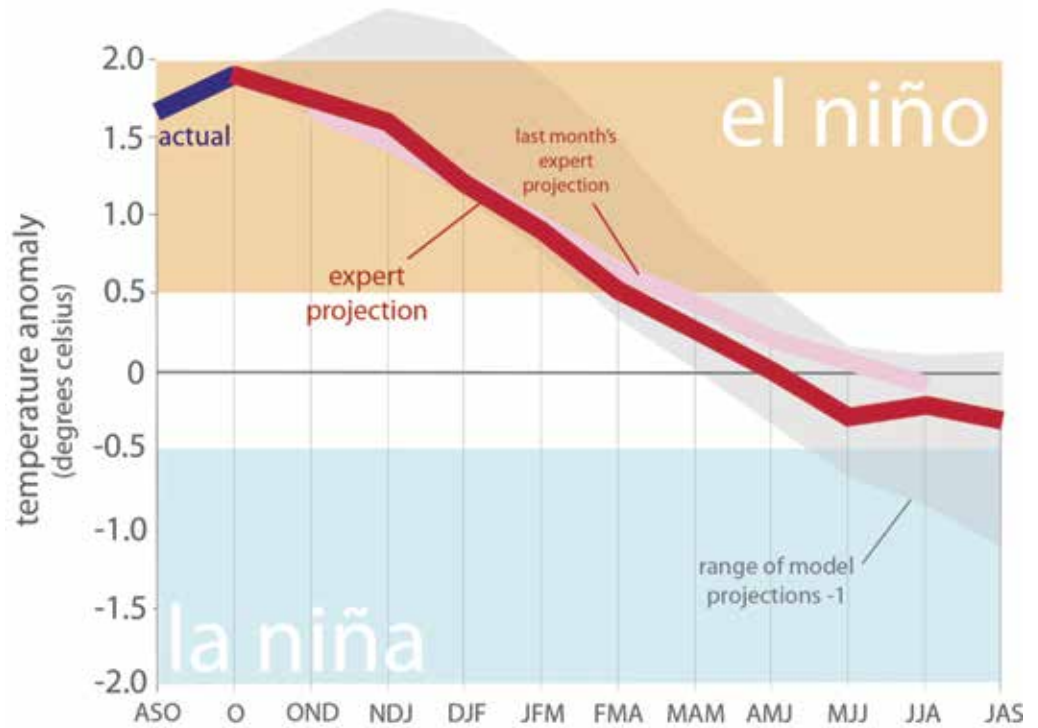


Figure 6a. Forecasts of sea-surface temperature anomalies for the Niño.

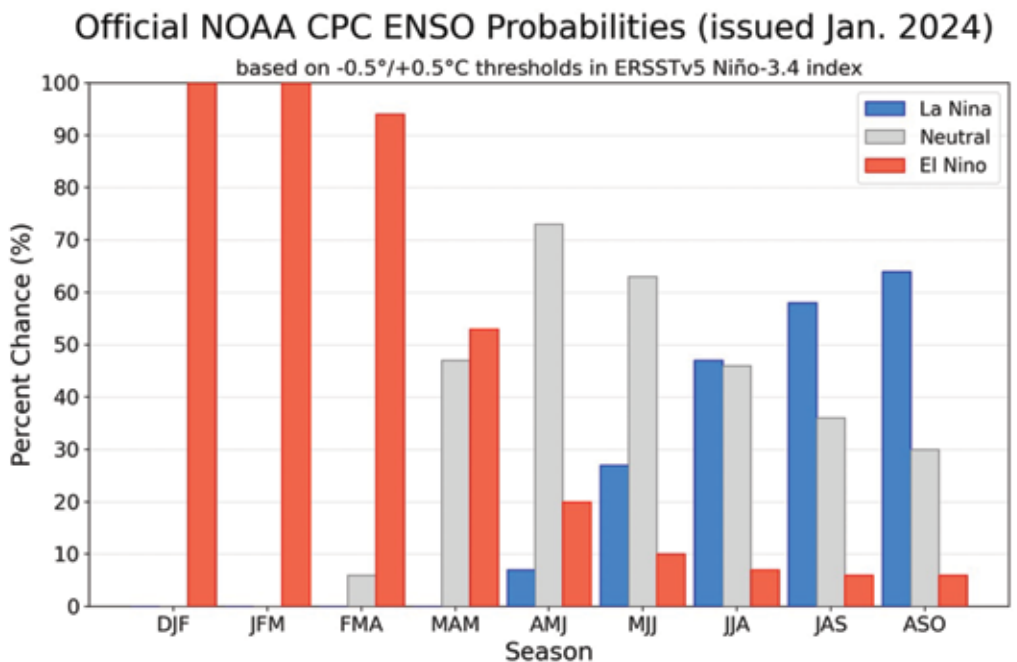


Figure 6b. Probabilistic forecasts of El Niño, La Niña, and La Nada (neutral) conditions (graph from Climate Prediction Center and others).

Texas Reservoirs Reach Dangerous Lows

In some parts of the state, water officials have cut off releases that maintain estuaries and other key coastal habitats.

Texas reservoirs are at critically low levels, according to an article by Dylan Baddour in *Wired*, and conditions are projected to worsen with another hot, dry summer likely coming up.

Regions around the state are declaring states of drought. “In Corpus Christi, on the south Texas coast, authorities last month stopped releasing water aimed at maintaining minimum viable ecology in the coastal wetlands, even as oil refineries and chemical plants remain exempt from water use restrictions during drought.” Corpus Christi’s reservoirs plunged from 53.7 percent full in 2022 to 30.5 percent full this month.

On the lower Texas coast, the Rio Grande has not been flowing consistently, and Colorado River water releases have been minimal as that river faces shortages farther upstream. Yet industrial water consumers like oil refineries often get a pass, authorized to use millions of gallons of water per day.

The crisis reaches across international borders. “Northern Mexico has experienced its own water crises lately, including a deadly riot at a reservoir dam in 2020 and months of water rationing in 2022 in one of the country’s largest cities. So, it’s been reluctant to release water for Texas farmers, contributing to low levels in the downstream reservoirs.”

Central Texas: People and Grass

Two hundred miles inland, the five-county region surrounding Austin, Texas’ high-tech capital

city, has grown faster than any US metro area for 12 straight years. Its water supplies haven’t.

In 2022, less water flowed into City of Austin

reservoirs than ever before, city staff said at a public water task force meeting on Tuesday. Last year was only slightly better. The largest reservoir serving Austin, Lake Travis, fell from about 80 percent full in January 2022 to 38 percent full at the start of this year.

Even in another extreme drought year, Austin can avoid

heightened water use restrictions, which take effect when reservoirs fall below 30 percent full, until at least July, according to a water supply outlook presented at the meeting. But the outlook stopped short of August and September, the region’s hottest and (recently) driest months.

“It’s not looking good,” said Robert Mace, director of the Meadows Center for Water and the Environment at Texas State University and a member of the water task force.

Even if levels fall below 30 percent, water users in Austin will face only minor restrictions, focused mostly on car washing and lawn irrigation. During the summer in Texas, when water consumption can double or triple over wintertime use, major cities spray most of their treated drinking water onto grass.

The problem worsens as more land converts to suburban subdivisions amid a homebuilding boom, said Todd Votteler, a water dispute consultant and editor of the *Texas Water Journal*, a peer-reviewed journal focused on water management and research. Texas gained more residents and built



Canyon Lake, a reservoir on the Guadalupe River in the Texas Hill Country. |jfortner2015 / Adobe Stock

(See RESERVOIR, Page 18))

Incoming Workforce Knowledge A Factor

(Continued from Page 10)

conservation efforts.

“The use of technology has increased dramatically in the last few years,” Maldonado says. “Technology that allows us to better manage irrigation systems remotely and the use of flow sensors, ET based controllers, and other platforms such as Rainbird IQ4, Weathermatic Smart Link and others that allow us to better manage our water resource.”

The Incoming Workforce

For years, Millennials have been a focal point on how to attract and retain them, but the oldest Millennials are in their 40s and well into adulthood and the workforce. In 2024, it is time to consider the next generation and what they can offer the industry.

According to the World Economic Forum, there are more than 2 billion people in the Generation Z age range, representing 30 percent of the total global population. Individuals born between 1997 and 2012 make up Gen Z. It is predicted that by 2025, Gen Z will make up 27% of the workforce.

While Millennials and Gen Zers have a lot in common as generations, it’s important to understand the key differences to recruit this diverse generation effectively. Gen Z is socially conscious, digitally minded and pragmatic.

“There is a misconception that they lack a work ethic,” says Melanie Anderson, talent acquisition representative with Ruppert Landscape, based in Laytonsville, Maryland. “It’s important to remember that they are just motivated by different factors than previous generations. We need to be open-minded about what they expect from an employer, understand the differences in motivation, and adapt accordingly.”

Anderson says because they’ve grown up with technology, Gen Z employees are proficient with using digital tools and adapting to technological changes, which can be a win in the workplace.

Chris Psencik, vice president of McFarlin Stanford, says Gen Z team members are always willing to look for technology to solve a challenge. He says in one instance, a Gen Z individual was able to come up with additional solutions for a client during a site visit by utilizing ChatGPT.

“While there certainly was a need for this site walk

(See TECHNOLOGY, Page 20)

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Building Your Team: Crafting a Successful Internship Program

Nubia Guterrez, director of human resources for Mullin, based in St. Rose, Louisiana, says they started their internship program over four years ago and utilized NALP's internship program guide as the foundation for their platform.

"We knew that our industry has a lot of issues in finding people," Guterrez says. "So what better way to get out there and to get to know these people that might be interested than reaching out to students? Reaching out to these college or high school students early on was super important for us."

Karen Filloon, director of marketing and business development for Southview Design, based in St. Paul, Minnesota, says they started their internship program in 2015 due to the labor issue as well.

"If you want to grow your company, you're going to have to realize that you need to train these people," Filloon says. "Whether or not they come back to Southview full time as an employee doesn't make any difference. It's that we're training and opening up the field and making it visible to students as an option."

Christina Checchi, talent acquisition manager for Yellowstone Landscape, based in Bunnell, Florida, says they have offered internships for almost 20 years, but their formal, national program dates back to 2011.

"It's a successful experience for the student if you can help them learn and accomplish their individual goals," Checchi says. "Identifying those goals early on is crucial."

Major Misconceptions

Internships are not a source of cheap labor and they shouldn't be used to keep a student on a mower all summer. Filloon says their interns have had this happen to them at other companies.

Photo: Southview Design

"Students accept internships so that they can learn; otherwise, they would accept a regular, more focused role," Checchi says. "Seek to teach students not just about the company but help them develop skills that they can take with them to other industries if they choose to go elsewhere. Students appreciate growing not just on a professional level but on a personal level



Photo: Yellowstone Landscape

as well."

Guterrez says internship programs are often seen as a lot of work and acknowledges that landscape companies are constantly busy, but this should not be used as an excuse for not having an internship program.

"Have different mentors that will be able to help these students out through the whole process and do a couple of check-ins," Guterrez says. "I think if you split it up and make it a bit easier on yourself it's not difficult."

Having a point person for the internship program and buy-in from the leadership team will also help with the success of your internship program.

"It's very hard to get programs off the ground when you're doing it all by yourself," Guterrez says. "Having a good team to back you up and help you push through this process is important."

What Makes a Program Successful

The main way these companies determine if their program is successful is based on the feedback they receive from their interns. They seek feedback during the internship from the interns and their mentors and at exit surveys.

At the end of Mullin's internships, they ask their interns what they liked and what they'd like to change. Guterrez says that based on this feedback, they may tweak their program. Mullin's interns also have to do

(See *INTERNSHIP*, Page 21)

Executive Director's Message

It's Springtime again! Well at least in most of Texas anyway, it has been a busy winter for me and TPT. I hope all is well and your inventory holds out this season.

ANNUAL MEETING

For some reason when we try to have the meeting in College Station, we bring down the wrath of Mother Nature! Just kidding, but it is a bit strange. Our reschedule went extremely well and I thank all of you who attended and hope you found the information useful. The attendance was great, and our vendor partners were happy with the turnout.

The cost of all events continues to increase, but we were able to keep your cost the same by increasing our vendor fees slightly and having a good response from you and the vendors where numbers are concerned. I am always open for suggestions when it comes to topics you want to hear about during the CEU and general sessions.

TPI NEWS

Most of you are aware the comment period for the proposed sod checkoff has ended and the ball is in USDA's court. As I understand it, USDA will evaluate the comments and determine if the base support is sufficient to move forward and if any changes need to be made to the document. After that the referendum would be scheduled and the vote would take place. At the end of the day we are still waiting to see what happens.

TPI TEXAS

TPI will be coming to San Antonio in 2025. I would like for TPT to host a welcome event for all the growers coming to Texas. Any suggestions are welcome!

2024 FISHING & GOLF EVENTS

The ever-popular **TPT Fishing Tournament** will be held **October 14th** with dinner on the 13th. The location will be the same as usual, the Matagorda Fireman's Hall.

The **TPT Golf Tournament** will be held **November 11th** at the **Rio Colorado** course in **Bay City**. We are working on putting together a Sunday evening event the evening before November 10th, more details to come!



2024 Goals

I always try to set some goals for myself and the association. Long term I still want to develop a "young" leader program for TPT. This would be patterned after other such programs in the agriculture community. The goal would be to develop folks who can advocate for and support the industry when needed and improve their personal skills to manage and improve their farm business. This is very early in development, and I will keep you posted. I have a few other ideas I will

write about in the future.

HATS!

Thanks to all who bought hats so far! They are moving well, but we still have some available and will have them at our events in the Fall.

As always let me know if you need something.

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Reservoir—

(Continued from Page 14)

more homes than any state in recent years.

“One of the challenges is the idea for home builders and the real estate industry that all these new houses need to have beautiful green lawns,” said Votteler, who has worked at groundwater and river authorities in Central Texas since 1994. “People moving here from someplace else might not have lived in a region with a limited water supply.”

Around the city of Austin, a patchwork of authorities manages various aquifers and reservoirs. Last month, the Barton Springs/Edwards Aquifer Groundwater Conservation District declared stage four drought restrictions for the first time in its 36-year history. That required the oldest communities and major companies in the district to reduce water use by 40 percent, while 16 newer permit holders were cut off entirely.

The district’s customers include the small city of Kyle, the third-fastest growing US city in 2022, plus dozens of small water companies and utility districts.

“We’ve been concerned for years. “We’ve been in one stage of drought or another for well over a year and a half now,” said Tim Loftus, general manager of the Barton Springs/Edwards Aquifer Groundwater Conservation District. “We just really need rain.”

Loftus said his customers have “risen to the occasion” and complied with cuts. Another district hasn’t been as lucky.

The neighboring Hays Trinity Groundwater Conservation District has fought for two years with a local subsidiary of a national investor-owned water supply company over violations of permit pumping limits, even as severe drought conditions have continued to deepen.

The company, Aqua Texas, has taken almost twice its permitted allotment for two consecutive years and has declined to abide by drought

restrictions, according to Charlie Flatten, general manager of the Hays Trinity Groundwater Conservation District. This month, Aqua sued the conservation district in federal court. Its legal brief didn’t address whether Aqua had over pumped but accused the groundwater district of violating due process and of “unequal application of its penalty policy.” It added that “Aqua Texas has voluntarily spent millions of dollars in water conservation.” The groundwater district, in legal documents, has denied Aqua’s allegations.

“We’re already seeing wells drying up, not just in specific sections but across the district,” Flatten said. “As we continue to use water and there continues to be no recharge, more and more wells will be affected.”


Another major nearby water source, the Canyon Lake reservoir, started last year 80 percent full, surpassed its record low of 68 percent in August, and is 60 percent full today.



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MARKETING MATTERS

Outsmart A.I.

By STACIE ZINN ROBERTS



Artificial Intelligence, otherwise known as A.I., is all the rage right now. Everywhere we turn there's another scary story about how A.I. is about to overtake humanity much like the Skynet robots did in the Terminator movies. And while the prospect of a maniacal Arnold Schwarzenegger-look-alike murder machine is terrifying, the truth is that A.I. is already here. And you're most likely already using it. Yes, really.

Case in point: If you run spellcheck in Microsoft Word or use texting prompts on your phone, guess what? You're using A.I. If you've typed questions into a customer service chatbot on a website, yup, you're using A.I. If you talk to Alexa or Siri on your phone or digital assistant to look up facts or play music, right, that's A.I., too.

Rather than fearing the android apocalypse, let's outsmart A.I. and use it to our marketing advantage.

ChatGBT <https://chat.openai.com/>

ChatGBT is a free service that allows you to write content, conduct research, and generate ideas. For marketing, you can utilize ChatGBT to write first drafts of blog posts, come up with campaign ideas, and write emails. For the most part, ChatGBT is a good place to start when you're having trouble creating new content. However, because it's a bot, not a person, in order to get really useful content out of ChatGBT, you have to enter in succinct prompts.

I typed in: "Help me write an article about how to use A.I. in marketing for sod farms."

Most of what I got back was generic or went off-topic about using A.I. for precision agriculture and GPS. But this one paragraph was actually pretty good:

Chatbots for Customer Interaction:

Implementing AI-powered chatbots on websites and social media platforms can significantly improve customer interaction for sod farms. These chatbots can efficiently handle customer queries, provide product information, and even assist with the

purchasing process. This not only enhances customer satisfaction but also frees up human resources for more complex tasks, ultimately increasing operational efficiency.

Anytime you utilize ChatGBT, consider that the A.I. does not know your brand story, history, or customer. It is a tool best used as a starting point that you'll then edit and refine. Think of it as a way to begin a project or campaign without staring at an intimidating blank screen.

The ChatGBT website recommends:

1. ChatGPT can answer questions, help you learn, write code, brainstorm together, and much more.
2. Don't share sensitive info. Chat history may be reviewed or used to improve our services.
3. Check your facts. While we have safeguards, ChatGPT may give you inaccurate information. It's not intended to give advice.

Social Media & Email Blasts

Some social media scheduling software, such as Sprout Social and Later, among others, offer options to use A.I. to craft social media posts and research hashtags. I've used both of these programs and find them good idea generators that need a human touch before posting.

I've mentioned MailChimp in other columns because I use this software to create email campaigns. One of the cool new A.I. features of MailChimp, available on certain levels of paid plans (not the free one), can tap into your website to select your color palette and photos to create on-brand graphic design elements that you can customize.

While A.I. should not replace your marketing team, it can help save time and generate a new perspective on your marketing efforts. Don't fear the robots. At least, not yet.

Stacie Zinn Roberts is an award-winning turfgrass marketing expert and founder of What's Your Avocado? Marketing & PR. Contact her at whatsyouravocado.com

Technology—

(Continued from Page 15)

and audit of the material, the simple process of involving technology to bring to life possible issues, concerns and solutions not only helped us get to a better result for the client, but they were able to do all of that without ever leaving the property and in time to still have a healthy conversation with the customer and create next steps,” Psencik says. “As a landscape professional for over 20 years, it was exciting to see what and how we can help service a customer’s needs and exceed customer expectations by utilizing some of the tools in the tool belt that had not ever existed before.”

When it comes to recruiting Gen Z, one of the best ways to connect with them is through social media networks. Psencik says McFarlin Stanford has created their own social media channels that focus on driving engagement through education and training to help the next generation of landscape professionals prepare themselves for their next or first step in their career in the industry.

Anderson advises leaning into your current employees and their sphere of influence to attract young talent.

“Encouraging team members to share their work lives on social media, talk about your company’s culture and values, and share your company’s open positions are all great ways to recruit,” Anderson says.

Gen Z looks for companies where they have the opportunity to advance in their careers and a culture that resonates with them.

“If you are thinking you can just put someone on the end of a shovel and expect them find their way and be successful, you are wrong,” Psencik says. “Gen Z wants to ask the questions about what life will look like working in your business.”

Anderson and Psencik agree that work/life balance is one of the most important benefits to Gen Z. Psencik adds you need to know what this looks like at your organization so you can address it in discussions with potential recruits.

“They’ve seen their parents and grandparents prioritize their work lives over personal lives, missing things like family gatherings and sporting events to get ahead in their careers,” Anderson says. “So while a competitive salary and benefits package is very important to Gen Z, they are also looking for flexibility with their schedule that enables them to be more fully present in their lives. It’s more about working to live versus living to work.”

When it comes to retaining Gen Z workers,



Anderson says helping them achieve a healthy work/life balance, providing a feedback-rich environment, and giving them the technology and improved software that they need to work efficiently are good areas of focus.

“They are looking for assurance that they are on track and working towards something and they are looking to get there quickly,” Psencik says. “Training programs need to be clear and concise.”

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Internship Rotation Beneficial Investment



(Continued from Page 16)

a presentation on what they learned and sell them on some aspect that would help improve the business.

“They have to sell this to us and basically say why it is important for us to implement this certain process or product and why it will make us more efficient,” Guterrez says. “It makes them understand more of the business aspect of things as well. It puts them in real-life scenarios, which is more important than just being in a classroom all the time.”

She says they have implemented past suggestions from interns and will let them know certain areas to keep an eye out for suggestions during their internship as well.

“They have definitely made an impact on us for sure as an organization,” Nubia says. “It’s nice for them as well because they take ownership too. They can say, ‘In my internship at Mullin, I suggested something really great and they’ve implemented it and they use it now. I feel like I’m a part of their team.’”

How many interns you can convert to full-time employees will vary greatly. At Yellowstone Landscape, Checchi says they bring on their interns often but other times students realize the landscape industry isn’t for them. She says this is okay, as internships are all about exploration.

About 25% of Southview’s interns transition into full-time employees. Filloon says they don’t expect all of their interns to stay on.

“There are a lot of reasons that it has absolutely nothing to do with us and more to do with them and what they want to do with their career,” Filloon says.

At Mullin, almost all of their interns convert to full-time employees. Guterrez says there have been a few instances where a student has to finish another semester

before they can join the company.

Keys to Success

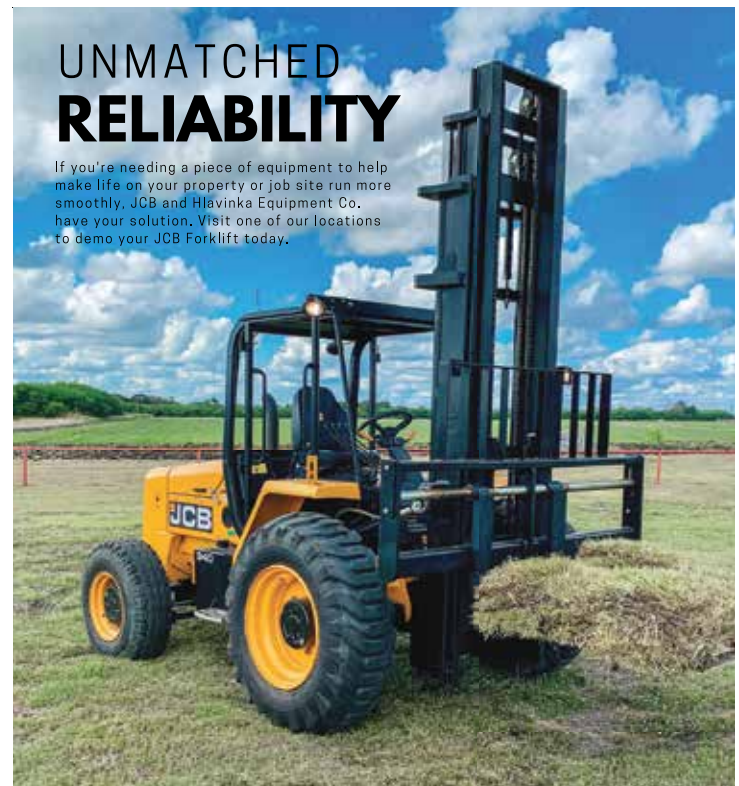
One of the major elements of a successful internship is having interns rotate through the different departments. Checchi says they rotate their interns through both operational and managerial experiences.

“For the first 7 weeks, the intern moves through each department – design, installation, maintenance, irrigation, spend time on a design/build crew, spend time with maintenance crews, shadowing project managers, shadowing landscape care reps, shadowing a landscape designer or architect, spending time with accounting, marketing, snow operations, and the safety director,” Filloon says. “The 8th week is his/her choice. Where do they want to go back and learn more? At the end of 8 weeks, we conduct the exit interview.”

Filloon says during their exit interview with their interns, they always share how surprised they were to learn about how all the different departments work together.

After rotating through all the departments, Mullin’s

(See KEY, Page 23)



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Cleated Shoes and Fake Turf Don't Mix

(Continued from Page 12)

SHOE CLEATS AND SURFACES

Dr. Joseph Donnelly has repaired numerous torn ACLs in female high school soccer players in the Bay Area where most high school athletes play on artificial turf. [Female athletes](#) are more likely than males to suffer ACL injuries in sports such as soccer that require sudden changes in direction, studies have shown.

"It's an epidemic," said Donnelly, an orthopedic surgeon at Stanford Health Care. "When these ladies tear their ACLs, we fix them, we send them back and then they're actually more likely to tear their opposite ACL."

He dug into the research. [One study](#) from 2016 used a hydraulic testing machine to simulate shoes with different style cleats pivoting on various playing surfaces. Shoes with blade-shaped cleats on artificial turf were a dangerous combination. The traction from the blade-shaped cleats increased the twisting force on the knee.

"You're not going to be able to change the surface you play on," Donnelly said. "So we do try to get them to use a cleat that has a favorable interaction with the turf."

Some young athletes don't want to give up their favorite cleats because they worry about performance on the field, he said. Like other sports medicine experts interviewed for this story, he thinks grass is safer.

"There's no question that there is less torque when you're on grass no matter what cleats you're wearing," he said.

HYBRID SURFACES

For big stadiums, aside from player safety, there are financial pressures that favor artificial turf, which offers more flexibility for events like concerts. Weather and upkeep are part of the equation. A poorly maintained grass field can cause injuries.

The future may be hybrid fields. The Green Bay Packers' Lambeau Field in Wisconsin has featured [Kentucky bluegrass sod weaved in with synthetic fibers](#) since 2018.

Grass or hybrid fields may get a boost from the 2026 World Cup. The regulations for the tournament have not yet been published, but grass has been preferred for all past men's World Cups. Seven of the 11 U.S. venues are NFL stadiums with artificial turf. And in a recent ESPN interview, NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell said the stadiums will be putting in hybrid surfaces for the tournament.

Grass field technology has improved, Cole said. "They can do it when it's 110 (degrees) and they can do it when it's 30 below zero in Green Bay. So it can be done. And I think the science is clearly enabling them to do it at this point."

Austin Water Violators Continue To September

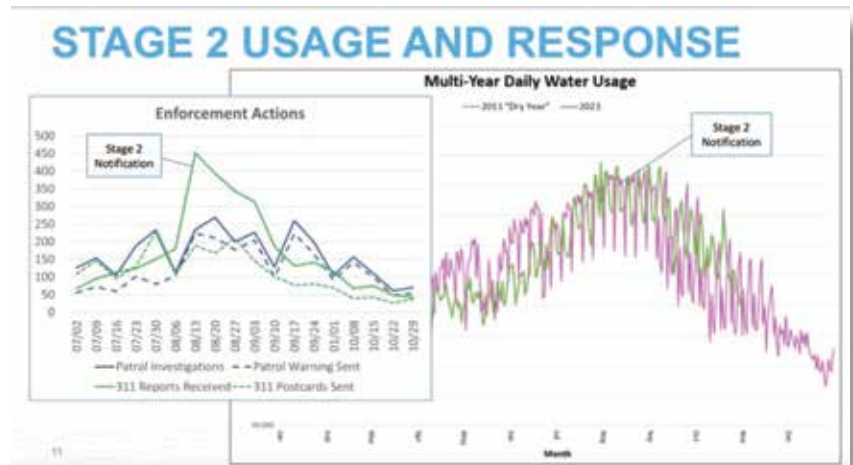
(Continued from Page 8)

the task force about the effectiveness of city enforcement of water restrictions.

"If we're not moving the needle on reducing the usage in the worst drought we've had in a very long time," task force member Paul DiFiore said, "you might need a stronger tool in the toolbox for getting the worst offenders to reduce their water usage."

While Austin, like many Texas cities, relies mainly on voluntary compliance to try to conserve water during drought, [some have questioned](#) the effectiveness of that approach.

El Paso, considered a success story when it comes to conservation, has long made violating water rules a misdemeanor criminal offense.



Austin Water

Though officials say they're considering a change, they also say [aggressively fining repeat violators](#) is one way to reduce water use.

The City of Austin will have an opportunity to rethink how it deals with water violations as it revamps its drought contingency plan, a process that will last until May 20.

Keys to Success – Multi Faceted Interns



(Continued from Page 21)

interns go on a field trip and visit a jobsite that is completed, a jobsite that is in progress and a jobsite they're about to get started on.

"We want you to understand and learn how the work is done," Guterrez says. "After that, we want you to also be a part of the sales part of it. You're going to be selling this stuff to clients. After that, you can sit down with our design team and figure out the design process, but by then, you've already sat through the superintendents and the project managers, so you already know the ins and outs of it. So when you're actually sitting down designing everything, you're understanding these different troubleshooting aspects."

Guterrez says that their interns appreciate this aspect of the program as they are able to gain a better understanding of the landscape process versus just designing at a desk the entire time.

Having interns cycle through all the different roles in your company can also help them identify which parts they aren't interested in. Guterrez says they've had some students realize a division they thought they wanted to go into isn't what they're passionate about.

Assigning dedicated mentors to the interns also helps set them up for success. Filloon says she works with the students to find out what their area of focus is and tailors the program to them.

"Interns crave communication and feedback," Filloon says. "To have a successful program means dedicating time and resources to give that to them."

Photo: Yellowstone Landscape

Filloon adds that you need to treat your interns like your best client. There needs to be trust and respect.

You can generate this by helping your interns feel comfortable and welcome on their first day.

"Before they start, interns meet with their mentor in person or through a video call," Checchi says. "We also send a welcome box to their home. On their first day, they are introduced to the rest of the team, and they are

taken to lunch. Early on in the program, we sponsor a three-day welcome event where students get to know each other and share their objectives for the program. We do a community project and also manage to have a little fun!"

Guterrez says if they have a company or team building event, they invite their interns and don't treat them differently than the rest of their team members.

At the end of Mullin's internships, they will throw a party for their interns and gift them something useful. For instance, they may give a student studying landscape architecture a nice set of colored pencils.

Don't be afraid to change up your internship programs and adopt new aspects to improve the intern experience. Guterrez says as your organization grows, it's important to allow your program to evolve to provide the most opportunities to your interns.

"It might not be immediately, but I promise you it will be a return on investment for you," Guterrez says. "Besides being just a marketing or a brand thing, it's important because you're getting fresh, new ideas. You're figuring out the world is changing, and you want these new students coming in and showing you how to make your organization better."



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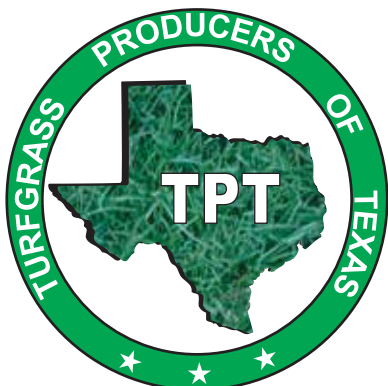
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