

July 19, 2007

## **Becker finds fertile soil in landscaping division**

**BYLINE: BILL CHURCH** BJ contributor

When Becker Groves experienced a downturn in its citrus business caused by foreign competition and falling prices, the management team began looking for ways to diversify. They considered businesses which could use their existing people and equipment.

Six years ago, they settled on the wholesale nursery business as a viable option. Today, the nursery on Bridge Road near I-95 has 600 acres of trees in pots.

The next logical step was commercial landscaping, which Becker entered five years ago by purchasing a Delray Beach company and moving it to Bridge Road near the nursery. With its vast experience in watering its own groves, Becker also added irrigation services recently.

Diversification has proven to be a very wise business decision.

The gross revenues have jumped from \$3 million in the year before Becker took over to \$21 million in 2006. Becker Landscaping and Irrigation now contributes 43 percent of the revenues of the Becker Companies.

When Becker took over, the landscaping business had just 14 employees. Today, Landscaping and Irrigation employs 125.

With little landscaping experience, the company hired landscape veteran Charles Parker, as vice president of operations to run the operation. He had worked for Valley Crest Landscaping, the largest in the world, heading up the Florida and Georgia operations while based in Orlando.

Today, Becker Landscaping and Irrigation serves clients from Vero Beach to Miami, including large developers like WCI Communities, M/I Homes and Catafulmo Construction. Current projects include 800 homes at Sand Trail, a Centex development in Palm City, and Old Palm in Palm Beach Gardens. The company is also the landscaper at the new Pine School upper level facility, which will open in Hobe Sound in February.

Parker expects offshore work to make up 40 percent of his business in the near future. The company employs 35 in the Bahamas where the company is working on several major projects, including the Chub Cay Marina and Villas, a \$5.5 million job.

Major competitors include Valley Crest, his old employer, Vila and Sons of Miami, and Concepts in Greenery and Dixie Landscaping of Stuart. Parker said about 65 percent of his company's jobs are negotiated work, however, rather than the result of competitive bidding. He credits strong customer relationships.

He is also high on his employees, and is proud of the company's good salaries, profit sharing, Christmas bonuses, health care and uniforms for workers.

"Half our employees have been offered jobs with other companies, but few leave," Parker said.

Parker is a Hobe Sound resident and is active in the Hobe Sound Chamber of Commerce. The chamber chose Becker Landscape and Irrigation to receive the Martin County Business Development Board Industry Appreciation Award in September.

Copyright, 2008, Scripps Treasure Coast Newspapers, Used here with permission. No additional reproduction or distribution of this article in any form is permitted without the written approval of Scripps Treasure Coast Newspapers (<http://www.tcpalm.com>).