

Jane Ellis, horticulture manager of Joyce Landscaping in Barnstable, MA, waters a living wall.

as noble work by parents,” she says. “I want them to recognize the potential that lies in the pursuit of plant science and in becoming a certified landscape professional.”

Personally, I was introduced to landscaping in 1986. A college classmate suggested I come help his boss with a job on a Saturday. In his words, “Come on, what’s there to lose? You like being outside, you’re strong. Just do it!” So I took the job on a whim, mulching and landscaping with a bunch of guys. That single day of being outside, working hard, sweating, and feeling like the only woman on the planet who could keep up with a group of guys, made me feel invincible. Before I knew it, I was working for landscape architects and garden designers as a freelance labor hand. I had no idea the hurdles I would face or the obstacles that would be in my path. All I knew was that this work was something I connected with and I wanted more of it.

A Maturing Industry

When I started, it was a different time, a different economy, and while I was part of a tiny minority of women in the industry, men who worked in landscaping weren’t necessarily “visible” as serious business people either. The industry didn’t have the clout, presence, or intensity it does now. Today, the Green Industry wields a powerful presence in local and national economies. Conversations about landscape business growth, scaling operations to seven and eight figures, and setting the stage to be acquired by a national chain are the norm.

Yet despite all the industry change, lawn and landscape business owners interviewed for this article stated that job boards and common recruiting tools haven’t been working. But when I dug deeper, I found that for the most part, posting a job is a passive exercise—we post it and wait. And, upon reading many industry postings, they were eerily all the same. What can we do to make a change to this situation?

For starters, we must think about building careers for people, rather than just

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Recruiting Women

Why it’s your next power move to build your team.

By Monique Allen

The recent rally cry for labor has been unprecedented. Intensified need has owners venting their struggles to find and keep good help. But in our industry, it isn’t a new complaint. The revolving door of staffing has plagued the industry for decades. And while landscape business owners have become savvy employers, this post-pandemic climate has introduced new challenges; ones that are difficult to understand, and hard to overcome.

Are women the untapped labor resource that we’ve been waiting for? Should we be strategically targeting female power to round out our teams? I say, “YES!” But there are no easy answers. The issues we are facing as owners go deeper than what gender we are courting for hire. There are nuances to how we recruit, build, and retain our

teams that need refinement for all employees. Let’s examine those first.

Youth Investment

For starters, it’s time to invest in youth. Focusing earlier in the age timeline of creating our ideal employee may be where our best future lies. Nicole Forsyth, plant science instructor at Norfolk County Agricultural High School in Walpole, MA, says most students at her school initially seek education in animal science. But she encourages them to consider plant science and challenges them to recognize the employment opportunities available at successful landscape companies—even right out of high school. She also recognizes that changing the mindset of parents may be the first hurdle. “Landscaping is [often] not seen

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getting “hands on deck” to dig holes and run machines. Men and women alike have become savvier in job hunting. They want to know, “What’s in it for me?” As owners, we’ve got to lay that out in our postings, our interviews, and throughout the onboarding process.

Recruiting Women

When it comes to women, roughly half of those I spoke to got their start in a way similar to my own experience; they fell into the work by chance introduction. The other half were pursuing adjacent fields of study—such as environmental science, horticulture, agriculture, and animal science—and eventually found their way into landscape production, which offered immediate impact and better pay. The women I interviewed are strong and resilient. They are ready to “dig in” with vigor and commitment for landscape companies that see them as able individuals worth training and investment.

It’s true that women are an untapped resource in our industry. Currently, 35% of our production labor force is women. Jane Ellis, horticulture manager of Joyce Landscaping in Barnstable, MA comments on an advantage she’s seen in having female work crews: “There’s nothing better than a high-powered female client seeing a ‘girl-crew’ and saying how pumped she is to see working women on her landscape.” (Ellis’ use of “girl” is a term of endearment and pride when she refers to what she calls a “kick-a**” crew of able and committed women.)

So how do you attract more women? Here are some considerations for your next recruiting campaign. (And a bonus: some strategies may attract more men too!)

Women were hit hard by the pandemic. In an article by CNBC, Oxfam International’s Executive Director Gabriela Bucher was quoted as saying, “Economic fallout from the Covid-19 pandemic is having a harsher impact on women, who are disproportionately represented in sectors offering low wages, few benefits, and the least secure jobs.” Women were effectively ousted from



Miriam Hellweg is director of maintenance at Sudbury, MA-based a Blade of Grass.

this “informal economy.” By offering on-the-job training, and skill-building through internship programs, a custom workforce might be available to the landscape industry if we can articulate the benefits to these job seekers.

Bathroom breaks need to be policy. Miriam Hellweg, director of maintenance at Sudbury, MA-based a Blade of Grass put it succinctly when she commented, “Hygiene isn’t a woman’s issue, it’s a human issue.” Gone are the days when relieving oneself outside was acceptable — especially in a hyper-hygienic, pandemic world. Hellweg feels that, as professionals, the industry needs to address this head-on by having a strategic plan around everyone’s need to use a bathroom regularly. To be frank, it can be an especially keen issue for women.

Companies owned by women and divisions managed by women had clear directives around hygiene. “Every truck had a list of public facilities, clients’ sites with available bathrooms, and we had a non-shaming environment about the need to be human on a daily basis,” says Tracy van Schouwen, owner of Northridge, MA-based Bees and Blooms Garden and former project manager of Merrifield Garden & Design in Wayland, MA for nearly a decade. Owners who make bathroom breaks a part of company policy destigmatize the issue.

Men and women both participate in parenting. Both men and women want to be present for their partners and children. Yet a lawn and landscaping labor force is expected to start early, work late, and take on weekend work. Incorporating a “sec-



Nicole Forsyth, plant science instructor at Norfolk County Agricultural High School in MA, wants to change parents' mindsets about landscaping careers for their children.

ond-shift" policy may help parents who are caring for children manage morning drop-off schedules. At The Garden Continuum, we've implemented a 10 AM shift start that allows women—and men—to manage their morning family obligations before starting their workday.

Today, many landscaping companies don't provide for, or offer, child-care support. It may be an opportunity for owners to revolutionize the industry by adding this into our benefits portfolio.

Everyone needs a mentor. Lauren Holt, currently Boston branch manager at BrightView, remembers being told early in her career, "Just hop on into that Bobcat and take it for a spin. We'll get you trained up," by one of the male owners of the landscaping company she was working for at the time. That company believed in her from day one, she said, and never treated her any differently than any of the young men they hired. That trust—and lack of special treatment for being female—gave her the courage to keep learning. Now, at BrightView, she's in a management role because of her can-do, will-do, and will-try attitude, but she can also still drive and operate any piece of machinery you put in front of her.

Diversity creates uniquely skilled teams. Some believe women are generally detail-oriented and more ready to engage in deep conversation with clients and coworkers. From my experience, I can see some validity to this. If men and women actually do bring different skill sets to the table, there may be a beautiful team synergy in the making. Integration on work teams can disperse workload responsibilities by natural talent. Not everyone needs to do everything in the same way. Our teams are

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BUSINESS MANAGEMENT: HIRING

Need Employees?

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Provide real-world examples. Open position pages could even feature in-depth stories about certain team members in these roles. (For great examples of articles spotlighting employees, check out Michael Hatcher & Associate's blog at hatcherlandscape.com/blog. And for great examples of professional photography featuring team members, visit Yellowstone Landscape, at yellowstonelandscape.com, or Oasis Turf & Tree, at oasisturf.com.)

Besides communicating company culture, videos can also be a great medium for exploring a "day-in-the-life" of different employee roles. Want to know more about being a crew member versus an operations manager versus an account manager? It's all there on the career videos page at Level Green Landscaping.

Offer career articles. There are dozens of common questions job seekers have. From industry transitions, explanation of compensation and benefits, to training program details, creating insightful resources will help recruits get their answers. Feature these article links on your career center hub. (For some great examples, such as what millennials look for in career options and more, check out some of the articles on Oasis Turf & Tree's News blog.)

Use Spanish. For some clients, we've completely translated careers content and videos done in English to Spanish. It can be a special touch that communicates your dedication to this important demographic in our industry. (For great examples of Spanish recruiting content, check out Kingstowne Lawn & Landscape's Spanish Career Center on its site at kingstownelawn.com.)

Turn visitors into candidates. All of these ideas are well and good but if you can't turn website visitors into interviews, it's all for naught. So utilize a prominent call to action. Most common is the "Apply Now" button and a brief form that serves as an applicant pre-screener. These pages are also great places to explain what the next steps are in the process. You can do that in both text and video. (Check out the "What it's Like to Be a New Team Member" video on Yellowstone Landscape's Video page.) When applicants complete the form, you could even send a series of emails with more helpful info or provide a calendar link where they choose a time for their interview. The point is to make it easy for them.

As you read this article, there may now be a lot of action steps on your to-do list. Start exploring the best web developers, writers, photographers, and videographers now to assist you with creating an effective career center that's ready for Spring hiring. Your recruiting strategy needs a firm foundation. Your website can be the instrumental keystone that holds up your success. Make a plan, build it well, and your website—and recruitment—will withstand the test of time. ■



Diller is a green industry professional with 20+ years of practical experience in operations, sales, and marketing. He currently serves as Vice President of Landscape Leadership, a digital marketing and sales agency exclusively serving the lawn and landscape industry. For more information, visit LandscapeLeadership.com.

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BUSINESS MANAGEMENT: RECRUITING WOMEN

Recruiting Women

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Sheila Fitzgerald, decor manager with The Garden Continuum, is shown here directing the installation of fall plantings at a client site in Needham, MA.

stronger when we allow people to work to their strengths and celebrate the differences.

Your current team is your best recruiting resource. Developing a paid recruiting program within your organization is an ideal way to build strong and resilient teams. If my college friend hadn't recruited me that day so long ago, their crew would have been short-handed and I would have missed out on a career that was, until then, completely unknown to me.

It's well documented that when we have friends at work, love what we do, feel appreciated, and are encouraged (and paid) to learn and build skills - we do better and stay longer in our jobs. Owners must lean into the amazing recruiting force they have in current employees. Tell them you want to see more women in your work force and they will deliver for you. It's time to expend energy into finding people to train and mentor in our field.

Whether you specialize in lawn care or any type of landscaping, you have nothing to lose by expanding your workforce to include women. Everyone I spoke to believes if we could get the word out that we are running reputable, safe, and lucrative businesses with real career opportunities we'd attract more women—and men—to our companies. We'd also start attracting parents who could encourage their kids to consider the industry for gainful employment. ■



Allen is the CEO of TheGardenContinuum.com, an award-winning, multiple seven-figure landscape company in Medfield, MA. She's the founder of the Life-Scape Method and author of the book STOP Landscaping, START Life-Scaping. She has dedicated her career to spreading awareness about sustainable landscape while working tirelessly as an educator, landscape business coach, and industry advocate. You can connect with Monique on Instagram @ [monique.allen](https://www.instagram.com/monique.allen) and LinkedIn @ [moniquetg](https://www.linkedin.com/company/moniquetg).

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