



Landscape Ontario Podcast

Low-barrier learning:

Access free training opportunities through Landscape Ontario

Host: Karina Sinclair

Guest: Courtney McCann

Transcription

INTRO:

Karina: If you're looking to explore a career in the green trades but aren't sure where to start, then this episode is for you. Welcome to the Landscape Ontario Podcast. I'm your host, Karina Sinclair.

Today we're exploring various educational opportunities that are available to people in Ontario looking to gain skills and employment in landscaping.

I've invited Courtney McCann, the director of workforce development at Landscape Ontario, to tell us more about the GROW program and the apprenticeship program that has recently expanded to Loyalist College in Belleville.

These programs have been designed to help people learn instantly applicable skills and apply them for genuine, meaningful jobs with companies who share their passion for designing, building and maintaining beautiful landscapes. And did I mention they're free?

If that piqued your interest, stick around because Courtney has all the details about these amazing opportunities to grow your career.

Music transition

Karina: Courtney, I am so grateful that you've been able to take some time out of your super busy schedule, because I know that as the director of the workforce development team at

Landscape Ontario, you're a very busy person. I'd love to hear you explain about some of the workforce development programs that are offered through Landscape Ontario.

Courtney: Sure. It is a pleasure to be here. And there's so much going on that I most certainly hope that I don't leave anything out here. So just to get us started, I'd like to tell all of you a little bit about what it is that we do here. And I'm going to start by explaining a wonderful course that we started and it's called GROW. And GROW really has three different streams. And the reason why we have three different streams is because we're hoping to provide a bridge.

So these three streams really focus on helping job seekers enter into our wonderful field and we provide them with some basic training. And this training really takes place more of a hands-on training course. We are providing some of it out of our Milton site. However, we have started to conduct some offsite training courses as well.

And the job seeker training course, it's a three-week period now. It had started as a four-week training course. We've cut that down to three weeks. And it focuses really on what are the entry level skills that a job seeker might need when they start their very first career. And so that takes place.

And then the next stream that we run through GROW is the incumbent worker stream. And what that means is really any current employee that an employer has can actually be eligible to take some upskilling.

So there's, there's some upskilling funding that an employee can come to us and say, *I'd really like to enhance certain skill sets*. And they'd like to apply for this additional funding wherein we map out what some third party training courses might look like. And that employee can go and do some upskilling that, in turn, will help them climb their career ladder.

And the third stream that we run through GROW is an employers of choice stream. And really what that is, is we're supporting the employers and the workplaces to ensure that they're ready to support and help some of their employees grow. So that would be ensuring that when a job seeker comes on to a work site, that the employer has some good HR policies running, and some good training courses as well. And then for their current employee that they're going to support them with some of that career growth as well.

And those really are the three GROW streams. In addition to GROW, there's an apprenticeship service that we also run, and that really provides a lot of case management to an apprentice who has recently been signed up or an employee who would like to be signed up.

We're taking a lot of the office-y workload off of them by helping them complete all the paperwork and all of the forms. We're providing a lot of the skill set around understanding what is that apprenticeship pathway and what is involved. We help them with getting signed up with college and understanding what those next steps are.

We also support those employers who don't yet maybe understand what their role is, and we help walk them through what some of those apprenticeship training standard skill books are.

And then there's resources and tools that we provide to both the apprentice and the employers. And in addition to that, we've got a pre-apprenticeship training course currently that we are running. We supported them in the past as well, and really what this is, is it's the precursor. And so we're taking job seekers, we're promoting what that apprenticeship pathway would look like.

We're providing them with their apprenticeship level one training course, but we're also providing them with some, let's call it pre-employment training. And really what that is, is we're exploring the many different careers. We're talking about what some skills might be in terms of soft skills. And we're providing some first aid and some health and safety training courses. And then we provide them with a paid work placement wherein that would run roughly 12 weeks long.

And then they're completing their apprenticeship level one training at a college, and then they're, quote-unquote, ready to go. Meaning we've signed them on as an actual apprentice. They've completed that apprenticeship level one training and they are going to now embark on level two.

I believe that's all that we've got currently running. I'm hoping that I didn't leave anything out, Karina.

Karina: Well, in addition to all of the seminars and workshops that run throughout the winter season at Landscape Ontario, that is quite the host of opportunities for people to gain new skills, improve existing skills, network with employers. It just sounds like there's so many opportunities for somebody to find their way in a really rewarding career.

Courtney: Yes. It's very nice currently because with the government funding, we are in a position where we can offer many of these different training courses at no cost.

And there are many people that unfortunately still haven't heard of some of this support being run so this helps to market that. So thank you very much.

Karina: I know with the new entrant stream for the grow program, I've had the pleasure of at the Landscape Ontario head office, and all the students and participants seem so interested and excited about actually having hands on the equipment, even if that means they're cleaning off the blades of the lawn mower at the end of a shift, or being able to practice their backpack blowing skills and things that really just get them introduced to landscaping in general so that they can see all the different ways and opportunities within the trades.

Now, if somebody were to move into that next level stream, what practical skills are they gaining there?

Courtney: Most certainly. So for the current employees that are looking to be upskilled, what we're doing with this group is we're saying, *hey, look, you're at a point within your career wherein you're looking to grow.* And many of them at this point have had some years of experience. And they're looking at maybe growing a specialty.

And so this is the first year that we've decided to actually expand it. In the last few years, it really focused on anyone looking to become a leader, looking at a crew leadership role, looking at someone that might train staff. And we recognize that there were many other current employees who maybe thought, *you know, I'm not looking at getting to lead teams. I'm looking at maybe getting something else from this.* And so what we did is we decided to branch out.

So current employees can now come to us. We had people that said, *I am missing this one critical skill set that I'd really like to get.*

Some of them have been DZs. So maybe someone drives G-licensed vehicles, but they've really wanted to start driving some of the trailers and trucks and so on and so forth. And so providing them with the additional training courses and licensing in order to drive some of the larger trucks and vehicles have allowed them to also grow.

So we didn't want to limit it on just people that saw themselves leading teams, but could expand that. We've got some current employees that started to say, *hey, I'd like to be able to take our Fusion training course or our Water Smart training course. I would like to start growing.* And so some of those things are also now embedded as well. So, any employee looking at creating specialized skill sets.

The other piece that I didn't make mention of in the past, employers are having to coach an apprentice through on the job. There is something called a Training Standard Log Book. And every apprentice must work their way through these logbooks. And it really gives you specific skill sets that employers must train so that the apprentice can complete it. And at the end of this logbook, they're able then to go and say, *okay, I'm ready to challenge my actual journeyperson exam.*

And so one of the missing pieces for us was some of the workplaces don't actually cover every skill set on their work sites. A really great example is some of the workplaces weren't doing a whole lot of hardscaping. So we would have some current employees saying, *hey, this apprenticeship log book is going well, however, I'm really missing some of these critical skill sets around hardscaping elements.*

So what we did is we're building some of that training in to our current funding year so that our apprentices that are current employees, that are working for maybe two to four years, but they're not done this log book, we're able to offer some of these training standard skill sets on our site so that an apprentice can come and they can complete some of these hard skills so that that log book can be signed off on and they can, in theory, complete their journeyperson exam.

Karina: Are there costs associated for the apprentice to complete those offshoots through Landscape Ontario or is that something that the employer has to be involved in?

Courtney: So currently, and thanks to our funding, we are able to offer that at no cost. We are very, very excited because as I've said, there are many apprentices who have spent years on trying to complete these training standard log books. So this is just helping all of them get one step ahead so that they're able to finish and that's something that we're looking forward to.

Karina: It's a great opportunity for those who really want to master a particular skill or for those who want to become generalists and have a broad set of skills that can apply to any job site. So many different opportunities to take agency over your own destiny — that's so powerful. And to do that without cost to the apprentice really creates a low barrier opportunity.

How might somebody find out about it? How do they know that it's right for them?

Courtney: The pre-apprenticeship funding has actually been around for many years. I don't really want to take a guess at it. I personally have been offering some pre-apprenticeship forms of training since 2012 and it had already been running for many years then. And what's really great about that specific fund is that it is well known. It's something that the province has been funding for many years, and they market it through different channels and many employment services know about it. Many schools do. And it's a wonderful way for anyone who's been having second thoughts or thinking, *I think a trade might be right, but I'm not sure which one.*

What happens is, they're able to go to the ministries' sites and explore what pre-apprenticeship trades might be offered each year. And we're lucky that the horticultural technician trade has been offered for many years through different colleges and this year we're adding Loyalist College, which is great because within that Belleville area, there is no apprenticeship training being offered currently.

But it does get marketed through the province. And outside of that, we're hoping to get word out as well.

And as I mentioned, the employment service field that works with the job seeker side of things, this is a training course that they have known about for many years, and they do market them as well. And it is a training course which is free as well. So there is no cost and it includes that apprenticeship level one training. And it also includes any equipment and gear or book costs.

The way that the program is set up is that the ministry really wants to make sure that there are as little costs as we can possibly make it so that people who may have barriers to joining, we've really stripped those barriers away.

So, it is a wonderful way for a person who's thinking about a trade to come in, try it out, at no cost again, and then be supported with being placed at an actual apprenticeship job, where they're going to be exposed to what the job is going to include. You need between 10 to 12 weeks and that gives a job seeker a really great feel of *is this the right career*.

That course, as I've said, is well known so currently, I think we're just under shy of 100 people have actually applied for 24 seats so that funding has always done quite well in the job seekers eyes.

Karina: Are the 24 seats only at Loyalist College or is that spread through the other colleges that offer horticulture technician programs?

Courtney: Thanks for asking that. So, when I referred to the 24 seats, I'm just referring to the new pre-apprenticeship course that's running out of Loyalist College this year.

Humber College also runs them and I don't have the official count on what their chairs are at currently.

Karina: So there's a chance for 24 pre-apprentices to go to Loyalist College for free, and then get connected with employers who will sponsor the continuation of their apprenticeship towards the Red Seal certification?

Courtney: Yes. And for the actual employer, what's wonderful for them is a lot of these job seekers now understand what the career is and what that ask is in terms of what their jobs are going to look like. They have now not only applied and been chosen for one of these seats, but they have now completed all sorts of training.

And so they have really self-committed at that point that this is the career choice. And so that helps for the actual employers that we've conducted some of that screening up front. The other perk is that the employer gets an employee that is very much excited. They have completed that

apprenticeship level one training. They are aware of what that apprenticeship Training Standards Log Book is. They are keen to work their way through it. And so they're getting an employee that has a lot of passion and a whole lot of drive.

The other element that I didn't bring up yet is that these employers would be eligible for a training incentive fund, meaning that we can offset some of the wage costs. We can go up to \$3,000 per employee that they take on, but we really can't go beyond covering half of whatever that wage cost is. So, the employer would need to cover the other half of whatever the wage is up to a maximum of \$3,000 the employee would be reimbursed for. And the reason that that exists is because we recognize that when an employer takes on a brand new employee who hasn't yet had any work experience, we recognize that there's a commitment that the employer makes to supporting them with some additional training and so reimburse some of that wage cost. We're hoping to offset some of that, like additional training that that employer is going to need to take on.

Karina: In speaking with some other Landscape Ontario members who have sponsored apprentices, they speak so highly of it and can't imagine why more people don't take advantage of it because it's worked out so well for their company to bring apprentices in and support them through their learning journey.

You mentioned that you're pre-screening these candidates. How out of the 100 applicants are you choosing those who fill those 24 seats?

Courtney: I always try to let the students know that what we're really doing is supporting them with understanding more about the different careers so that they too can screen. So what we do is we talk a little bit about what the different careers are, what a typical day might look like, what some of the skills are.

And we're really looking for passion. And so a lot of the screening questions that we ask really are around the passion piece. So what we're trying to do is, is find 24 people that essentially are passionate but also have a good grasp of what they're about to start because it's a pretty big ask. What we're saying is, *hey, would you like to try out this career and are you willing to jump in and commit yourself full time to go back to college, to try out one of these work sites? And then to work for that employer for an additional year beyond training?* Because the way that the funding

works is we're supporting for the first year, most certainly, with making sure that the job seekers are doing well, and that school's going well, and we're supporting them with any challenges. We're all supporting them with client support funds so, for instance, if there's travel costs that may be a challenge, we can support them with that. We can support them with additional clothing needs. So we're supporting them with all these other things. But the other piece of the puzzle is that we actually need to support them for an additional year beyond the time that they've finished that apprenticeship level one training. So we're really supporting the employer and the apprentice to ensure that things are still running well.

What the reality is, is every now and then the job placement may not be the right match. And that can happen on either side. The employer might come back and say, *you know, the students are great. They're just not a great match. Perhaps they're looking for more of a design/build as a future plan but we're doing garden maintenance here.*

So there could be matches that we need to support them with, meaning we can help the apprentice secure a different job that might be a better match. And on that employer side, we can support them with coming up with a different match that perhaps better suits their needs as well.

So that support still, as I'm saying, continues for one other year. So we're really working with the employers and students for a two year period.

Karina: That's a real investment in time and energy, as well as money to help somebody succeed. And I imagine that to be pretty inspiring for the person receiving those supports; that would really encourage them to continue pursuing their career journey and education journey within the green trades. You said a full two years of these wraparound services. So, tuition is covered. Their books and tools required for the classes are covered. Transportation, if that's a barrier to them, might be covered. What about something like a single parent who was looking to get involved, would child care be covered?

Courtney: So, Karina, yes. Childcare is one of the supports that we offer as well, and so some of the screening questions that we ask are also letting people know and be aware that these supports exists because we don't want for there to ever be a closed door if someone's applying

and they're thinking, well, this course sounds fantastic and all this support is great. However, I'm a single parent with a child at home. I just could never do this, right?

What was wonderful about this ministry fund is the client support funding is built right into it, and the objective of the fund really is to support people that, more or less, would have challenges to get into one of these trades without some of this support, whether it be in the case management support from staff, whether it be in some of the some of the funding, whether it be with the transit support, whether it's with childcare funds. And so it really is a wonderful training fund.

Karina: It really does sound like that. Do you have any sense of what kind of demographic comes through this program? Is it typically one kind of person, or because of the strength of all of these supports, does that allow for a broader range of diverse people to come through the program?

Courtney: Karina, that is the best part of the fund is it is a diverse group of students and everyone's coming from different experiences, different areas. And what's really lovely about this fund is the group ends up being quite close because they're a tight knit group wherein we're putting them through something for two years together as a single group. And you'll find that the students end up supporting each peer as well. So not only is it wonderful that the work sites are seeing a new group of students being able to hire and train and so on. But the group themselves end up being very, very close. And it's always amazing because they're coming from different ages and different backgrounds and areas, and it's so special when they create such a strong bond. And it really turns into this family feel, and it's really quite special. But the diversity is wonderful. It is something you don't always see.

Again, as I mentioned, priority is really supporting people that more or less have had some challenges or barriers with getting into one of these trades.

Karina: So if somebody is out there listening to this episode right now, wondering if the green trades are right for them, what would you say to them directly that might help them understand that this pre-apprenticeship program might be a place for them?

Courtney: I would say it is a place for almost everyone, Karina. The different paths and the different areas that people can work in is so vast. This is one of the reasons why I enjoy working here is; there's a career path for pretty much anyone, and the case management support from the staff — we're able to support and help them sift and search so that we find the right career path with them.

And that support is being provided at no cost. So again, not only is the support available, but it's coming at no cost, which reduces any barrier. And, I said it previously, but it's really about getting that support to find the right job match. A lot of people out there when they're without work and they're trying to job search... Sometimes what happens is they take that first job offer, and sometimes that first job isn't right job, it's not the right fit. And so I think the power of the pre-apprenticeship fund is that their staff support for that two-year period to really support and help them find that right match so that it is something that they enjoy, that they look forward to, that they see them themselves in a future career.

That's something that the employers reap as well, right, that we're supporting them with finding that right match because the right match not only happens on the job seeker side, but on the employer side as well. They're hiring and they're sometimes hiring staff because they too, have a need. And they wish they hired a whole month ago. And so sometimes they'll hire someone that maybe they wouldn't have otherwise hired because they felt the pressure or stress. And so we're here to help them too.

With our staff, the most important thing that we can do is find the right match, which really means we need relationships that are quite strong and quite deep with the members and the employers as well as the student group. And so, yeah, that job match is, I think, one of the biggest perks.

Karina: Anybody who's job hunted will know how stressful that can be. And blind submitting a resumé or filling in those automated systems online only to wonder if it actually goes to a human, or writing out a meaningful cover letter that nobody reads... having that support fresh off of your education, so you're coming out feeling excited with what you've learned and not then having to face the slog of of the job hunt, what a relief that must be for them.

So when somebody comes to the program, they do the pre-apprenticeship. They've worked with an employer, hopefully successfully for the summer season... what's next? What do they do next?

Courtney: Sure. So the way that the Loyalist pre-app is running this year is the work placement piece actually occurs after some pre-employment training and after the health and safety training. The job placement is happening first, which would be during the summer and fall. And then they're doing their apprenticeship level one training during the winter term.

And then come spring, we're hoping that they return to their original work site. But as I've said, if that's not the right match, that provides us the ability to match them to a different site come spring. Then what happens is, from spring until the winter the following term, we're doing check-ins. We are following up. We may do one site visit. What we're doing is we're really supporting both the student at this point, but the employer as well. And so we are supporting both of them to ensure that the match is still going well.

Then we're supporting them with signing up the student as an actual apprentice at that point, and we're supporting them with making sure that they're getting signed into school so that their apprenticeship level two can be completed that following year. And so we're supporting them with that. And then we would support them as well with any challenges once they're in school. If there's additional challenges at that point, we support them through that as well.

Karina: Since the apprenticeship program is run through colleges, do you suppose that might scare away any students who feel like formal school isn't necessarily for them and so maybe aren't thinking of looking at colleges as a post-secondary option?

Courtney: Yeah. So there's some things that we've put into place through grants where we've got a [Hort Tech Hub](#). And what is on our Hort Tech Hub are resources and tools to support students who may be a little bit afraid of starting school and there's some additional learning tools there.

However, with the pre-apprenticeship training funds, we also have built in some tutoring and peer support training funds. And the college, too, is ready and set up through their student

service to support any student that has any learning challenges or starts to suffer in any one of the core training areas. And so that support is built into this fund.

But keeping in mind that the apprenticeship training at colleges are delivered by journeypersons and professionals that work within the actual trade, and so many of them are very skilled at teaching in a different way. And most of the training is happening as a hands-on learning, so those teachers and trainers are used to showing people and training on their own worksites with how to perform certain things. And that support is provided to them just through the ordinary college stream.

Karina: It really does sound like you've thought through all the potential barriers and are just knocking them down one by one, so that it opens the road for these participants. How would somebody get involved in the next cycle? I'm guessing that enrollment and consideration for this fall season has already begun. Would there be one again starting, say, in January or does somebody have to wait until next year.?

Courtney: Right now, the way that the ministry has their funding is you have to reapply each year. However, after your first year, you can apply for a multi-year term, of which it would be nice if we applied for and we did get approved. However, currently it is a year by year fund so someone would have to wait for a whole other year until we're able to then launch again.

But as I've said, it's not just Loyalist. Humber College also runs one. So most certainly I would encourage anyone hearing this or who is curious to contact any one of our staff. And we'd be happy to walk them through different dates and different schools and different, like, not only with the pre-apprenticeship training course, but as I've mentioned too we also offer the GROW training course. And that one is more provincewide. So we can reach more students through that GROW training course and then we can go the traditional way where maybe the apprenticeship route is something that they want to do, and we can sign them up and then they can go to their local college and take their apprenticeship level one training and their apprenticeship level two training.

Karina: And the benefits of gaining that official apprenticeship training and eventually Red Seal certification — what's the benefit in that when you could just go work those jobs without that certification?

Courtney: One thing that I see is our industry is so vast and for a lot of people that end up starting work and they're working and they might work for two years or even three years. And, they're doing maybe just one specialty or one core area. And they may not have been actually exposed to the sheer vast skill sets that our industry has.

And so what, what I worry about is if, let's say, they're working as a gardener and after two years or even three, maybe they're not enjoying that role anymore. What worries me is that that employee then is just lost. They've probably quit and they've left our whole field where they didn't realize that maybe design might have really spoken to their core strengths.

And so going this apprenticeship route means that they're gaining exposure to all the different skill sets and all the different core areas that someone might be able to work within. And so I'd like to think that what we're doing is keeping our workforce in-house so people see that there's many different career paths and they don't necessarily have to exit our entire trade; that they're able to explore and grow within our trade.

So that's something as someone that cares a lot, that's one area that I really like stressing to the employers because that's something we all worry about because the shortage of finding skilled workers has existed for such a long time that it reduces the risk of losing any skilled worker, if they know that they can just stay within this trade, but work within other paths.

For the actual employee, I think there's many different perks, but one of them is learning a craft and getting really good at it. I think everyone deep down inside wants to be really good at what it is that person does. And so I think as you're in school and as you learn, you're growing and you're expanding some of your own limits, you're also expanding a great deal of your knowledge.

And then I think that a lot of that effort goes back into the actual work. And so you end up a happier employee. Your clients probably love a lot of the work being done because you're now working with passion and skill set.

I think that there are many different perks there but I think becoming a skilled journeyman is becoming a skilled craftsman and that's something a lot of people would take a great deal of pride in.

Karina: That's certainly high on the hierarchy of personal needs. Once we have that security and our safety taken care of, then to grow towards that self fulfillment, that's a really rewarding journey as well.

Landscape Ontario represents this broad mix and the community of landscape technicians and designers and horticulturalists and people in all different sectors of the trades — what kind of membership or involvement can these apprentices and pre-apprentices have in connection with Landscape Ontario?

Courtney: What we try to do at our level is engage any new worker. So any time there is an event, we're promoting that with our students or with anyone new but what we're trying to do is attach them to existing members and people that work within the trade so that they can find someone that's in a like-minded state and that they can connect with and grow with.

Any student gains a membership with LO that is free, and so again, we're restricting any barrier and while they're a member, they can get involved in all sorts of other areas.

Karina: And there are lots of ways to get involved. Anyone who has any involvement with Landscape Ontario will know that there are tons of events and opportunities to network and connect with peers in the trades, and share lots of great ideas.

Courtney, thanks again for coming on the podcast today, sharing all that you know about the apprenticeship program, the exciting new opportunities at Loyalist, and really digging into the benefits and barrier reduction opportunities that all of these programs have to offer.

So I hope that encourages people to pay attention to the opportunities that Landscape Ontario is offering.

Courtney: Thank you so much. This has been a great, great experience.



Music transition

EXTRO:

Karina: So there you have it. Free training and support to help you find a job in landscaping. This is a trade for everyone and there are so many paths for you to take. The hardest part might be deciding which one to explore next.

As always, I have posted a full transcription for today's interview on this episode's web page at landscapeontario.com/podcast, as well as any other relevant links.

And you know what? I'd so love it if you shared this episode to help more people learn about the free training opportunities facilitated through Landscape Ontario.

Together, we can grow a greener future.

Resources relevant to this episode

[Hort Tech Hub](#)

[GROW Programs](#)

grow@landscapeontario.com

[Pre-apprenticeship at Loyalist College](#)

preapprenticeship@landscapeontario.com

[Other training opportunities through Landscape Ontario](#)