

Landscape Ontario Podcast: Joe Steeves

Transcription

Intro:

Hello, you're listening to the Landscape Ontario podcast. My name is Karina Sinclair. Thank you so much for joining us! Today I'll be talking with Joe Steeves, a young man from Moncton, New Brunswick who exemplifies how a passion for plants can overcome physical challenges and anxiety. Joe got his first taste of working in the green sector when he got a part time job in a Superstore garden centre. That led to a high school co-op placement at a local nursery, which went above and beyond to accommodate Joe's disability while sparking a light. And as Joe is about to tell us, that was where his confidence bloomed.

Interview:

Karina: Welcome to the Landscape Ontario podcast, Joe. I'm really excited to introduce you to our listeners. What would you like our audience to know about you?

Joe: My name is Joe Steeves, and I have a really, really great passion in the horticulture sector. And as soon as I got exposed to this sector, I just fell right in love. So my journey began at MacArthur's on a co-op program ran through the high school, and I really got my foot in the door there with an 11 or 12 week program through school, I went to Riverview High. And I would go into MacArthur's in the morning from my co-op block. And I really got a feel for the workforce. And I really clicked and gelled with my coworkers. And they gave me patience, dedication and support. because of my disability. I have cerebral palsy. So they give me a lot of patience and dedication. And I learned a lot about myself there. And during the day, I would do plant care, management and retail, dealing with a lot of customers. So I really got my hands dirty with the soil and I just loved it and I fell right in love with the sector.

Karina: That's really great that you got such a young start at it.

Joe: Yes.

Karina: Now, for those who might not be familiar with cerebral palsy, what kind of unique challenges does that present to you that you have to deal with in the workplace?

Joe: What cerebral palsy is is when you're born unfortunately you lose a lot of, like in my case I lost a lot of oxygen at birth, like in my brain, like brain trauma. So I had to be born really fast. So I lost a lot of oxygen at birth and relating to support in the workforce, MacArthur's was just really good at understanding. I was very outgoing at the time, and they actually turned me into such a social person. And so they gave me the patience and everything I needed to succeed. Because when you have cerebral palsy, like especially multiple tasks in a row, I would tend to forget and I need to pay even harder attention. And just those neuro-pathways, um, I just need a little extra reassurance of what I'm doing. And so that was when I logged what to do when my phone and inventory, take a bunch of pictures. And I learned a lot

about myself through MacArthur. Now I'm working at Farmer Brown's, so I learned a lot about myself through the co-op program and spending time at MacArthur's.

Karina: That's wonderful that they were so supportive. Tell me more about how once you started practicing the deadheading and pruning of plants, the kind of benefit that provided you.

Joe: Oh, my gosh, I would be here all day explaining to you. It was so, so awesome. When I was pruning and cleaning the plants, like a lot of the tropicals, it's really those fine motor hand movements with the pruners. And so basically it was a little rough at first. Like I was very shaky and stuff. But just those hand movements and my muscle memory and the fine motor, like giving my hands the work that they need. And I built up a lot of strength at McArthur's and plant care is so, so good for my fine motor. It was great.

Karina: And that's something that you've been working on since you were a child, right? That's something that has always been there for you. And now working with the plants on a consistent basis has made a major improvement.

Joe: Oh, yeah, exactly. Like when I was young, we used to have a private OT (occupational therapist) come to the house and I'd work on little games with them. Like a lot of pieces and stuff like that just to work on those hand movements and writing and things like that. So being at MacArthur's tending to those plants all day was basically therapy and I found a really marked improvement and everyday tasks got easier. And just like it's so, so good for me because it's my passion, but it's also really benefiting me in life.

Karina: I love to hear that. Now, working in landscaping and horticulture can be really physically demanding and require people to follow proper safety techniques for safety. How did MacArthur's Nurseries, which happens to be a member of Landscape New Brunswick, accommodate your physical challenges so you could contribute while avoiding injury?

Joe: Well, this is a very, very cool question you asked me. A very good question. They had a lot of inclusion at MacArthur's. So like, for example, when I was watering a plant, let's say my dexterity, I had to work on my dexterity a lot and I would be hunched over a lot during the time I was watering and things like that. So they actually made my own personalized watering cart. So it was a cart that had a grill and a two tier cart with the like bucket to catch the excess draining water so I would just set each plant down, water it, and the excess would come out the drain holes and into the basket. And just wonderful, wonderful people there like Thomas and Ashley really changed my life because they're the ones that had this wonderful idea. Thomas to make my own watering station. He made it for me and he put a spout on it so I could walk the cart up as soon as it would get full and then drain it in the draining system at MacArthur's, it was perfect.

Karina: Well, that requires, you know, a lot of thought and consideration from the employer to see how they could help somebody who really wants to do the work and set up a way that might be a little different from somebody else, but was the perfect way for you to contribute.

Joe: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah, for sure. It just made my every day a lot easier. And everybody's so awesome in there. Like, they just gave me the time I needed and was so supportive. And every day I would go in there with a smile on my face because all of them, they really, really understood. Tony, who hired me as a is a great, great guy and Trudy, too, another manager in there really took me under their wing and really, really trusted me. And I learned a lot about myself. Now, like, working at a few more jobs, like, that confidence is always staying with me, and that's because of MacArthur's. I can't say enough good things about them because they literally put the information and like, just I've learned a lot about myself to succeed in this sector I love.

Karina: Well, that's a pretty powerful moment for them to have been able to set you on a path that resonates with you so well. What do you think makes the difference between somebody just giving you a job and somebody making you feel like a valued member of the team?

Joe: Well it speaks volumes as the company because somebody with cerebral palsy like I do, like I had to overcome challenges all my life and them hiring me was just just the great, great confidence booster that I wanted to experience in the workforce. And thanks to them hiring me and I got some really good, good relationships and that balance, the workplace balance to really get to know what I need in a workforce and they welcomed with open arms for me to go on and achieve my dreams.

Karina: Wow. I really hope that everybody has an opportunity like that. So now you're working at Farmer Brown's Greenhouse, which offers a range of services like greenhouse, nursery, custom planters, garden maintenance, commercial properties. What sorts of responsibilities did they start you off with and what other parts of the business are you curious to learn about?

Joe: So it is so cool what I'm learning out there. So I go in and most of the days I'm working with a sowing machine, like I, I've had a really, really good passion about starting from seedling seedlings and just working with the sowing machine. Like, I would be filling a lot of five inch planters in plastic trays and filling them repeatedly and stacking them up in stacks. So you would feed them through the conveyor belt. And basically this sowing machine, you cut open bales and bales of dirt and mix it with water and the solution fertilizer and stuff like that. You feed the trays through and the soil feeds into the pods and then you lift them off and go to your transplanting station. And that's where I transplant and I, I absolutely love transplanting. Getting my hands dirty, feeling and smelling the soil is just awesome. It's really, really great because it's so, so therapeutic for me.

Karina: Well, it sounds like being grounded in nature is that tangible thing that really makes you feel at home while you're at work.

Joe: Yeah. I've always been a big time nature guy since I was basically born. I can remember being a little baby and I was getting so, so excited every time the wind blew. Like, I would just put my face up to the wind and and just like I've always been really inspired and really at ease when I'm in nature. It really grounds me.

Karina: Now I've heard that after working a full day at the nursery, you come home and spend hours tending to your own plant collection.

Joe: Yes,

Karina: Tell me.

Joe: I do.

Karina: Tell me more about that. Do you have a garden? A greenhouse?

Joe: So I bought my own greenhouse at MacArthur's because I was interested in this sector so much and found my passion. So I bought a greenhouse and I have a couple of raised garden beds I've put in there. Last year I grew lettuce, carrots, chili peppers, green peppers. I even grew potatoes in a grow bag. So that's like a burlap bag on the outside. But inside is insulated, so it's really cool. You take seed potatoes, submerge them in dirt and cover the dirt while the plant's growing. And long story short, it was as tall as me or even almost taller. And it was my first year of growing. And I got a total of ten potatoes out of it. And that was my first time ever experiencing that. And I grew cucumbers, tomatoes, peppers, chili peppers, lettuce, carrots. My lettuce and carrots I started from seed, but my tomato plants, cucumber plants and chili peppers were all started, I just put them in bigger grow pots and mixed with that three in one fertilizer with peat moss and everything you need to grow vegetables properly. And after a big, long day of work, I in this sector, I love it so much, I go out and tend to my garden because it's so, so therapeutic just with the sun on your face and just watering, being one with your plants and with grocery prices right now, like, it's such an awesome sector to be so interested in because you can grow your own produce and it's really, really a great, great passion to get into.

Karina: No kidding. So you've got the groceries covered. How about ornamentals? Do you like flower gardening as well? Or houseplants?

Joe: Yes, I. I love houseplants. When I started at MacArthur's on a co-op program, I had one houseplant. Now I have over 60. And any time they need care. I'm always there and watering them and tending to them and cleaning them up because again, it's so, so therapeutic. Tropicals and annuals and perennials and outdoor garden, plants are a lot different care wise, but they're still a plant. And obviously I just love tending to it, it's so relaxing and soothes me.

Karina: Now, I've heard a lot of people have been helpful by sharing some supplies and tools with you, helping build a greenhouse and such. What do you think that says about the kind of people who work in this green profession?

Joe: Well, it just goes without saying, like everybody who's interested in this sector, I know people are all different but this part was incredible. So I have to shout out to Cormier Landscaping and Property Management. They came and put down patio stones and laid out concrete blocks to put on my greenhouse. And the crew was fantastic. And my dad and uncle helped me build a pergola for it. And I put a bunch of hanging baskets around my greenhouse, and it's just so pretty and comforts me so much.

Karina: I love it. I hope we'll be able to share some of the photos of this on the page that goes with your recording of the podcast so that our listeners can take a

look at what you've been growing. I hear you've also been selling some propagation for a good cause.

Joe: I've started propagating my plants. I'm just in the starter phase of it, so there's still a lot to learn and everything like that. I kind of know the basics of propagating for now and I'm looking to get some more experience about propagating, but a lot of my plants now I have at home I can start them in water and they'll root with the rooting powder, some of them. It was a great learning experience for me. I took a super rare tropical plant I have to a friend that taught me a lot about the nodes in propagating plants. And she helped me bring it back to life too.

Karina: So not only did you bring it back to life, but expanded it so that it could continue to grow another in other pots.

Joe: Yeah, exactly. And it's so interesting. By knowing that, like, a node is basically a a new bump, like a bump in the middle of the stem and some plants, not all, but some plants you can cut by the node and replant them in the rooting agent and with the proper care, with supplies and everything, you can actually make new plants, which I find so fascinating.

Karina: That is fascinating. Are you thinking of selling these or are you keeping them all for yourself?

Joe: Well, I'm just going to start off for now. I've had some experience and success, so you never know. Maybe down the road that something I look at because I, I do really enjoy it.

Karina: Fantastic. So what are your next steps, Joe? What does your dream future in the green sector look like?

Joe: So my dream image or story or whatever the future has for me. I love it at Farmer Brown's and I'm really looking to get one on one experience, which I totally have; I love it out there. I'm transplanting. I learned how to operate a sowing machine, which I find so cool. So in the summer time, I actually tended to some friends' garden beds, and I did that kind of as a side hustle when I wasn't working and still was with Youth the Future, which is a great employment program that got me on this road to Farmer Brown's, so I would go and clean up people's garden beds for them, weed them and clip them and things like that.

Karina: What would you like to learn about next? Do you want to dive into learning about the horticulture side or about the equipment side?

Joe: I'm very, very interested in, like, little seedlings, like planting from seed. And I already tested it out in my own greenhouse. But I'm just so fascinated by watering the little seedlings, starting them in, like the corrugated trays. We actually have a germination room at Farmer Brown's and I really would like to, down the road, get some one-on-one experience in there. Like I'm so fascinated by that.

Karina: Joe, your enthusiasm for this is palpable. I can tell that you are so excited just to support these little tender shoots of life. That's very exciting. Do you have any final words of advice for others who might want to explore a career in

landscaping or horticulture, but think that they can't handle the physical challenges?

Joe: I just say, like, if you really, really like this sector, I know I do. It's very, very therapeutic. And like I said to my coworkers today, like when I was transplanting, I wasn't even keeping track of time and just just was like, 'Whoa! It's noon already? It feels like I just started!' I just get lost in it. I love it. It's so therapeutic. And anybody who wants to start it, if you have nerves, like that's totally natural. Even I was a nervous wreck my first day, but I tried to spin it positively. And I really, really thought in my head, I'm there to learn. It's so fun and I just really like this sector. And if you're worried about not understanding it right away, just go after it because it's a great sector. And I've already learned so much, and I absolutely love it.

Karina: Well, what more is there to say than that? I think that is a perfect spot to wrap up right there, Joe. Thank you so much for sharing your thoughts and opinions and your passion about plants with us today.

Joe: Yeah, for sure. I had fun.

Karina: I'm so glad. I enjoyed every moment of it and I am excited to see what happens with your career next.

Joe: Awesome. Thank you so much for having me.

Extro:

If you're interested in learning more about some of the programs and agencies that can help connect you to a green career, be sure to visit the webpage for this episode. We'll include a link to the Landscape Ontario Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging Committee page for more resources as well.

Thank you so much for listening to the Landscape Ontario podcast. We hope you'll subscribe to catch new episodes every month.