

Landscape Ontario Podcast: Liana Demarais

Transcription

Intro:

Thanks for joining the Landscape Ontario Podcast. I'm your host, Karina Sinclair. One of the big pain points for a lot of landscaping companies over the years has been labour supply. We've heard time and time again how difficult it is to find qualified staff. Well, today we're going to talk to Liana Demarais, who took over her family business a few years ago. Plantscape has been serving the Windsor/ Essex County for about 30 years, and Liana is a member of the Windsor chapter of Landscape Ontario. In the last few years, Liana has incorporated apprenticeship as part of her employee recruitment and retention strategy. And as we're about to hear, it's brought fresh ideas and a deeper sense of job satisfaction to her company.

Interview:

Karina: Welcome to the podcast, Liana. I'm really excited that you could join us here on the Landscape Ontario podcast today.

Liana: Thank you for having me.

Karina: My pleasure. Before we get right into the topic today, tell me a little bit about your company.

Liana: So Plantscape is the name of my company and we have been proud Landscape Ontario members for about eight years now. We, my dad actually, opened this company in 1976 and we started as an indoor tropical plant service provider in the Windsor and Essex County market and the company has just grown and evolved to be a full serve design build landscape construction company that it is today.

Karina: Oh, that sounds amazing. That's one of those success stories that we love to hear at Landscape Ontario. you're doing something right, obviously.

Liana: Yes, we try to.

Karina: Fantastic. So I've heard you've had some success with sponsoring employees through the Horticultural Technician Apprenticeship Program. Before we get into their stories, I'd like to know how you heard about the program in the first place.

Liana: I had heard about the program just through some of my visits at Congress and visiting and taking some courses up in Milton. But I'll say I really kind of dug my teeth into the apprenticeship program after I had successfully registered some of my staff in the Landscape Ontario GROW Program. They came back from the GROW Program and started asking me some questions about the apprenticeship. So it was a bit of an evolution, but I was hearing snippets kind of throughout my journeys with Landscape Ontario.

Karina: So that progression from the GROW Program to the next level apprenticeship. How did Landscape Ontario help you with that whole process?

Liana: They did everything, to be honest with you. I sent some questions. Even the first time I registered my first apprentice, I still don't think I really understood what I was doing because they did all of the paperwork. So I felt a little bit blind in it. But at the end of the day, it was a great experience and I think I just expected that I would have to do more.

Karina: That's something I wanted to ask you about. Does it seem like it was going to be onerous or hard to get into? Do you think that's something that scares people away from trying it?

Liana: I'm not sure if that's what scares it away, but I do remember thinking to myself, if I have to deal with some level of the Ontario government or a ministry and sometimes those websites, I don't understand the language or there's different log-ons and paperwork can be a bit of a challenge. We also use the federal Canada Summer Jobs and that paperwork can sometimes be a bit overwhelming. So I was worried and when I filled out literally two pieces of paper, I felt like, am I missing something? Why isn't there more for me to fill out or do? So that was the piece that at least for the first Apprentice, I really didn't even understand how or why this was happening, because it was just too easy.

Karina: It's funny that we're suspicious of things when they go the way they should.

Liana: I wish we could come up with something where Landscape Ontario could help me with that Summer Jobs program because that, if anybody's listening to this and has done Summer Jobs, I can honestly say this is night and day totally different from an experience as an employer.

Karina: Wow. That says a lot. Okay, so now you're using the apprenticeship program; now that you've discovered how easy it is to move through the paperwork, how do you identify a good candidate that you'd like to sponsor?

Liana: To say that I'm passionate about apprenticeship at this point would be kind of an understatement. I think I'm literally a die hard champion of this apprenticeship program now. I don't necessarily try to identify a good candidate. I talk about the apprenticeship program in every single interview. My team knows about it. This is something that is active within my company now. We try and just constantly find people for this program. I believe in it wholeheartedly now. I believe everyone in Ontario that owns a landscaping company has somebody, whether it's a current staff member or a potential new hire, that would be a great candidate for this program. All three of my current apprenticeships come from different walks of life and are in the program for different reasons, and how they came about are all different circumstances. So I don't think trying to come up with a set of criteria is necessarily something you need to do. You just need to embrace this as something that our industry offers and start talking about it. Reach out to me if you need to, because you'll probably feel the same lost feeling I felt. But once you kind of get your first apprentice onboarded, the work is really done at the apprentice level and with Landscape Ontario's support, there's very little for me to do.

Karina: Well, I can't imagine a better testimonial than that right there. What kinds of qualities have you noticed about your employees who have been through the program now? What do you think they add to your business?

Liana: There is definitely a higher level of engagement. Long-term buy-in for sure. And I think it just creates a sense that they have a company or maybe it's me, the owner of the company that's just supporting them in their development. For some of these candidates, that's the first time in their life that they've experienced support. And if I can be real for a moment, you know, landscaping, I think, lends itself to — especially an entry level landscaping candidate — lends itself to a young adult, maybe has not been an all-star in high school or in their education. They sometimes have substance abuse problems or childhood trauma and coming to work for a company that offers them maybe some health benefits and a career path within 90 days can literally be life changing for these individuals. And their level of gratitude and belief in my company is unmatched.

Karina: Wow, the empowerment that would come from knowing that somebody believes in you

Liana: Yeah.

Karina: and wants to help give you the resources to succeed. I mean, that's powerful stuff.

Liana: Yeah. Look, these people are good people, and they want to do good things. They just need a plan. And I'm happy to support that plan for the betterment of my company, for sure.

Karina: We talked a while ago about this and you had mentioned that you find some of these apprentices come with new innovative ideas.

Liana: Yeah, especially after the educational component of the program. My first apprentice, Roch, has completed both Level One and Level Two education within the program. And both times that he came back in the springtime, he had just ideas and pages of notes because he had worked for me the previous season. And he came back with all of these ideas on how to improve some of our processes. And just how to be a better company. And we implemented some, not all. And then he went back to school two years later. We had a bit of some COVID delays. So he was in school this past winter and again, just came back, texted me from London going like, 'when can we sit down? When can we chat? I've got more ideas.' And he's just all in.

Karina: That's amazing. So let's get into your employees a little bit more because they've all come to you from different backgrounds, right?

Liana: Yeah, they absolutely did. And all three of their stories are just so different. And it really speaks to what I said earlier about not looking for specific qualities. You're looking for just the right fit for something long term. So I'll start with Roch. He was our first apprentice. He actually came to us from a referral of an existing employee, and strangely enough, that friend of his is no longer with the company. He ended up pursuing a different career mid-way through the season. So Roch ended up taking his job. But Roch had recently graduated from the University of Windsor with a degree in environmental studies, and he had graduated in April and he started working for me in around July. He quickly decided after graduating that working in an office or a lab was just not going to be for him. So he thought when he applied for the job, he was just going to kind of come in, cut grass for the summer and work with his buddy. And during his interview, I chatted with him about the apprenticeship program. Again, I had not signed anybody up at that point, so I was a little bit blind and not really sure what I was offering, but I thought it might be a fit for him if he wanted to consider landscaping as a career. So I chatted with him a few times, followed up with him throughout the season, and it wasn't until the end of the season that we finally made the leap and signed him up. I think the reason he made the leap was at the end of the season, he was reluctant to go back and find a job in an office or a lab. And this was his ticket to making landscaping a career, getting a Red Seal apprenticeship, and converting his environmental studies degree into something that he would just love to do day in and day out.

Apprentice Number Two came a couple of years later, actually, that's Carson. He came and interviewed with me at the end of season in 2021. He was a young kid, had graduated high school, and he was unhappy working for a local concrete company. He just wasn't sure about post-secondary. I had asked him some questions about what the future held for him and where he

thought he wanted to go, and he really just had no idea. He expressed that essentially he just wanted to work and save some money for school. And I almost got the sense that he felt obligated to answer the question that he aspired for post-secondary to get the job, but that he ultimately really just wanted to work. So we chatted about apprenticeship and he seemed somewhat interested. But I hired him on the spot and he came to work the next day. A few weeks later I went and I was doing kind of some of my regular visits to some job sites, and I saw him with a wheelbarrow and I stopped and asked him how he was liking the job and he said he loved working for Plantscape. And I said, well, you know, 'did you give any more thought to that apprenticeship program?' And he's like, 'Yeah, you know, this is something that I think I would like.' So at the end of the season, again, he came in and we chatted and he brought in all the paperwork he needed as far as his grade 12 and his social insurance number and stuff like that. We sent the paperwork off to Landscape Ontario.

Apprentice Three is probably my most favourite story. This just kind of speaks to the evolution of what this can do for your company. So I have a special section on my website under Careers for apprenticeship and Apprentice Three actually emailed in this past spring and she applied for a job as an apprentice through my website. I emailed her back right away because this was the first time I ever had anybody apply through the website for the apprenticeship program. So we emailed her right away and told her all the stuff she needed to bring with her to her interview on the premise that we would potentially be hiring her as an apprentice.

Karina: At this point, she didn't have any in-class or any on-the-job training? It was just she saw that that was an opportunity and it attracted her to your company?

Liana: Yeah. So when I met with her, she actually told me that she had been working for a landscaping company for the last few years. Now, she had gone to school for something else and had a part time job somewhere else. So the landscaping portion was not actually on her resume, but she had been working for the last five years during the summer for another landscaping company that had actually just recently closed up. And she was looking for a company to kind of plant her feet. And she had Google searched "the oldest landscaping company in Windsor." And Plantscape popped up.

Karina: Wow.

Liana: When she went to the career section, she saw the apprenticeship program and she told me in the interview she knew right away that this is where she was supposed to be. She had brought all the paperwork. So we basically stopped the interview at that point. I photocopied all of the stuff she needed. I sent it off to Landscape Ontario. This was in March. We gave her an April start date. We

got everything signed, sealed and ready to go. And the funniest part about this is she accepted the position and the apprenticeship on the spot. She left and on her first day in April, she came to me because she realized we had completely skipped the wage portion of the interview and she was here not knowing at all what she was going to be paid by the hour.

Karina: So that's a leap of faith.

Liana: If that doesn't convince you to be a sponsor employer of apprenticeship, I honestly don't know what would. Her belief and desire to work here was no longer dependent on whether she was making \$18 or \$25. She knew she had something long term here and that we were going to believe in her and support her. And this is where she wanted to be.

Karina: Wow. I love that each of those individuals, they all have completely different reasons for being there

Liana: Yeah.

Karina: but that they're bringing that level of passion and commitment because you've taken the time to demonstrate you're invested in them. You want to support them and provide them with the tools to succeed. What a great environment for them to find themselves in.

Liana: Yeah. Yeah. And it really does. It trickles out into the crews into, you know, the entire field staff. Everyone in the office knows about apprenticeship. Everyone out in the field knows about apprenticeship. And everyone knows at Plantscape who our apprentices are.

Karina: Now how about your clients? Do you think it's important for your clients to know that you've got Red Seal-certified people on your crews?

Liana: Absolutely. And we champion that in the market that we are a sponsor employer. It goes over really well, too, with those clients that have kids at home in the 20 to 30 range when they hear that there's a local small business that's supporting youth. Yeah, it's important to clients. And we definitely speak about it.

Karina: What are your next steps for growing your business? Do you think you'll continue to sponsor and seek out these apprentices?

Liana: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, we're definitely in a growth strategy right now at Plantscape in the last 24 months. I've acquired 26 acres and my intentions to continue to grow this business. I've got

big plans to start a nursery and a tree farm. So we will absolutely be sponsoring more apprentices. And I'm looking forward to the kind of promotion and graduation of my current apprentices so that I can take on even more. But this year we actually set a goal as a management team to make sure that we're going to sponsor two apprentices per year for the next five years. So my management team knows we need to find two. We've got one for 2023 already and we're on the lookout for who number two is going to be.

Karina: What advice do you have for others who might worry that it's too complicated or that it's not for them? How do you encourage others to consider bringing this in?

Liana: It's just easy. I don't know. It's not complicated, it's not expensive. And there's almost no paperwork. There's literally no reason I can think of for somebody not to have an apprentice. Even if you're a small, four-person landscaping company and in a small family business, at this point, you can actually make money. There's so many grants available as well. I think it's any apprentice signed up after July 1st of 2022, the sponsor employer can receive a grant up to \$10,000 and a maximum of two apprentices. So, I mean, we signed Apprentice Three up right away and within, I think, eight days we had \$10,000 direct deposited into our company account. So I mean, I don't know what kind of business would turn their back on \$20,000 like that. It's not complicated. Landscape Ontario takes care of everything. So if you have questions, there's an entire building full of people ready to answer your questions. And ready to do all the paperwork. Literally, all I do is once a year I get an email that asks me to send in proof of insurance and my current WSIB and a one-pager with a list of my current trainers and my current apprentices. And they do literally everything else for me.

Karina: Sounds like you've really streamlined your hiring and your career progression professional development program at work. And are you still making use of the GROW Program as well?

Liana: Yep, absolutely. So for some of my staff that maybe are hesitant on the apprenticeship program, we offer the GROW Program to them as a starting point. And at this point, I'm in Windsor. And the closest TDA (training delivery agent) for me and my apprentices is London. So there is a barrier there for some of my staff where they're just not sure where they would live or how they would make it with, you know, having kids back home or housing concerns. So they're just not sure they can commit to going to London for the educational component. So we offer the GROW Program and that's a great starting point for these candidates that are on the fence.

Karina: Well, I'm certainly glad to hear that all these resources that are available are being used and turning out to be of great success. Is there anything else that you think people need to know either about Plantscape, about your amazing apprentices or the apprenticeship program in general?

Liana: No, I think that just about covers it. I just really believe in this program. I guess as a final, I would just offer up my name and my email if you have any questions. I'm a bit of a die hard on this one. Like I said, there's a building full of people that are far more versed in this than I am. But if you want some real talk from a business owner, feel free to reach out by phone or email to me directly.

Karina: That's fantastic. We'll include those in the episode notes and I think that's a good spot for us to leave it there. So thank you so much, Liana, for sharing your stories today. I really appreciate it.

Liana: Thank you so much.

Extro:

If you want to boost the skills and knowledge of your workforce by participating in the Horticultural Technician Apprenticeship Program, be sure to reach out to our apprenticeship team here at Landscape, Ontario. They've got all the answers to your questions and can make it super easy to sponsor apprentices at your company. Or check out the website HorticultureTechnician.ca There you'll find videos, testimonials and details about financial incentives for both employers and employees.

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

Want to talk to Liana Demarais about her experiences with the Horticultural Technician Apprenticeship Program? She can be reached at:
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