

Landscape Ontario Podcast: Life is Better Outside, Scott Wentworth

Host: Karina Sinclair

Guests: Scott Wentworth

Transcription

INTRO:

Welcome to the Landscape Ontario Podcast. I'm your host, Karina Sinclair.

Life is better outside. Scott Wentworth, owner and president of Wentworth Landscapes in Picton, Ontario says this is what drives him and his team. Their mission is to craft outdoor spaces that set the scene for building memories, celebrating milestones, and spending more time in nature.

This message is certainly resonating with their clients. Wentworth Landscapes has earned a 4.8 star rating on the design site Houzz.com and has won "Best of" service awards four years in a row.

Speaking of awards, Wentworth Landscapes won the Employer of Choice award at the Landscape Ontario Awards of Excellence in 2021. In 2023, the company won several more Awards, including two of the best in category awards: the Dunington-Grubb Award for the project with the most outstanding and highest overall score in the construction category, AND the Don Salivan Grounds Management award, which recognizes skill that protects or enhances the value of original landscape investments.

The accolades don't stop there. It seems the employees at Wentworth Landscapes love supporting this mission too, judging by reviews on the job board website, Indeed.com. Comments such as "Best company I've ever worked for," "they encourage personal development and help you achieve career goals", "this company sets the bar for how employees should be treated", and my favourite "it gives me a sense of purpose and belonging."

That's the enviable company culture Scott Wentworth has fostered, and he's joining us on the podcast to talk about **how** to infuse their mission in everything his team does, and more importantly — **why**.

If you're looking for inspiration to build a fantastic culture at your company, stick around.

Music Interlude

Karina: Welcome to the Landscape Ontario podcast. Scott I'm so excited that you could join us here today. Very happy to do so. Now, first, I'd like to set up for our audience that maybe they don't know about you, but if they don't, I don't know where they've been. But let's tell everybody a little bit more about your business.

Scott: Certainly, we are based in Picton, Ontario, in the heart of Prince Edward County. Our company's in its 33rd year at this point. We're landscape design/build/maintenance. We also do swimming pools. We also do building construction and renovation as well. So we've got a team of over 100 people at this point from landscape architects, designers, craftsmen for all really the major trades that are involved in landscaping and building. So we have just a wonderful team that keeps very busy down here.

Karina: Now, that's a lot of people. Are they on staff all year round or is a lot of that seasonal?

Scott: We're about 60 people full time around the year and then everybody else's is seasonal full time.

Karina: It's amazing for a small area; Picton is a beautiful small town in southern Ontario. But to have the ability to have that many people on staff and serve that niche area, that's very impressive.

Scott: We have another office and yard in Kingston, a larger market there. But certainly Prince Edward County with the amount of tourists that that come over the course of the year, a county of 26,000 expands to over 100,000 on any given weekend during the summertime.

Karina: Well, I'm sure everyone that comes to the County gets to admire the beautiful landscapes that you've installed.

Now, speaking of which, last year at the Landscape Ontario Awards of Excellence, your company came away with armfuls of hardware. I remember seeing you walk by and in all the plaques in your arms, you could barely contain them all because you had won so many for your amazing designs. So that's quite the reputation you have amongst your peers. I also hear that you have an amazing reputation for the culture of your company. I'd love to hear more about how you infuse it throughout your messaging, throughout your staff, so people know that you are a really great company.

Scott: Well, thank you for bringing that up, because that's something that's really, really important to myself and our entire team, and we refer to it as that intentionally.

It's not our company, it's our team; members of our team. And really using the sports analogy in many ways really refers to the composition and how we think of one another, especially when you've got a company that has a lot of diversity, as this whole profession does. People with with skill sets in all sorts of different areas, building the acknowledgment of those skillsets, the respect for it, and building a culture that really looks to amalgamate all those things together...

One of the lines we use in our team meetings all the time is “no **one** of us is as smart as **all** of us,” and we really live that in really trying to gain from one another's knowledge as we apply that to the things that we built and the processes that we use to build them.

Karina: So when you're onboarding some new staff or people who are still junior in their career, what sorts of things are you doing to help them feel those same values?

Scott: Great question, and there's multiple ways that we do that. So we have a very comprehensive onboarding process of going through the company, introducing people. I think the real secret sauce from that comes from our full team meeting. So if they're joining us for the first time, we have a startup meeting, as most companies do, and that's getting all 100 people in the same room at the same time, which, post-COVID, that's a really special thing to be able to do again. We do this again through the year with celebration events to really mark the things that we've accomplished, the goals that we've achieved over the course of the year. And then our wrap-up meeting, which is also our startup meeting, again in December, which is a bit of a show and tell meeting as well, where we have slideshows of projects in process and people can say, 'yes, that's what we were working on,' because very few of us get to see all of the projects that we're working on.

So then new members of our company get to see the company in it's entirety. Part of the process, as well, is that we really work together on establishing our goals, what the actions are going to achieve those goals. And then we how we track them to be able to see our progress in achieving them, as well.

Karina: You were telling me once about some of your early days of your own training and experience and described it as being European trained, even though you were here is still in Canada. Tell me a bit about how that influenced the way you train others.

Scott: Very much so. I was very blessed to get started with Leslie Solty and Sons, which many members of LO will remember them as one of the founding companies of Landscape Ontario many decades ago.

And I benefited so much from what I perceive as a European-style apprenticeship. So I worked with craftsmen that were trained in Europe in the field and in design reviews and in teaching me really how to effectively design for people. So in working in the field, I worked with horticulturalists, I worked with stonemasons, and they taught me ---

We did talk a lot and this is really infused in our culture: 'Start with why,' you know, why are we doing things as opposed to the what? And I really felt that was intuitive to those lessons and it taught me how landscapes are brought together. This is why we mix the mortar this way. This is why we cut the stone in this way. This is why we layout plants this way, and this is how we do it efficiently and effectively.

So as with so many of us in this profession, we've learned from wonderful mentors that those lessons carry on and then are multiplied to others from that grounding that we have.

Karina: You also carry a lot of those values into how you approach your clients and not just how you communicate with them, but again, why you're creating spaces for them. So that's going to lead me to your Come Alive Outside program. Tell me what prompted you to start it and what do you hope to accomplish with it?

Scott: Well, going back to the origins of Come Alive Outside, we were working alongside Jim Paluch and Bob Coulter from JP Horizon's, landscape consultants that have been working throughout North America. And Jim had come to me with this idea of the landscape profession having a stewardship position in being able to get kids, get families, get communities back outside, engaging with nature and living healthier lifestyles, and really that becoming part of the mandate of this profession.

And the point that really struck home to me was a report from the *New England Journal of Medicine* that reported because of the health issues related to the sedentary lifestyles of this next generation coming up, it's expected that their life spans may be shortened by as much as five years. And thinking on that in what can we do as a company, as members of our team, as members of our community and this profession, what can we do to really drive this message home to reconnect people with nature, even if it's nature in their own backyards, if it's getting active outside, if it's learning with their hands in the soil, growing something they can eat.

These are all some of the original principles of Come Alive Outside. And so we've really expanded that to a rationale as part of our mission statement within our company. And so we view what we do then, especially on a residential scale, as not just building a deck, as not just laying sod or planting trees. What we're doing is creating outdoor living areas for our clients, areas for their kids to explore the garden, see pollinators and butterflies in action, as it were, and get firsthand knowledge of that.

The other piece of this, when we consider climate change, this current generation of children, of students coming up, has a greater academic knowledge of the environment, of the issues that go into climate change than any generation before them. They probably have many more concerns to be addressing.

But I think there's a principle that we protect what we know. We protect what we have firsthand knowledge of. And the contrary to them having this academic knowledge is that they have the least amount of firsthand experience in nature. So I do feel that there's a stewardship position for our profession to relay to our clients and our communities to get back out there.

And whenever we talk about these things with clients, they're they're hungry for this knowledge. And I think it's really the pathway then that students have a great awareness of Greta Thunberg, and her work in creating knowledge of climate change. But that really seems to end with protest. We really need to be able to communicate to this up-and-coming generation that this is the boots-on-the-ground profession to do something about that.

People want to have a meaningful impact in their lives in this way. This is where to do it. And I think that really is something that we need to communicate effectively to our clients, communities, school communities to be able to try to bring people into this profession where they can realize their awareness and have a positive impact towards arresting climate change, and having positive environmental designs and builds in what we do.

Karina: So I can imagine that the anger and that the indignant feelings that come with protest, those are big feelings, legitimate feelings, but we need to convert that into action that feels achievable. As an individual, as one young person might feel like this is such a big problem, 'what can I do that's going to make a difference? So I will be angry about it.'

But how do you counter that? What can you do to relieve that anger and actually convert it into some form of therapy as you spend more time in nature?

Scott: Absolutely. And then being able to work with a team and clients to be able to make an impact, even if it's small impact, if it's building biodiversity by planting native plants that are going to attract butterflies and moss to the garden.

And then when you see that happening, you know that there's positive work being done towards a big issue, but there's no one single solution for it. It's going to be incremental and perhaps that's one backyard at a time or one tree at a time as we take on these challenges before us.

Karina: There's certainly lots of opportunity there. Do you think municipalities and communities at a larger scale could have some real power here as well? There's the individual homeowner or property owner, but can you scale that to start building out these communities that feel as passionately and come together to do this work together?

Scott: Very much so. And some of those communities that we're working with currently are school boards, municipalities, colleges, universities.

I think they all have a very heightened awareness of wanting to do something, especially under the umbrella of sustainability. But what is that that's effective? We can be their trusted partner and guide to help them make progress on it. Again, I think the knowledge both for design and installation and maintenance of sustainable landscapes resides within our profession and we need to go out there, talk about it, build the relationships on it.

I've been doing so a lot recently and in this past year, and had great pick up with all of those communities in wanting to do something and them seeing us as that trusted partner that can help them to be able to go forward.

Karina: So when a homeowner or a property owner approaches you and says 'Scott, you do these amazing award-winning backyards, I want one of those too,' how do you then broach this conversation around it's not just that we install a backyard for you, it's that we create this platform for you to build memories and so much beyond that.

Karina: Exactly. I think it really starts --- we have a little bit different process. It's not that different than most, but I think it delves in a little bit deeper and that is most new calls on a residential front would be looking to redo my backyard, looking to have a deck, maybe a swimming pool. All of that is speaking to the what and not the why.

So in first meetings with clients, even on the phone, we start to explore what's the why for that? Why is it that you want to have a deck? Do you do entertaining at home? 'Yes. In fact, we have three family get togethers every year. It's a tradition that we have. We have lots of generations coming.'

Oh, and how many people would you have at that? 'Well, we're at the 40, 50 people. So we want a bigger deck.' Well, a deck is restricted in how many people you can fit on it. Perhaps something that brings it down to the ground, to a sitting terrace, they can expand out in the lawn areas for these these get togethers. 'Yeah, that'd be a great idea.'

And you have kids there? 'Yes, we do all.' Maybe we should put a play area for the kids away from the grandparents sitting over here while they're having their meal. That's one aspect to really building the design around really understanding the client's needs that they may not even know themselves. And really, that's part of building the relationship with them.

The other one gets to the environmental aspects of what we do. And it's not a matter of do you want this or not, it's 'here's how we do things and why.' And I've yet to have a client say, 'No, not in my backyard. I don't want to attract butterflies and pollinators and have trees to capture carbon and a healthy lawn to do so.' No, everyone wants to embrace that. I think most people want to do what they can do to contribute positively towards it, they just don't know how to do it.

So as we bring those things up, it just builds a stronger relationship with the clients. When we're done and they see birds and butterflies in the garden, it's just proving that out. And you know, they're going to share that at the family gathering or when friends or neighbours come over to have a glass of wine in the evening and they can hear the birds chirping. 'You know, we didn't hear that before the landscape was re-done.'

So I think being very intentional about bringing those things up and doing it in a way that builds a relationship, that gives them great places to be outside and live and have these positive environmental contributions.

Karina: Speaking of being intentional in forming those relationships, I want to touch on a little bit about some of the upcoming work that you'll be doing for Truth and Reconciliation. Now Landscape Ontario has a very young program, we're still in the process of working out all the kinks and developing with Indigenous partners, but the idea of installing Reconciliation Groves at schools to help bridge that connection between settlers and colonialist communities and Indigenous communities. You're actually doing something about this. You're not just talking about it. There is something happening. Tell me a little bit about what the future of that might look like.

Scott: We've been very fortunate to be working with one of our local school boards here. We've been doing some work with them with Come Alive Outside through that the design challenge and it created in an Indigenous learning space within the school but didn't fully realize it. There's a basically a bookmark for that right now. They were forming an Indigenous advisory committee and we didn't want to take the design any further until we had an opportunity to partner with them. Now, during the time that we were waiting for that to form, we found out about the Reconciliation Grove Planting project and thought this would be a marvelous fit.

And again, to build confidence in members of Landscape Ontario to speak with their clients — I brought this up matter of factly to one of the facilities managers at the school board and just gave them the two minute elevator speech of what the Reconciliation Grove Planting is hoping to do and to be. And they said, 'That sounds like a great idea. I'm going to get back to you on that.' The next day I heard back, "I brought it to senior management already and they're all in. We want to explore how we can do this for the new builds that we're working on and also the other schools within our board community.' So again, great idea, great things that we need to share with others.

As this is moving along, we've built in into some of the new school designs, but again, some of it has got placeholders in it. The Indigenous Advisory Committee formed just in the spring time. We were at their second meeting and presented the Reconciliation Grove concept to them at that point, but in the terms of 'here's what could be done, not this is what you should do.' And I think that's really, really important. Again, we want to be partners with this community to understand how we can best proceed.

It really is a matter of sharing our perspectives, ours in wanting to do something to recognize this and to bridge the gap that exists and to do so in a way that's sensitive and meets the needs of that community as well. So we're really excited about the potential of this, but fully understand that we need to take it slow to get it right and to have the right conversations and build great relationships to do so.

Karina: The restraint and respect required to do something like that, when it's so tempting to just go ahead, dig a hole, put a tree in it and feel like you've accomplished something and put a plaque next to it. Whereas actually taking the time to get that feedback from the meaningful partners, that's a step that can't be skipped. But it does sound like this kind of project, and really being a green steward in general, to help people reconnect with the Earth, to reconnect to nature, to find their way in green spaces is just a powerful profession to be a part of, and that must be very exciting and inspiring.

Scott: It absolutely is. And I think coming to work in the same profession after 42 years, there's still things like this that are tremendously energizing. And I really, really hope that everybody has the time in this very, very busy year and profession to lift their heads up and see these opportunities of where we can be making significant contributions with our teams to our communities in these ways.

That looks different for every company in every region, every town, village and city that we're within. But they're there. We just need to grab a hold of them. And I think it's a really great point for being excited and energized by what we do.

Karina: You've been a member of Landscape Ontario for a long time. You've been participating in many of the programs. How do you see the Landscape Ontario community being able to support that very mission that you were just talking about?

Scott: I think it's trying to create a little bit of space around us to be able to look for where those opportunities are. It's easier in some ways being in a small town, in a small community, to have these opportunities, to have the relationships, to know where to go. But I'm convinced through everywhere. We just need that to lift our heads up and see where they are.

This is a very, very generous and giving profession. Landscape Ontario members give of their time, give of their wallets, give of their interest. And I think having a focus on and a confidence in having these conversations and how meaningful these things can be to our communities is really the message that I would like to further along: **Be confident in knowing that we do amazing things.**

And I think it really puts us in a position to be leaders going forward in looking at issues such as reconciliation and looking at issues of the environment and climate change and really energizing the generation to come with something that's very meaningful to devote their lives towards.

Karina: Speaking of the generation to come, do you work with many apprentices or graduates from the GROW program?

Scott: We have been involved with the apprenticeship program very deeply when it was offered at Loyalist College in Belleville. It's not in our region right now. We really would love to get back involved in it again at that point. We are involved in the Employers of Choice program, the peer network there. We work with our community in ways that we can try to get students involved in this.

The greatest one is the work that we do is with Come Alive Outside, with the design outdoor spaces within their school grounds. And I'll tell you, those that have an opportunity to participate with this, it is magical to be dealing with a school community. Let these kids' imaginations go wild. And for the students, the teachers and the parents, to have a completely different perception of what the landscape profession does in designing these spaces and building them, in addressing climate change, in impacting people's lives and in getting active outside.

So when those opportunities arise, you really, really hope members of Landscape Ontario will look for ways to be involved in that.

Karina: Well, that sounds transformative on so many different levels, from personal to environmental. I mean, the potential of that is huge.

Scott: Some teachers through the program have told us about students that haven't gotten excited about anything this school year yet and they've seen some that, as they're drawing out ideas, they're using both hands! They just can't get that excitement and the energy of fast enough. If some of these people we've seen involved in the program don't become landscape designers at some point, the stars have crossed the wrong way in the universe because it really exposes them to the things that we do and I'm sure is going to be engage them in the future as well.

Karina: That's fantastic that you're in a position where you can share that look behind the curtain for young people who don't even know that landscaping and horticulture is a career path potential for them. So that's a great opportunity and a power that you have. And when you said that it felt magical, how many people get to say that about their day-to-day job — that it feels magical?

Scott: Absolutely.

Karina: So Scott, you've given me and our listeners so much to think about, so much inspiration, and I really appreciate that you took the time to meet us today to walk us through your Come Alive Outside program, the relationship building that you do, and how you build a quality culture within your teams. I really hope that this inspires a lot of other Landscape Ontario listeners to do the same within their own companies.

Scott: Thank you. Pleasure to be with you today, Karina. I am really looking forward to finishing off a great season and to the path and the future of Landscape Ontario and its members going forward.

Music Interlude

I hope that you heard something inspiring from my conversation with Scott Wentworth. Let us know what resonated with you the most! We're always glad to hear from our listeners! For your reference, we'll have a full transcription for today's interview on this episode's web page at [landscape ontario slash podcast](https://landscapeontario.com/podcast).

Don't forget that registration for Landscape Ontario Congress is now open. Congress is Canada's largest and longest running trade show and conference for landscape professionals. With over 400 exhibitors covering more than 8 acres, Congress is a one-stop-shop for the latest equipment, tools, materials and supplies; everything you need to do what you do best.

Thank you so much for listening to the Landscape Ontario podcast. We talk to all kinds of innovative and knowledgeable landscape professionals, so be sure to subscribe to catch new episodes for inspiration every month.

Resources mentioned in this episode

[Wentworth Landscapes](#)

[Landscape Ontario Reconciliation Grove Project](#)

[Come Alive Outside Program](#)

[Landscape Ontario Awards of Excellence](#)

[Horticultural Technician Apprenticeship Program](#)