

## Landscape Ontario Podcast

### High school horticulture:

Inspiring the next generation, one teen at a time

**Host:** Karina Sinclair

**Guest:** Darren Schmahl, landscaper and educator

### Transcription

#### INTRO:

Karina: As students head back to school this month many are probably wondering what they should “be when they grow up.” While I’m sure plenty of adults are still trying to figure that out, high schoolers have a great opportunity to explore different topics before planning their post secondary path. And maybe, just maybe, that’s a garden path. Welcome to the Landscape Ontario podcast. I’m Karina Sinclair, and we’re talking about how exposure to horticulture and landscaping at the high school level can inspire youth to explore the green trades as a career option.

My guest today is Darren Schmahl, who has been engaging a grade 11 and 12 students through the Green Industries Program for the Niagara Catholic District School Board for the past 15 years. The Green Industries program is offered as a Specialist High Skills Major, also known as SHSM, where students get to dive a little deeper into the potential career paths that could interest them. These SHSMs offer experiential learning and specific employment skills, and in the case of Darren’s Green Industries program, classes take place outside of the traditional school setting. The students benefit from Darren’s decades of experience as a landscaper to truly understand what a career in this profession might look like.

I first learned about Darren while profiling Elliot Young, a recipient of the Casey Van Maris Memorial Scholarship and recent graduate from the Niagara Parks School of Horticulture, where Darren also teaches landscape design. When asked to name his role models in the profession, Elliott said: “the person who inspired and motivated me to pursue a career in horticulture the most was my SHSM teacher, Darren Schmahl.”

So without further ado, let's talk to the man making a difference, one teen at a time.

## INTERVIEW:

Karina: Thanks so much for taking time out of your busy day today, Darren. I would love to hear a little bit more about your career path in landscaping.

Darren: Thank you, Karina. It is a pleasure to be here today. And, as far as my career goes in high school, I really wasn't too sure what I wanted to do. Art was kind of my strong subject, but I love the outdoors and things. And I spoke with my dad about his career because he was a graduate of the Niagara Park School of Horticulture who graduated back in 1959. And the more that he talked about the program, the more I loved the idea of what it was. Working outdoors, had very hands on and actually, something that wasn't too far from home. Being a native of Saint Catharines, it was just a 20-minute drive, so, I ended up applying and getting accepted to the Niagara Parks School, where I learned about all the different areas of horticulture, but design was still my favorite thing.

And when I graduated, I went to England and took John Brook's School of Garden Design and, that is where I really learned a lot about design. The Niagara Park School ... I learned a lot about horticulture and plants, but not so much about design. So, with the knowledge I'd gained through the school along with these design principles, my brother and I had a landscape company that lasted for about 20 years. And we built projects, maintained them.

And, at some point along the way, I started teaching part time design at the Niagara Park School of Horticulture, and I enjoyed it, and I wanted to do more of it. And eventually, this opportunity came up to teach high school students Green Industries, as it's called, which at first I wasn't sure if I really wanted to teach high school level kids.

I was more looking towards college level kids. But, I did it, and I really enjoyed it. And the students, although they're younger and they certainly have a lot less knowledge, it was a great experience to introduce them to the field of horticulture. And I've been doing it ever since.

Karina: How did you get into those teaching roles? Did you have to go back to school to gain credentials to be an educator?

Darren: Yes. I taught for one semester, as sort of, 'let's see how it goes.' I went through an interview, but you don't have to necessarily be a qualified teacher, if you will, to teach one of the high school trades. But it's highly recommended. And you don't have much job security, because if somebody comes in that has teachers' college behind them, they're going to take your job.

So I wanted to do it. And what I did was I went and took a special program for skills teachers at the University of Windsor, and they had a program and I think the program has changed a little bit since then. But at that time, it was over two summers you could basically get your teaching degree. And that's what I did. And it's a great learning experience going back to school, living in the dorm and riding my bike to class each day. But it was a great learning experience, and it certainly helped me. I came back and then I was a totally qualified teacher.

And, you know, when you mix teachers' college with a career in the trades, whether it be horticulture or if you're an auto mechanic or a chef or whatever it is, now you have real world experience as well as the knowledge of how to deliver lessons. And it's a great combination.

Karina: I'll be sure to ask you more about that in a couple of minutes, because teaching teenagers must be a particular set of skills all on its own. Let's talk about where this program actually lives. It's in the Specialist High Skills Major program. Some people in Ontario would know that to be called the SHSM program.

Different high schools and different communities offer different streams. And at your school in Niagara, it's a Green Industries program?

Darren: Yes, it is. And, it's somewhat of a unique program in the sense that rather than be located at one high school with a greenhouse, let's say, which is commonly the way that Green Industries is delivered, our board decided to set the program up at the Niagara Parks Botanical Gardens, where the School of Horticulture also exists.

And, so it's an offsite course. It's a double course that's offered to all eight of our schools within the Niagara Catholic community. So the students are bussed out to the site, and we have an amazing set up out there where we have basically a 100-acre outdoor classroom that is the botanical garden that is a great learning tool for us. Not only do we have the great resource of all the plants that are out there that we can learn, we also work hand in hand projects with the Niagara Parks Botanical Gardens, and we get a lot of practical, hands-on experience.

Karina: What an exciting environment to learn in, to be outside of the cinderblock walls of a typical classroom and out in the outdoor spaces. What kind of students does this program attract?

Darren: We certainly get all kinds. We get what I would classify as the keeners, ones that perhaps have worked in the field of horticulture a little bit or have a keen interest in it and they're coming here to learn more and perhaps do something after high school, college, university, what have you. We get quite a few students that will come and try it, not knowing a lot about it, but liking the sound of maybe being outdoors and trying a different kind of a learning experience.

Occasionally we'll get students that have tried other things and nothing's really worked out so they end up in my program and some of them really get interested and thrive.

We also have special needs students that come out to the school, or to the botanical gardens, which is also a wonderful thing for me and for them.

They get to escape their environ at their schools and come out, and and we all know the benefits of being outdoors and what it can do for everybody. Just a different environment being out at the botanical gardens. I have zero discipline problems out there and sometimes I do get students that have a history of discipline problems, but I've never really had issues out there. It is a really different environment and I think it has a lot to do with just the way students feel and react.

Karina: And how do you develop a lesson plan and curriculum when you have such a range of students, from the keeners to those who aren't sure what to expect to those for special needs ... how do you make sure that there's something for everyone?

Darren: Yeah, it is challenging. There's no question. That is one of the greatest challenges, I think for most teachers, is how do you deliver lessons that everybody can get something from and hopefully be motivated and dive into it. Clearly sometimes the lessons maybe are a little bit more advanced than everybody in the classroom, but you try to cover the broad spectrum but you also try to present it in simple enough terms that everybody's getting something from it.

Some times with some of our special needs students, some of them that have challenges with learning, I've seen amazing examples of higher achieving students taking some of these students under their wing and helping them along, and this is one of the great things about I think this program, too, it goes way beyond horticulture.

It talks a lot about not just horticulture, but getting along with others, work ethic, whether it be horticulture or whether you get into something completely different. And preparing — those students have to get on a bus and come out every day. So they have to bring water and sunscreen and work boots, whatever.

So there's a variety of things that are in their skill set that if they don't have, they need to develop that. So I guess back to your original question, it is challenging, but there are ways to get to everybody. And that's really the goal.

Karina: And what kinds of things would a student do in this class? What do they get to learn? What kinds of projects do they work on? Trying to help potential students and parents of potential students understand what actually happens in this outdoor classroom.

Darren: Okay. Well, that will vary from semester to semester because there's the fall-winter season and then there's the winter-spring season. Bleeds into summer almost. So because of the nature of horticulture, the seasons change. For example, we would assist in planting tulip bulbs or daffodil bulbs at the botanical gardens in the fall. In the springtime, that's when they

come up, and that's when we would probably remove some of those bulbs and then plant annuals.

So, and then those annuals get removed in the fall and the bulbs get planted again. So it's a continuous cycle based on the natural seasons. We will do a lot of maintenance, weeding and raking leaves, whatever's required with spring cleanups.

And we'll also do projects. Those projects can vary greatly. A few years back, we actually did the Landscape Ontario [Congress] trade show. We entered a high school garden exhibit, which is usually done by the colleges. And it was a great success. It turned out to be a much nicer project than I ever envisioned originally when I heard that we're going to be doing this. And it was well received. The folks from Canada Blooms loved it so much they asked us to come and do the Canada Blooms show. So that was an unusual semester where we did a lot of work towards that.

There was another semester where we did quite a massive native bee hotel project, which resides at the Botanical Gardens, and it's on a big scale. It took us most of the semester to research it and design it and build it. Those are one-off examples.

We also will go out to some of our high schools and do projects. So for instance, this fall sometime in September, we're going to be starting a project at what would be called my home school. It's Saint Michael's Catholic High School in Niagara Falls. We've already designed an outdoor student area, and this area will be an area where students can go to hang out and the success of our design and install will be measured by whether the students actually use it.

And we really want them to buy in. So what we're doing is creating a space. It's going to be partly covered by shade, partly open. There'll be picnic tables and benches, and we're trying to include multidisciplinary areas of the school. So we're going to have the construction class participate. They're going to be helping to build pergolas and other structures. And we're going to have the manufacturing class, they're going to design and build some benches for us.

We have the art department that's going to be putting up a giant mural. On the wall is a big, big backdrop of a wall and of course, we'll be building some walls and putting in some paving

stones as well as some planting. And the whole thing is designed to be very, very low maintenance, but high impact. Using some native plants, plants that we know are very tough and durable. And we can go as a Green Industries class in the future and help to maintain it. We'll probably do a fall close down and a spring clean up every year to help stay on top of it.

So there's an example of probably a project that might take one or two semesters. It might even take going a couple of years, perhaps, depending on budgets and how much time we have to do these things. So, what I like about these projects is, A: the students, I think, really buy into it because they're going to feel like it's part of the legacy of them being at school. And they can leave this behind.

But perhaps the most important thing is they're learning by accident. They're learning by doing. And that is, from a practical standpoint and in the trades world, it's the best way to learn.

Karina: I really love that there's that opportunity to collaborate with the other programs. To have the arts and the manufacturing and the construction students in there. What a great way to show them behind the curtain of another potential career path that they might not have considered or even understand how they can connect with people in those fields to do something great all together. So that's very exciting, that you have that kind of project planned.

What kind of questions do you get from parents? Are they curious about whether this is a viable career path for their youth, or any concerns that this is really hard work for low pay? What feedback do you get from your students' parents?

Darren: Yes. I sense that you probably have heard similar things. There are a lot of parents that, well, number one, they might not know what Green Industries means. And I think a lot of students fall into that category, too. It's not my favorite name because I think it's misleading. I think some people think Green Industries is perhaps some kind of an alternative energy program, or something different than what horticulture is all about.

When you and I had talked preliminary, you had mentioned the word 'green trades,' and I do like that. I think that gives me a connotation more about that this is a trade industry, and the word 'industry' too, isn't really great, but it's a trade where people work and are professionals

and get paid accordingly. So as far as parents go, yeah, there are many parents that I think would not encourage their kids to pursue horticulture, thinking that they're going to be laying sod and digging ditches the rest of their life, kind of thing.

And I think there's a lot of ignorance around that because we know how big the field of horticulture is and how it can be very lucrative and successful as far as wage; you can do very well in the industry. It depends on your abilities and how determined you are and what sector you're in, but it's such a broad field and it's growing at such an incredible rate. It's certainly a great idea to at least explore it.

And that's one of the nice things about taking this course. And I'll tell parents this, if you're on the fence about taking it, I'd suggest you take it. Have your son or daughter take it because it's going to be real world experience that they gain.

They're also going to learn whether they really like it or not. The last thing you want to do is go off to college and think, 'I'm going to try horticulture.' And then maybe after you're there for three months, you realize, 'why did I sign up for this?' Well, this is an opportunity to eliminate that from ever happening.

If you don't like it, well, you've learned something, but you're going to move on to something else. And if you like it and you love it, well you've only built a foundation now for moving on to post-secondary education.

It can be a battle with some parents. A lot of parents, though, love the idea of their child to come out and actually get some work experience. I really think that it's something that every student should get in high school. Everybody should have to try and actually do some physical work so that you understand what it's all about. It might be the best thing that ever happened to somebody to say, 'you know what? I don't ever want to do that again. I better make sure I get my act together and find a path or a direction.' Other students just have a natural work ethic and they thrive. They just jump right in and there you go.

But, you get all kinds of parents, and a lot of them will find out about the program and be surprised: 'Oh, I didn't know about this.' And that's a challenge because we're not actually at a



school and we're offsite. It doesn't have as high a profile as it could otherwise. So that's something that we're always kind of dealing with and challenged with is getting the word out. But we try our best.

Karina: I wish it was something that was available when I was in high school. And what a great opportunity that would have been to at least gain some exposure. And when you have that exposure to how, to how interesting, how diverse, how complex, how, like, just how fascinating and broad reaching that career potential is to really understand that the people doing this work, they're doing good work, hard work, honest work. That there's real value in what they're doing because now you're greening the world, you're adding to the environment. You are doing very practical things to add beauty. And I think to help even build that appreciation, even if it doesn't end up being your career path — although at Landscape Ontario, we hope it would be — you appreciate the people who do choose that career path.

What sorts of things do you think get the students most excited in your classroom? Any “A-ha” moments or projects where they've gone ‘Yeah, this is what I want to do’?

Darren: Well, I think that varies again. Last winter, we did some terrariums, for instance, which I hadn't done in my class, which I've always wanted to do it. And the students loved it. It was great. I don't know if it was an A-ha moment necessarily, but it turned out to be a really fun activity to do where they had to do research and go find out how you build a terrarium and what kind of plants go in it. And then we put them all together. That was fun.

Other examples, I think some students will really thrive on the construction end of things. We'll install some pavers or we'll build a wall or what have you. And there are certain students that are going to take a liking to that, where other ones are more hands off, if you will, and they're not really into it. And again, it depends a lot on personalities and what people are interested in.

Now, because we have a nice greenhouse facility that the Niagara Parks allows us to share with them, some students get exposed to the greenhouse and to the Niagara Parks Butterfly Conservatory. So some students will really take to that side of things. The greenhouse has never been my favourite place; I like being outdoors. But some people are really at home in the greenhouse. So having these different areas of horticulture — and the golf course, the Niagara

Parks has a golf course next door too — so we do get exposed to many of these different aspects.

Now, occasionally it will happen later on. I might have a student that graduates and I don't see them for a couple of years, and I bump into them in the grocery store and they're working for a landscape company. It's like, 'wow, I'm happy to see you and happy to know that, because I wouldn't have known otherwise.' So it's hard to entirely know what everybody's up to once they leave high school.

Karina: But since you also teach design at the Niagara Parks College, then you must see some of the students come up through high school into post-secondary and see quite a transformation.

Darren: It's one of my favorite things. You get to see a student that you meet in grade 11, and they're back for grade 12. And then you see them at the college level, and they start off almost like an adolescent. And then they become men and women by the time they graduate from the Niagara Parks School, where I do teach two design classes.

So, you're familiar with them, and then you get to see them go off in their careers as well. And that's a really nice thing. This is perhaps the best tool that I have for talking to parents who have students that are thinking about green industries. And so I'll say, 'the field's big and there are lots of good paying jobs out there, and here's a couple of examples.'

One of the students in our program, she came in grade 11, wasn't sure if she even really liked horticulture, but thought she tried to like growing houseplants and really kind of fell in love with horticulture. Came back for grade 12 and still wasn't sure what she was going to do, and was hesitant about applying to Niagara Parks. Didn't think that maybe she could get through the educational component of it. And admittedly, she talked to me later on and said she had some low self-esteem issues. But I'm so glad because her mom said, 'why don't you apply? Just apply. What have you got to lose?' She ended up getting accepted to the Niagara Parks School. Was a nervous wreck because 'how am I going to get through the three years?'

She did. She thrived, graduated, and she is now, after working in the field for four years. just about finished Teacher's College, and she's about to become a Green Industries teacher. So what a great example of someone that's come full circle right through the whole, all these different programs and is now going to be educating young people, just like she was ten years ago.

Karina: Well, I think that's a testament to you, Darren. That you created a space that let somebody feel comfortable and capable and inspired to become that same sort of person for other students, future students. So that must feel awfully good to know that you have the potential to increase the potential of others.

Darren: Well, I would agree that it does feel very good. It's, as a teacher, really, the ultimate thing that you hope to achieve is that A: you are able to teach the students something. They learn from you. And B: that, perhaps, you can help set them up on a future career path as well, because, I certainly don't like to push anything on anybody, and I don't push horticulture on any students.

But if there seems to be a natural inclination there and lots of potential, I fully like to help out with that and help wherever I can with, perhaps, connections in the field or people that I know or whatever it might be. Just advice. So it is the ultimate compliment of a teacher to see a student that graduates and is thriving.

Karina: Now, I know you do also have a long history in landscaping yourself before you became a teacher. We know that there's a labour shortage. We know that the generations are shifting. How do you feel about your role and the role of your peers in helping make sure young people are coming into this profession?

Darren: I guess that's a personal choice for people and their personalities. But for myself, I am promoting, if you will, the field, because it's been very good for me. And where I see an opportunity for a student, I'll share that with them. Absolutely. Now, not everybody might see it that way.

Maybe there might be someone in their daily business or whatever where they have young people working, but they're so busy in their day that they just make time for it. I don't know, but for me, absolutely. I have been one to suggest, 'hey, why don't you consider the Niagara College program? Why don't you consider going to Fanshawe for landscape design? How about the Niagara Parks School of Horticulture?' They only accept 15 students a year, and it's an amazing program. So these are the sorts of things that if I see if it looks like the shoe is going to fit, then I will approach them and talk to them. but I'm not pushy with these things. I like to let them make their own decisions. And ultimately some of them have made some great decisions. And those are some of my favourite success stories.

Karina: In the 15 years that you've been teaching their Green Industries program, have you noticed the level of interest changing over the years? Do you think kids are more or less aware of this career path than they were before?

Darren: I think a little more. I think that the reality is that what we do as horticulturists, especially with global warming, our field is going to be moving more and more to the forefront, because it just has to and there's no getting around it. So I think that it's in one way sad that it's hard for me to get lots of quality students that are signing up for Green Industries.

I think it's partly because of the name and partly because of it's hard to promote, but I think that over time it's going to get easier. And I think there's going to be more and more students interested in horticulture.

Karina: And what do you think the future of the green trades looks like? How do you think it'll transform as younger generations begin to make their mark?

Darren: It's hard to say exactly. It's certainly not going away. And as, let's say, urban sprawl continues as the climate warms, and I think with the rise, too, of of all these television shows where you can turn your backyard into an oasis, that there is, there is more awareness and more of a desire for people to do things in their garden.

One of the great things about going and learning about design with John Brookes, he wrote his first book — he wrote many books, but his first book came out in the 60s — and it was called

*Room Outside.* And that was, at that time, it was a novel concept that you should extend your living space outdoors and turn it into an outdoor room, and that's what so many people do today.

It seems amazing that you think back in time and people didn't really do that, but now it's more and more popular, which is great for our industry, and it's great for the people that can go into their backyard, even if it's tiny and have an escape. And I think more and more people are buying into this and see the benefit of it.

Karina: And so are you feeling pretty hopeful that the green trades are in good hands as you pass the mantle over to younger generations?

Darren: I do. The simple fact that, like you had said earlier in this podcast, you wish that you had a program like this. So do I and so many people that I talked to that are of an age that we didn't have these programs then. I think the simple fact that this has been delivered at high school is a great example that shows you that the field is alive and well and healthy, and we can always make improvements and do more.

But getting it at that fundamental level is really an important step. And it's out there. The Ministry has seen the wisdom in the trades, not just even horticulture. And it's a great thing. If you live in Europe, you have all of your phone numbers for your important people in your phone and your doctor and lawyer are in there.

But so is your stonemason and your electrician and your plumber and your gardener. And over there they call them guilds. The trades over there are guilds, and sometimes they were passed down from generation to generation, but they're highly respected. And somehow, somewhere along the way, the idea of trades, for some people, is like below them or something.

The reality is trades do amazing things. They build amazing projects and they make amazing money and they have amazing lifestyles. So it's really a perception. And we need to not just in our industry, but in all the different trades industries, change that perception.

Karina: So if you could just reach out to parents and potential students right now, what would you tell them to encourage them to consider this as a possibility for them?

Darren: I think they need to research the field a little bit to see just how big it is. It's a huge field. And Landscape Ontario certainly is a good resource for that. Get an idea of how many jobs are actually out there and what kind of pay that is out there as well and it doesn't have to be a seasonal thing. It can be, certainly we have seasons, but it's not like a lot of people's perception of it is — which is totally incorrect — that it's a short season and then you're on unemployment and you don't get paid very well, and it's a crappy job. If that's the case, then you've gone down the wrong path.

And then again, I guess my best method of trying to convince people to look at it deeper is just give examples of some of the students that I've taught at Niagara Catholic and have gone on to some good careers and are doing very well for themselves.

Karina: Well, I think there's no greater testament and proof in the pudding that you've got students who have come up from grade 11 through the post-secondary programs and then ended up working successfully in the fields. So I think that's very encouraging indeed.

Darren, thank you so much for not only coming on the podcast, but also for continuing to be part of that engine that helps inspire youth to get into this profession and promote it as something that's meaningful and of value. So thank you for that.

Darren: Well, it's my pleasure. And great for you to get the word out here, and that's part of it — educating the public, getting them to really understand what horticulture and green industries or green trades are all about is part of the battle. But I think we're making progress. And that will continue to happen over time.

## **Music transition**

### **EXTRO:**

Karina: So here's a call out to all of the experienced landscapers listening right now. If you love your profession, look for ways to share that passion with the younger generation. Share this



podcast episode with them. Make space for high school co-ops and connect with the Landscape Ontario youth engagement coordinator.

If you are a young person wondering what career to pursue, check out the horticulture programs available at your local high schools. This is a great way to see if you like working outdoors, caring for the environment and building beautiful landscapes. Talk to the people in the business and be open to hearing about the many different ways you could find your niche. Landscape Ontario also has lots of resources to help you figure out next steps.

You should also check out the Congress Trade Show and Conference in Toronto in January. There, you'll see post-secondary student displays, meet experts of all kinds, attend hiring fairs and learn about the tools and techniques used by leaders in the green trades. We hope to see you there.

If you'd like to read the full transcription of today's interview, you can find it in the relevant links on this episode's webpage at [landscapeontario.com/podcast](https://landscapeontario.com/podcast).

And if you're enjoying the conversations on this podcast, I'd love your feedback. Giving positive reviews and sharing episodes on social media also helps foster the advancement of the horticulture industry. We're in this together, building a community of passionate, knowledgeable and innovative professionals all committed to nurturing a greener tomorrow.

Thanks for being part of it by listening, subscribing and sharing the Landscape Ontario Podcast.

### **Resources relevant to this episode**

[Niagara Catholic District School Board SHSM](#)

[Niagara Parks School of Horticulture](#)

John Brookes book, [Room Outside](#)

[Elliot Alkemade Young Scholarship Profile](#)

[Ontario Horticultural Trades Foundation Scholarships](#)

[Landscape Ontario Congress Trade Show & Conference](#)

Landscape Ontario Youth Engagement Coordinator: 1-800-265-5656 x 2335

## Photos

Provided by: Darren Schmahl



Student exhibit at Congress





Plant identification class



Outdoor student area at Notre Dame Catholic High School



Native bee hotel project