



# Landscape Ontario Podcast

## Gear up for Congress 2025

**Host:** Karina Sinclair

**Guest:** Heather McRae, Landscape Ontario Show Director

### Transcription

#### INTRO:

Karina: Welcome to today's episode of Landscape Ontario Podcast, where we dive into the topics shaping the green trades. Today, I'm thrilled to talk about the Landscape Ontario Congress Trade Show and Conference, Canada's largest and longest-running trade show for landscape and horticulture professionals, happening in Toronto, Ontario, from January 7th to 9th, 2025. If you're in the business of transforming outdoor spaces—whether through landscaping, horticulture, or outdoor design—this is the event you can't afford to miss. Imagine walking into a space that's nearly 10 acres showcasing everything from hand pruners to giant excavators, alongside innovations in sustainable landscaping and the latest in outdoor design trends.

And to give us an insider's look into this incredible event, we're excited to welcome Heather McRae, the Trade Show Director for Congress. With over a decade of experience in bringing this iconic event to life year after year, Heather is here to share what's new for 2025, the can't-miss features, and what makes this trade show a key date on the calendar for industry pros. From interactive demonstrations to networking with thousands of like-minded professionals, there's something for everyone, no matter where you are in your landscape career. Let's dive into what attendees can expect and why Congress remains the go-to event for landscape and horticulture experts! And stay tuned to the end for a promo code that gets you free tickets to the show.

#### Music transition

#### INTERVIEW:

Karina: Welcome to the show, Heather. I'm so glad you're here to talk about the next Congress coming up because I think people are really going to want to hear what's new and exciting about it. So, welcome to the show.

Heather: Thank you.

Karina: Let's start with why should landscape and horticultural professionals come to Congress in the first place?

Heather: Ultimately, if you are part of this community, in this profession, this is the place where you can really connect with the latest and greatest products and services. But above all of that, you can connect with other industry colleagues. And that's really the prestige feeling that you get at Congress when you go there and meet like-minded people.

Karina: I can definitely see that from the times I've attended Congress. It is the connections that are being made on the show floor, and people greeting one another, even competitors, they all seem genuinely glad to see each other there. Hopefully, people who have never been will be interested in this idea of connecting with other people, other peers in the industry and come on to the show. Now, what do you think was the biggest highlight of Congress 2024?

Heather: The biggest highlight for Congress 2024 was something that was taken away from us during COVID. Not only was the show not open for a couple of years, but when we did bring the show back, we kind of chose not to include at that time the schools and the program and our student gardens. Even though we resurrected the show after COVID, it truly didn't feel in 2023 like the show was back. Last year, we were able to welcome back three of the schools to build gardens. That was really the big highlight, not only for the attendees but the exhibitors, because all of that amazing action happens during move-in. It creates great energy to see the youth and the students on the show floor working to create this amazing event. So, I think that was the biggest highlight for most last year.

Karina: And for those who don't know, move-in can take three or four days, right? It's a whole process, an event onto itself. So, to have the energy from that new generation coming into the profession would inject a whole lot of energy there.

Heather: It really does. Yes, it's a four-day move-in, and as you can imagine, in the trade facility, how cold it can get in there, and how dusty and dirty and all those things that can happen. So the conditions aren't always the best, but it's actually really fun to be a part of that piece of it.

Karina: Well, landscapers are quite accustomed to working in the dust and in all kinds of weather conditions and getting dirty to make something beautiful. So, I don't think that's a negative; I think that's probably just part of their natural environment. You've been directing this show for a long time now and have continued to evolve the experience for attendees and exhibitors. What new features will attendees see at Congress in 2025?

Heather: Having the privilege to work on this show for over a decade now, a lot of the new comes from our show committee. We're so fortunate to have such a dedicated group of volunteers that are boots on the ground, coming to us with ideas like, "We should look at doing something like this" or "This is important." This year is super exciting because for many years, we have been learning about and contractors have been testing out and exhibitors have been showcasing electric products. There's been this idea of having a demonstration area where people can actually test this product within the building. Of course, on gas-powered equipment, we could never do that — it wouldn't be safe. Now, we have this amazing opportunity to do that on the show floor. Attendees can sign up, and we will have six different companies where they can test out their equipment, ride-on and handhelds.

We're really excited about this because it's great interaction from the attendee side. The exhibitors participating have been asking for this for a long time and are thrilled to be a part of it.

Karina: So what kind of equipment are we talking about? How big of a piece will be demonstrated at this demo?

That's a good point. We've had discussions on how big we're going to go because we only have so much space. Primarily, there will be mowers that people can test out. We do have some UTVs being tested as well, and the handhelds will be separate from that.

Karina: With so many municipalities considering bans on gas-powered equipment and people being more interested in quieter machines, I think there's going to be a lot of interest in that section of Congress this year. But that's not the only thing that's different about Congress — it's growing!

Heather: Yes, most shows usually take on one new thing each year. Somehow, we've taken on many this year. The next most exciting piece is that we've had the privilege of having a waiting list of companies wanting to participate in this community event, and we just haven't had the show floor space to get them in. With some creative floor plan design with our suppliers that support us on the show, we've been able to open up 110 new spaces, and I'm happy to report that, as of September, all of those waiting list companies have signed on.

It's really exciting to expand the show and have so many new brands participating. There's such a large market, and we weren't able to get everybody in. At Landscape Ontario, we want to make sure everyone feels welcome, so it was nice to be able to go back to these groups and fit them in.

Karina: Well, obviously, all the big brands are there because they know this is an event they cannot miss. For you to make space for those newer, smaller companies with emerging technologies is great. It adds competition and diversity, and I'm excited to see what's happening there because sometimes those up-and-comers bring really great, exciting new ideas.

Heather: And there's been a lot of questions from these companies about booth design, and we're seeing some really innovative and creative booth designs. We like that part too, because it ups the competition for the best booth awards.

Karina: Which is always a fun thing to see handed out. People get pretty excited when you walk up to their booth with your entourage and a trophy in hand. Now are there any other changes happening, maybe things that were there in the past but won't be this time?

Heather: So this year we're doing our new product showcase a little differently. Over the years, it has been an evolution where we used to have exhibitors contribute a product to a space, and we would set up a display area. Over time, we had to take that space back because we needed

to bring in more companies. Then we started doing imagery on the new products that are on the show floor. This year, we're actually asking exhibitors to submit video content that will be playing on screens at the front entrance of the show. So when attendees come into the show, they can have a look at some of the areas where there will be new products. That's pretty exciting as well.

We keep trying to come up with creative ways to highlight new products because, ultimately, that's the reason people come — to see what's new and what's happening. So that will be another new piece to the show.

And from a fun side of things, this year we've taken our Tailgate and we have themed it Octoberfest. So I think it's very fitting for this event, and I'm excited to see how it all comes together.

Karina: It's always a good party, you see. Lots of great energy. Even though people have spent many hours standing on the show floor, they let off some steam at the Tailgate Party. That is all fine, and that is included in people's ticket price when they attend Congress. Right?

Heather: Yes, it is.

Karina: Okay, fabulous. Are there any elements to the trade show that people might not realize are there, that they're missing out on? Because a lot of thought goes into some wraparound events and supplementary opportunities for networking that happen off the show floor. Do you think that that's something people need to be more aware of?

Heather: I do, and I think that our website is very robust with a schedule of all of the events and everything that's happening. Although it's a lot of detail to go through, I really feel it's important prior to going to any event that you attend to spend some time, take an hour or so, and really have a look at the website and create a calendar for yourself, a schedule prior to attending. In fact, calendar reminders are great when you're at a show because you do get chatting away and sometimes forget that something's happening. But really, spending some time researching through the website is key.

For those, because I know our members can be super busy and it could be snow plowing season, when they arrive at the show it might be worth taking the show guide, sitting with a

quick cup of coffee, and having a look just to really see what's happening, where, and what's important to them. It's really nice that we have that printed piece at the show because people can reference it when they arrive.

Karina: There's something for everyone happening at this show. For job seekers, there's the Jobs.Live section. Last year, there was even a hiring party. Will there be that event again this year?

Heather: Yes, so the hiring party this year is super exciting because it is moving to the show floor. We did have it in a meeting room last year, and we'd like to bring that energy onto the show floor, up by our student gardens. That's Courtney McCann and her team with the Workforce Development that are putting that together. Last year, it was a super success, and we actually ran out of space in the meeting room. So definitely for job seekers, I've seen that with Congress over the last four or five years, it seems that we're putting more focus on that, and I think that's really important. That's something the attendee is really looking for.

Karina: Last year at the hiring party, I saw lots of resumes being handed out. I saw lots of smiles and handshakes so that indicated that there were some really meaningful connections being made between job seekers and employers. So I definitely think that if anybody is looking forward to working in the green trades, that that's a must-attend event. But that's not the only opportunity to make connections and for learning. There's also the Congress Conference, which is a separate paid ticket but has so much value. Do you want to tell me a bit about that?

Heather: Yes, it really is. And there's different business tracks that we have in the Conference depending on what your focus is. We have created it to be a half-day conference, so it gives you the opportunity to do your education in the morning and still visit the trade show floor in the afternoons. We have some really great speakers coming in this year on a variety of topics. Everything, again, is on our website. That is a really important thing to have a look at because we have speakers that overlap, so you really want to pick and choose who you'd like to see. But it really is a first-class education lineup.

Karina: I know it must be difficult to choose who appears in that lineup, because we get a lot of applications for people wanting to present. How do you go about choosing who's going to fill all those morning slots that are available?

Heather: We actually work with a group of members. We consult a committee, and we want to know what those hot topics are in the market. We want to make sure that we cover that off. Our job on that is to make sure that we are relevant to what's happening in the workforce.

Karina: So you're getting that feedback from people working in all the different sectors involved in landscape and horticulture.

Heather: That's right.

Karina: Another case of something for everyone.

Now, I've been to Congress a couple of times, and I remember the first time stepping onto the show floor and just being blown away by the sheer size. And now this year, it's even bigger.

How could somebody new coming to the show make the most out of it to avoid being overwhelmed? Maybe to avoid their feet wearing out before they get their chance to see everything they want to see? What are some good strategies for somebody who's never been to the show to find and make those connections that would be really meaningful to them and their own careers?

Heather: First of all, I really think that when you arrive at the show for your first time, try and give yourself the full day. It opens at 9 a.m. and it's open till 5. So really try and plan to commit the full day because it will take that amount of time even just to get through part of it. So try and do that.

And I know this can be a little bit nerve-wracking in these environments, but it's really important to focus on the exhibitors that matter to your day-to-day business. Then, try and go in and really connect with somebody who's in the booth. I think it's important for attendees to remember that these exhibitors have paid a lot of money to be at the show and participate, and that's why they're there. They want to connect with people, have those conversations, and even if at the end of the day you don't do business with them, it's still a win-win for both sides.

It's amazing that you go into some of these booths and you speak with someone, and they've worked with three other different companies on three of their different product lines. So you can really learn a lot from the exhibitor side of things, even if you're not purchasing.

The other thing I would suggest, if it's a possibility, is to attend the show with a peer that has been there and walk the show together so that you can have that experience together. Karina, you're right. It is overwhelming. It's funny that you mention your first time because, like you, my first time attending it, I was interviewing at the show, and I was shocked. It just kept going and going, and I was like, "Oh my gosh, this is huge." So, yeah, I think the peer mentorship, if you can do that, and also take the leap of faith, shake the hand, have the conversation, and it'll be amazing where those conversations go.

Karina: I love that that was where your interview for this job was. I think that's really funny, and I didn't know that about you. But you're right — really get in there and talk to the people in the booth. If you think about it, it could be a long day just standing there if nobody came up and spoke to you. That is why they're there, and they want to find out what the needs of their potential customers are so that they could be providing that service or product. It really is a great opportunity to shape the industry as well. You may think you don't have much influence, but when you come in and have those conversations, it could lead to something bigger, and you just never know.

And how about for those who have been there before, right? They feel like, "Yeah, we know this. We got it. We go in, we touch base with the people we want to see." What could they be doing to take that to the next level?

Heather: What would be really nice is, and we do have legacy members that attend year after year, it would be nice as they notice new companies — and many of them do this already, actually — to welcome them to the community because that really is the space to do that. And also, some of our long-term supporters that we see year after year, a thank you goes such a long way. They really are some of the founding companies that have helped not only build the show but helped build the [Landscape Ontario] association over the years. So I think it's just, again, that personal connection, which, like I said, so many of them are so good at doing that. But really having those conversations.

Karina: You've mentioned a few times that this is a community that we belong to. A community at large. This show is basically all the community coming together from all the different places, not just from Ontario, but other provinces and even the U.S., and they're coming here. How



important do you think it is that we continue to support this community? Like, what if we didn't do this?

Heather: So I guess I've had the privilege in my career to work on many different shows prior to my arrival at Landscape Ontario, and I've seen what happens when communities don't connect and come together, particularly with shows. And ultimately, it becomes a demise of a show. I mean, that sounds very dark and heavy, but I've lived it and I've seen that. And so, you mentioned something earlier about how competitors, you know, they're like friends. They share information. And that is the real gift of this show and the association. And that's what we see here. Where I've seen in other, particularly these face-to-face shows, where everything's so close to the chest, and they don't want to share, and they don't want to connect, bit by bit, it tends to fall apart. That's just the truth of it.

Karina: The current president of Landscape Ontario, Ed Hanson, his catchphrase is, "We are stronger together." And you definitely see that at Congress, where people are helping each other build their booths and, you know, sharing supplies and sharing knowledge and sharing laughs. I think that's really important too, that there's a lot of lightheartedness on the show floor. It's bright, it's buzzing with energy. People are curious and happy to be there. It is quite like nothing else I've ever seen.

Last year we had a really great turnout. We want people to come and see these new companies that are filling out the expanded show floor. We want them to come and connect with these established brands, come to the Conference and learn and continue to grow their skills. Where do they find out about all of this?

Heather: Registration is now open, so you can register at [locongress.com](http://locongress.com), and we would love to offer you a free code so that you don't even have to pay anything. We just want you to come and visit and join in all the fun. So it is HMLO25. If you enter that code, you'll be registered for the trade show floor for free. If you'd like to do the education, we do have early bird pricing. All the pricing is on the website, and that's available until December 16th. So if you need some time to think about that and look at the budget, you have some time on that, but certainly, please register, please come out, and join in the amazing experience.

Karina: And that promo code once again was...

Heather: HMLO25

Karina: That is such a deal to be able to come and have access to this show floor, the Tailgate Party, the LIVE stage presentations. And then once you've got that for free, you might as well go ahead and take advantage of the early bird pricing for the Congress Conference, because there's just so much value there as well.

## Music transition

### EXTRO:

Karina: That's all for today's episode of Landscape Ontario Podcast. A huge thanks to Heather McRae for giving us a behind-the-scenes look at what's coming up at Congress 2025. It's clear this is the must-attend event for anyone in the landscape and horticulture industry, and there's no better way to kick off the new year than by joining your peers in Toronto from January 7th to 9th, 2025.

Make sure to register and find all those details at [locongress.com](https://locongress.com). And just for our listeners, use the promo code **HMLO25** at checkout for free tickets to the show! Don't miss out on this amazing opportunity to network, learn and explore the latest innovations in the industry.

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

Until next time, I'm Karina Sinclair.

## Resources relevant to this episode

[locongress.com](https://locongress.com)

[Why people love to attend Congress](#) video promo