



**Profile: Sarah Johnston,
Greenlife Garden Care + Landscaping**

Association advantage drives success

Page 12

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LO MEMBER PROFILE

Greenlife Garden Care + Landscaping

By Lee Ann Knudsen

Sarah Johnston of Greenlife Garden Care + Landscaping in Ottawa knows the value of association. In fact, one of the first steps in her business plan was to join Landscape Ontario.

Johnston plunged into the horticulture business five years ago, after downsizing brought her career in publishing to an unexpected end. "I am English – gardening is in my veins," she says. Her son Dave Johnston was already working in professional lawn maintenance, which was another motivator. So Johnston took advantage of a special employment insurance training program designed to incubate small businesses and drafted her plan.

Staffing allows niche focus

Greenlife is based in Manotick, a community south of Ottawa. Johnston runs two garden maintenance crews and one lawn crew, serving mainly residential clients.

Staff is key to Johnston's business profile. Lawn maintenance, she says, is not about skill, it is all about attitude. Johnston is especially proud that her son Dave "takes a manager's view of business and is adamant about quality. If a lawn was wet and the job does not suit him, he will cut it again." Attitude is her top hiring criterion. She finds proper attitude is tough to discern in an interview, but knows within a week whether new hires are suitable, and terminates quickly if not.

Greenlife structures its business on seasonal contracts, renewed at the end of each season. Johnston cites her renewal rate at 98 per cent, and credits that success to staff attitudes, which drive client loyalty. "You have got to care."

Winning path

While Johnston maintains that attitude is everything, good craftsmanship must also figure into her success. Joan Johnston, (no relation) of Peter Knippel Nursery served as a reference when Sarah Johnston joined LO. "I knew Sarah through a church committee. She was always very straightforward, and really well organized." Now that Greenlife is in business, Joan Johnston



The Greenlife team is young and full of enthusiasm.

comments, "Sarah runs good equipment, and it is always in good repair. She knows how to treat plants."

Dave Johnston mentioned with pride that Greenlife was recently approached as a prospective buyer for an area lawn maintenance business. The offer was not pursued. He says, "We do not want to get too big too fast."

Association involvement

Johnston joined Landscape Ontario immediately upon launching her business. Richard Rogers of RJ Rogers Landscaping, who also referred her for membership, says, "I cannot remember anybody seeing the value of association, networking and learning from peers as quickly as Sarah did." In reflecting on her early days in LO, Johnston mentions her hunger for knowledge, especially on competitive issues and pricing, as a big motivator to join.

Johnston's partner and husband Richard Sennott is an association executive himself, and his insight on how associations work helped her take advantage of the LO connection. She says, "The Ottawa Chapter is wonderful. One meets people from all levels of business." She is troubled that potential new members may not have connections to industry references, as she did.

She also worries that insurance and other benefits are not available until active status is achieved. "You *really* need the benefits at the beginning," she comments.

One detail illustrates the help Johnston received from Ottawa Chapter members: "Our routine was to fill up the

truck in the morning. Ian Stewart from Yards Unlimited told me it is more efficient to gas up at the end of the day – when the guys are less interested in smoke and coffee breaks."

In speaking with Johnston, it is clear she gives a lot of thought to how LO can serve industry members better, especially those new to horticulture. She ponders whether attendance at chapter meetings might be a beneficial requirement for new members. She wonders whether one-on-one mentors from non-competing areas could be assigned. (Note: a mentorship program is being developed within LO's new Prosperity Partner initiative. See page 8).

Johnston's involvement is far from speculative, however. She serves on the Ottawa Chapter board as co-vice president, with special responsibility for its education programs. Greenlife works closely with Algonquin College. Three staff members are graduates of its horticulture program, and employee Jen Hendriks is a founding leader of Algonquin's Landscape Ontario student chapter.

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Marketing matters

Johnston's background in publishing helped her decide that despite her commitment to quality, marketing should not be left to chance. She invested money upfront in a professional graphic designer, and says it has paid off with big dividends. The Greenlife logo features colours from the four seasons; customers remember the colours, and mention seeing the logos 'on your trucks,' though Greenlife has only one truck. Equipment moves to sites in a closed-in trailer, and the logo painted on its side provides a very effective moving billboard.

The company publishes a newsletter each spring, created by a professional writer and distributed in a 15-km radius. These efforts plus modest advertising in the Manotick newspaper generate all the work needed for a season.

Greenlife started as a business plan and is now a living force in horticulture. Johnston told a story about her staff, during a recent high-visibility plant installation at Notre Dame Basilica on Sussex Street in downtown Ottawa. "Without a word, they knew how to conduct themselves, they even went behind a screened area for lunch. I was so proud."

HR

Greenlife staff

Jess Cretzman, horticulturist
Josee Henderson, horticulturist
Jen Hendriks, horticulturist
Dave Johnston, lawn crew
Diarmid Kidd, lawn crew
Jeff Lloyd, lawn crew
Kayla O'Brien, garden crew