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Living off the land

Edible landscaping may just be the next big thing in add-on business opportunities.

A **S**THE IDEA of homegrown fruits, vegetables and herbs gains ground in American homes, a service offering of “edible landscaping” is beginning to crop up among residential landscapers.

But for Shannon Hathaway, president of Green Heron Landscaping Inc., in Cary, NC, edible landscaping is *not* a new concept. Her interest in it began as a little girl with her grandmother and mother’s gardens.

“My grandmother had a vegetable garden that was bigger than I’d ever seen, and I loved walking through it when I was a kid,” Hathaway recalls. “My mom’s garden focused more on herbs, so I also got a taste of growing a successful herb garden as just a kid.”

While studying landscaping in college, Hathaway fell under the tutelage of an instructor who emphasized living off the land. So it was no surprise that she offered the service when she started her business.

Hathaway says she has found it’s not a terribly hard sell. The lush climate of the region certainly helps, as does consumers’ increasing interest in their food’s origins.

“There’s definitely more interest for this lately, and I find a lot of clients come to me and ask for it. But I also suggest it every time I meet with a client for the first time,” she says. “Even if they’re certain they don’t want fruits or vegetables, a lot of people love the idea of fresh, homegrown herbs.”

Incorporating the produce into the existing landscaping is also beneficial for the plants. The produce is much more lush and healthy.

“If you incorporate your fruits and vegetables in your borders and beds, it allows you to rotate your crops more easily — and you’re not completely exhausting the soil by doing so many vegetables in just one small plot of land,” says Hathaway.

Hathaway says that offering edible landscaping goes hand-in-hand with her company’s Green Movement focus and



“Edible things can be beautiful,” says Shannon Hathaway.

has contributed to its success.

“We have found a real niche in the Green Industry by offering edible landscaping, which is part of our overall green focus,” she says. “We don’t use chemicals, and we try to educate our clients on other ways of growing. We’re reminding people that edible things can be beautiful — and that growing your own fruits and vegetables and living off the land is a wonderful thing.”

Because the company is based in suburban Raleigh, one challenge has been working with homeowner association (HOA) rules, which can be restrictive. But Hathaway says she has found ways to work with these rules and still incorporate edible landscaping into the property. Interestingly, she says that an influx of various ethnicities moving to the region has actually helped push the movement.

“We’ve had a number of clients from India who have moved into our region and are expecting the land to produce, because that’s what they’re used to,” says Hathaway. “They realize that we live in such a lush area and that you can grow a lot here, and they expect that to happen. They’re bringing their traditions of using the land for food production — and reminding many of us of our own past. It’s really helped drive the movement for more edible landscaping.”

In the Raleigh region, Hathaway says that fruit like plums, pears, figs, peaches, pomegranates and persimmons really thrive. There is also a large variety of vegetables and herbs that do well in the climate.

“It’s a wonderful region for growing, so it makes sense that more clients are showing interest,” she concludes. “I think it will only continue to grow.”

The author is a freelance writer with seven years of experience covering landscaping.

>> SERVICE SNAPSHOT

COMPANY: Green Heron Landscaping Inc.

HEADQUARTERS: Cary, NC

FOUNDED: January 2002

NO. OF EMPLOYEES: 6 full-time, 1 part-time

CLIENTELE: 99% residential

2011 REVENUE: \$400,000

2012 PROJECTED REVENUE: \$450,000

WHY EDIBLE LANDSCAPING?

“My interest in it started as a kid and only grew as I studied landscaping. I try to bring the concept of ‘living off the land’ into as many landscapes as I can.”

INVESTMENT? “There is no added cost to the landscaper to offer edible landscaping to clients, and most wholesale nurseries offer fruit trees and herbs.”



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“We believe that the spirit of our organization is our team, representing a variety of cultures from three continents and 10 countries,” says **John Gachina**, president of Gachina Landscape Management, Menlo Park, CA. “About half of our account management team has risen through the ranks, starting at entry-level positions.”

Gachina gives them important tools, including education and training. But employees must show initiative.

He tells *LM* what it means to be a good manager in landscaping today and shares his thoughts on where the industry is heading.

TOP TRENDS

› **Sustainability.** It runs the gamut from water conservation and reducing our carbon footprint to the use of alternative fuels and employing organic pesticides and fertilizers. We are located in the San Francisco Bay/Silicon Valley area. It's laden with creative, high-tech companies such as Apple, Google, Yahoo and Hewlett-Packard, many of which are our customers. Sustainability is very important to them. It's becoming a bigger and bigger deal every day.

› **Social media.** It's now the best way to reach professional young people, especially those in or just getting out of college. They are all steeped in Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, and it will continue to become more and more accepted, especially through the expansion of smart phones. Our HR department currently uses social media for recruiting, and we will be using it more and more to attract new and retain current customers.

TOP OBSTACLE

› **Lower margins due to a down-turned economy with increased competition.** Even though your customers like what you do for them, they have short memories when it comes to looking for the lowest bid. The best strategy is to keep them from going out to bid. But that means you may have to lower your margins to keep them. Since margins are getting tighter, we are evaluating every business process in our company to improve on efficiencies. We are looking at new ways to cut down on our waste stream and

John Gachina says if you have true passion for the job, that optimism is contagious.

INSIDE INFO

Company: Gachina Landscape Management

Headquarters: Menlo Park, CA

Employees: 300

2011 revenue: \$20 million

Key to being a maintenance leader:

Being genuinely passionate about what you do, and that's contagious. For example, we have always been passionate about doing the maintenance side of our business, and it shows.

Also, creating a clear career path for employees and taking good care of them. This builds loyalties and long-term commitments. I have provided growth opportunities for many employees who have stayed with me for the past 20 years. We encourage and support our employees who want to earn special landscape certifications through PLANET. They also see that I promote from within.

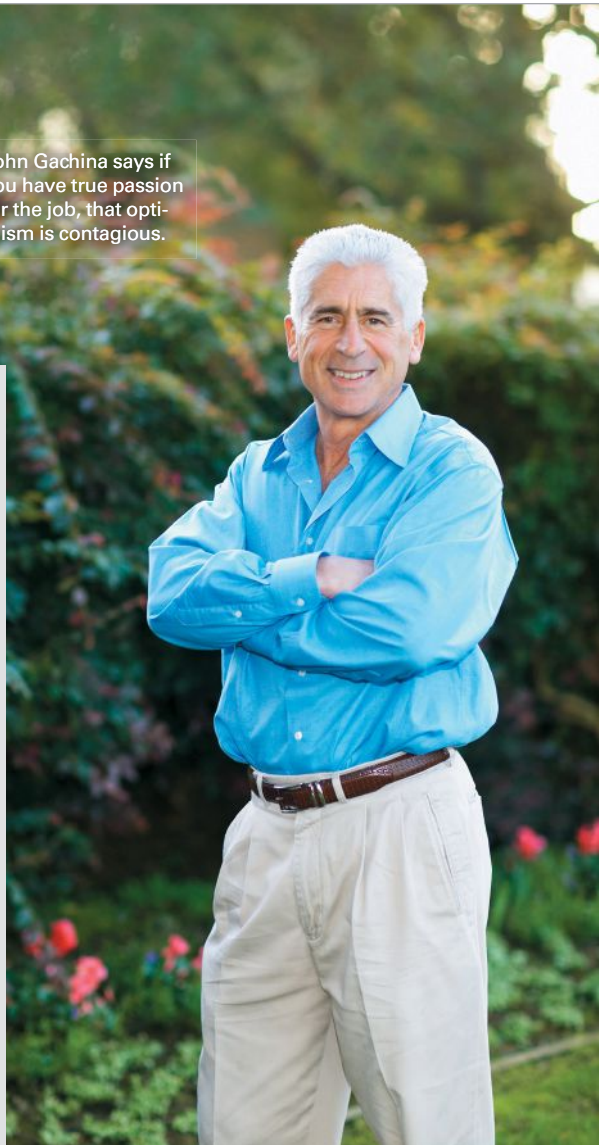
We found that all benefit when our employees started making healthy lifestyle choices both at work and at home, and these activities boosted morale and teamwork. A few years ago, to get our people active and promote teamwork, we decided to boost healthy living for all our employees and their families. We provide home-grown fitness classes, health awareness information and healthy eating. Our training room is turned over weekly to Pilates, yoga and stretching classes. All our crew members perform 10 minutes of stretching before starting any job.

more carefully manage our resources. We have a new contact management system in place. Lowering margins internally still means doing an excellent job for your customers externally — never compromising on quality.

TOP OPPORTUNITY

› **Educating your customers.** When you demonstrate to your customers that you are trying to save them money, their loyalties increase. For example, showing them smart irrigation practices to reduce water consumption and minimize erosion goes a long way in keeping them as loyal customers.

The author is a freelance journalist with more than 20 years' experience writing about the Green Industry. Contact him at tecrain@goinggreenguy.com.





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[Coming in September]

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2012 marks *Landscape Management's* 50th year in publishing. Our year-long celebration culminates with coverage in our September issue. We'll profile the Green Industry's 50 biggest influencers, past and present. If you would like to nominate someone for us to profile, contact Senior Editor Beth Geraci at bgeraci@northcoastmedia.net.



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LESSONS LEARNED THE HARD WAY » BY CASEY PAYTON



Robert Wilton miscalculated when he mistook his banker for his friend.



Robert Wilton

COMPANY: Clintar Landscape Management

HEADQUARTERS: Markham, Ontario

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 525

SERVICE BREAKDOWN: 30% maintenance; 20% landscape enhancements; 50% snow and ice control services

CLIENT BREAKDOWN: 95% commercial; 5% residential estates

ROBERT WILTON HAS lots of friends. As an accomplished landscape business owner, making connections comes easily. But one person that Wilton, who is now president of Clintar Landscape Management in Markham, Ontario, learned was *not* his friend was his banker. It's a lesson he had to learn the hard way in his earlier years of business.

After almost a decade of smooth sailing with his bank, Wilton was unprepared when the financial institution decided to call him about his mid-six-figures loan. Wilton says banks often view the landscape industry as having a lot of risk exposure, which is one reason he suspects he was called. Looking back, he says it was a big mistake believing his banker was his friend. That allowed him to forget the fact that he could be asked to pay back his loan at any moment.

"When they asked for their money back, I didn't have the money to give them," remembers Wilton. "So it was a very scary time."

After almost six months of sleepless nights spent trying to figure out where he could get the money, Wilton was fortunate enough to find some "angel capital" through a family friend.

"It was definitely a high-risk loan for that friend, but

I paid it back," says Wilton. "And today, I don't owe the banks any money."

Lessons learned

Wilton says that the experience taught him a few key lessons that will ensure he's never in that position again:

1 Banks don't like risk. "Banks are not there to finance start-up businesses," advises Wilton. "They are there to carefully loan money based upon a guarantee of secu-

WHEN THEY ASKED FOR THEIR MONEY BACK, I DIDN'T HAVE THE MONEY TO GIVE THEM. SO IT WAS A VERY SCARY TIME.

rity. They don't want risk. It's not venture capitalism, it's money that's coming as a result of providing sufficient security."

Wilton says it's a common mistake to assume you can count on a bank for any needed cash, and he warns that getting a loan is not like using an ATM. Be prepared to show the bank why they're not taking a huge risk with you.

2 Keeping records is important. Keeping good records is something Wilton says many in the industry ignore. But he says it's at their peril.

"Accurate and up-to-date accounting is absolutely vital," says Wilton, who admits his old "shoebox accounting methods" might have contributed to the bank's decision to call him on his loan. "If you don't understand your financials, find someone who does. I didn't have good accounting records when this happened. Now I have the best ever. I hired a controller and gave her full authority to manage the cash. She cost me more than I ever wanted to pay, but I've found now that she's saved me a lifetime. We used to get overdraft charges regularly — now that would never happen."

3 Be honest. Wilton says his communication with his suppliers helped save the business.

"We did not make promises to our suppliers that were overdue," he reports. "We were just completely upfront with them and explained that our intent was to pay them, but we could only pay a little bit at a time — even if it took a year or more. Because we were honest and kept those promises, many of those people are still our suppliers today. As simple as it sounds as a principle, honesty is incredibly huge when you're in difficult times."

Payton is a freelance writer with seven years of experience covering landscaping.

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