

The Natural

Once scoffed at for his 'hippie' ways, landscaper Hendrikus Schraven's personal, nature-inspired ideas now attract discerning clients — and garner awards

BY MIKE PERRAULT

A decade ago, when an extended drought and an accompanying irrigation ban turned Seattle lawns every shade of brown, landscaper Hendrikus Schraven's properties remained noticeably green and healthy. So noticeable, in fact, that the Holland-born president of Hendrikus Schraven Landscape Construction & Design, Inc. was accused of secretly watering his clients' turf at night. Baffled radio station reporters stuck microphones in his face demanding to know how he got away with it.

"Nobody could believe that I wasn't putting water down," Schraven recalls with a laugh. But when he launched into a technical explanation of an organic approach emphasizing carefully nurtured soils, microorganisms, plant uptake and proper drainage, many people tuned him out. It's a response he has faced since even before founding his Issaquah, WA-based landscape construction and design company in 1974. His approach has been perceived as everything from a

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Schraven constructed these walls with stone wedging without using mortar.

"We don't design the commonplace. We don't believe in kits. Like fingerprints, snowflakes and the stripes of a zebra, every project is unique." — Hendrikus Schraven

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counter-culture hippie trend to an environmental extremist's marketing ploy.

Today, however, more landscape professionals and backyard gardeners are listening. Schraven's 26-year-old company has garnered dozens of awards and a growing client base. In this booming economy, he has to turn away nearly three out of four prospective clients.

Schraven could easily grow his design, construction, installation and maintenance business to accommodate more customers, but he's more interested in focusing on quality, not quantity. He also wants time to research and implement new techniques that allow him to design and install unique landscapes that blend into the natural surroundings.

Working intuitively

The 47-year-old Schraven learned about the importance of soil quality and began developing an acute sense of ecological balance while working with his father on the family farm in Holland.

"We would walk through a field that we were going to plow, and we would just smell the dirt," Schraven remembers. "You instantly knew — by just touching with the hand, smelling it, feeling it — whether the soil was good or bad. There was no real scientific process involved; it was an inherited thing."

Julian Durant, Schraven's right-hand man and friend for nearly 15 years, says his boss's upbringing also instilled in him a passion and reverence for nature and a steadfast commitment to preserving the environment. He demands the same commitment from employees.

"We believe in the wonder and vitality of natural elements: wood, water, stone, wind, fire, earth, plants," Schraven says. He balances technology and art by using organic fertilizers and sprays, including kelp meal, rock phosphate, green sand, humate and compost, while factoring in conservation and recycling.

Schraven is adamant about good soil, amended sub-surface soil, proper drainage and a good medium for root expansion and moisture retention. "If you do the process right and stabilize the soil, you have a living organism that is feeding your plants so that your plants can uptake



Hendrikus Schraven

minerals and strengthen their immune systems," says Schraven, who traveled to China last year to share his expertise on soil revitalization.

"If the roots go down and the soil is composed in such a way that it retains moisture, yet also has the ability to percolate, what you have is what nature does; nature has been doing it for billions of years. All I'm doing is using modern technology to actually establish a nice, thick soil layer for plant life to thrive in," he says.

Waterfalls, tree houses

Schraven's company rarely hires subcontractors other than for high voltage tasks and other highly specialized roles. His company tackles everything from designing water features that look as if they've been part of the landscape for a century to ancient-looking rock walls, lively gardens and forest-like settings, says Tina Peterson, company business manager. That doesn't mean the firm won't take on such tasks as tree houses, hot tubs, trellises, decks, bridges or landslide restorations.

Because the landscape design and construction firm can pick and choose clients, it can take on more residential jobs where homeowners look for — and can afford to pay for — artistry, rather than focus on the bottom line. Typical landscape projects for the company range from \$20,000 to \$1 million.

When homeowner Julie Denney and her husband wanted two waterfalls installed outside their rustic north-west pacific home, the couple turned to Schraven based on a word-of-mouth recommendation. Julie Denney was taken aback by Schraven's enthusiasm and creativity. "You have to kind of listen to him and picture the visual ideas he has in his mind," Denney says, adding that she had to give him creative license and trust that he "knew what he was going for." He also disguised a structural wall at the home to look like granite — a work of art, she says.

The key to creating such landscapes is having a clear vision of the finished space, Schraven insists. He learns with each new challenge, and he never stops researching and implementing new techniques. He currently has a patent pending for an innovative method to blow topsoil.

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He uses pump equipment that dispenses the topsoil at 4 to 8 cu. yds. per hour, and adds microorganisms, organic amendments and fertilizers so the soil retains an abundance of life. Also key is making sure the soil provides enough moisture for the plants, yet remains permeable enough to let the water through.

He carefully plans drainage systems and creates innovative approaches for erosion control, landslides and water features in hard-to-reach or sensitive areas. By using structural steel pilings and anchors, reinforcement bar, and wire mesh armatures, he blows shotcrete and carves and paints them to resemble natural granite or other rock outcroppings.

Schraven's projects have not only earned word-of-mouth accolades, they have garnered more than 30 awards from such organizations as the International Ero-

Shotcrete boulder techniques were used to camouflage the ugly steel anchoring system and provide long-term stabilization for this landslide restoration project.

sion Control Association, the Associated Landscape Contractors of America and its Washington chapter.

Tea for turf

For over a year, Schraven and his employees have been using a microbrewed tea to nourish plants and control foliar diseases. A special "microbrew," developed by Norbert Viet and marketed by Michael Alms of Growing Solutions, produces compost tea on an industrial scale with high concentrations of aerobic microorganisms to help reduce anaerobic growth in soil.

"A German came up with a way of reproducing microorganisms at an extremely rapid rate," Schraven explains. "We go from 10,000 (microorganisms) to over a billion in 18 hours with the use of vortex nozzles that spin in a tank. We put compost in and actually make a

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 tea brew that we put in our truck spray units."

The process not only helps break down organic matter, it prevents diseases and allows mineral uptake and vitamins to the plants, Schraven says.

Schraven also flies in earthworms from California and Oregon to add to the soil to create a self-sustaining ecosystem. "What happens is nature is starting to take care of things," he says. "We have no dieback. When I do my installation jobs, I don't even have a per-

centage that I count on loss of plants. I say if a plant isn't making it, it's my fault. There's no 5% loss factor."

After Schraven tests and retests his intuitive approaches — topsoils, organic amendments, fertilizers, etc. — he sends them to the Soil Foodweb, one of the more prominent laboratories, which is headed by Elaine Ingham. Although he trusts his instincts, he knows scientific proof convinces skeptics.

"Cost" of going organic

Schraven admits that what many prospective clients fear most about "going organic" is the perceived high cost. "They don't understand that it's actually going to save them money," Schraven says. "We fertilize our lawns a maximum of two times a year — and sometimes not at all, because we don't need to. The soil is building itself. You just need to add some of the organics and the rest keeps on going of its own accord."

It's not uncommon to reduce clients' fertilization and water use by 60% to 70%, he adds. "It's just not needed; things are established." He estimates that if the city of Seattle went organic and installation methods were changed, water consumption would drop at least 50%.

It's difficult for someone as passionate as Schraven is about nature to understand how many landscape indus-



Schraven designed this spa, which is gunit and lined with boulders. It includes seating areas and jets to keep water moving.

try professionals don't take more steps to cut pollution. So he pulls no punches when he blasts those who damage the environment.

"Industry standards are way, way below what I consider integrity level," he insists. "The way many landscapes are installed is what I call horrendous. I don't believe in industry standards of two or three inches of topsoil on compacted earth to lay lawns on. I don't believe in pit planting. I believe in getting a good foundation like nature intended."

Many landscapes look picture perfect, Schraven says, but have little or no sustainable base of life in them. "In short, they look fake and are deader than a doornail," he says. "I call it the 'individually wrapped slice of cheese syndrome.' They're shiny and packaged to the hilt, but no real food is to be found inside." He wonders why such people get into the business.

"I mean, you have to ask yourself why you're a landscaper," Schraven says. "Is it just a business? If so, you could have been into cardboard boxes or nails. Or is it a love that you have, something in your heart that you want to create? Do you really want to install more beauty on this planet and leave it a better place than when you got here?" **LM**