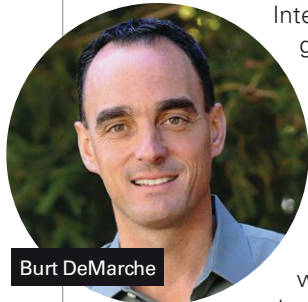


Off the (green) wall

Green wall and roof installations are a profitable endeavour for The LaurelRock Co.

AFTER HEARING A talk about living walls and roofs, Burt DeMarche was immediately interested in adding the service to his business. The owner of The LaurelRock Co. in Wilton, Conn., knew it would appeal to certain niche clients—particularly those interested in “going green.”

The talk that attracted DeMarche was given by George Irwin, the CEO of Green Living Technologies International (GLTi), a manufacturer of green roof and green wall panels.



Burt DeMarche

LaurelRock launched the service last year after having Irwin speak at an event of its own. Since then the service has seen slow but profitable growth—mostly through word of mouth. In fact, the company's first customer was a direct result of the event it sponsored with Irwin.

“One of the guys from the catering company at our event was opening a restaurant and wanted a green wall inside,” DeMarche says. “He let us put up a plaque that says we built and maintain the wall, so that gives us some good publicity.”

Ongoing maintenance is a revenue driver of the green wall business. LaurelRock comes once a week to hand water the restaurant wall and clean out the catch. Initially, the company came twice a week, but the restaurant took over some of the watering on its own. This client's system has no built-in irrigation, but the company has installed walls that have drip irrigation systems.

Besides watering, light is the most critical factor for a green wall to thrive and it may even dictate where walls can be installed. “Having someone on staff who has some knowledge of indoor plants and how to maintain them has been important to the success of this service,” DeMarche



Light is a critical factor for green wall health.

says. “Getting the proper lighting on the plants can be a challenge, particularly if there's not a lot of sunlight coming in. For the restaurant project we had to install light fixtures that came on via a timer at night since the plants weren't getting enough light during the daytime. A working knowledge of plant selection is also really important.”

Though green walls are more suited for commercial clients, DeMarche says LaurelRock has designed a vertical vegetable garden for a residential customer. “She wanted a vertical vegetable garden installed on her fence and ended up really liking it,” DeMarche says. “In the winter she wanted to bring it inside so she purchased a freestanding unit where we could hang the panels and she grew herbs in her family room during the winter.”

For the most part, the bigger sell on the residential side is for green roofs. DeMarche says so far the company has installed two green roofs and hopes to continue to see growing interest as more homeowners embrace a green lifestyle.

“With the roofs you have to get the architect on board because it does have to be designed as part of the home's design process,” DeMarche says. “But I do see the interest in it expanding as more customers become eco-conscious. They like the idea that it's not only environmentally friendly and reduces runoff, but it also looks really good.”

To date, the service has been profitable. DeMarche estimates there's at least a 20 percent net profit margin to be had on the jobs.

“Each time we do a project we're also learning more efficient ways to do the planting and transporting. The more we learn, the more profitable we'll be,” DeMarche says. “We're always looking to expand our knowledge and learn more.”

>> SERVICE SNAPSHOT

COMPANY: The LaurelRock Co.

HEADQUARTERS: Wilton, Conn.

WHY GREEN WALLS AND ROOFS?

“We saw George Irwin [CEO of Green Living Technologies International, a green wall and roof manufacturer] speak at a Professional Landcare Network event and got pretty interested in the idea,” says company owner Burt DeMarche. “We had George come speak at an event we were putting together at a client's farm and he trained us on building.”

INVESTMENT? “The main investment was time,” DeMarche says. “We had to invest time in researching the products and learning what to do.”

Payton is a freelance writer with eight years of experience writing about the landscape industry.