

Adding Design-Build Services



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If you have a turf maintenance company, you may notice additional revenue opportunities on client properties that you wish you could take advantage of. However, you might feel unsure of the skill sets needed to take on those projects successfully.

All landscape services are not created equal. As a matter of fact, running a maintenance business is quite different from running an installation business. And design, that's a whole different animal. So how do companies find success in doing all three?

As the founder of The Garden Continuum, Inc., a Medfield, MA based landscape design-build & fine gardening firm, I'm a firm believer in skill building by way of academic training, industry certifications, and aligning with professional associations. But I'm also an audacious entrepreneur. I've taken on projects that I was not yet fully trained to do. At some point, you have to make that leap into new challenges, but your approach makes all the difference. Here are some tips on the right way to build the skills you need to grow your business in 2020.

First, it's important to hold each of these landscape service skill sets in high regard. You can push the envelope and get curious about what services you can take on yourself provided you're also honoring the expertise of individuals that are running businesses that specialize in these segments of the industry. Just as I know that I could aerate and slice seed a lawn if asked, I'm also clear that I'm neither an expert nor authority on that segment of our industry.



Employees of The Garden Continuum, Inc., based in Medfield, MA, install a landscape design

As a business owner, I'm not above asking for help or partnering with companies to deliver services jointly. Sometimes that's a better solution than trying to do it myself. So when I need to tackle specific turf care issues, I reach out for guidance from the experts around me because it isn't a service line we regularly offer at The Garden Continuum (TGC). For example, we partner with three local companies that provide us with reputable lawn health care services, aerovating, aerating, and compost tea applications, as well as general mowing services when we need it.

Finding good partners to work with isn't all that hard. Ask around for starters. As contractors, we all know people—clients, vendors, and association members—so reach out and ask for referrals. Local associations are a great place to look because you know that companies that go to the trouble of participating in a trade association are interested in building their business and protecting their reputation. Next up, you must have some partnership standards. It's a great way to weed out companies you don't want to work with. For TGC, we only work with firms that are fully insured and willing to list us as a named insured on their policy and sign a hold harmless agreement. We also have a code of conduct policy that helps clients feel comfortable with all our contractor partners.

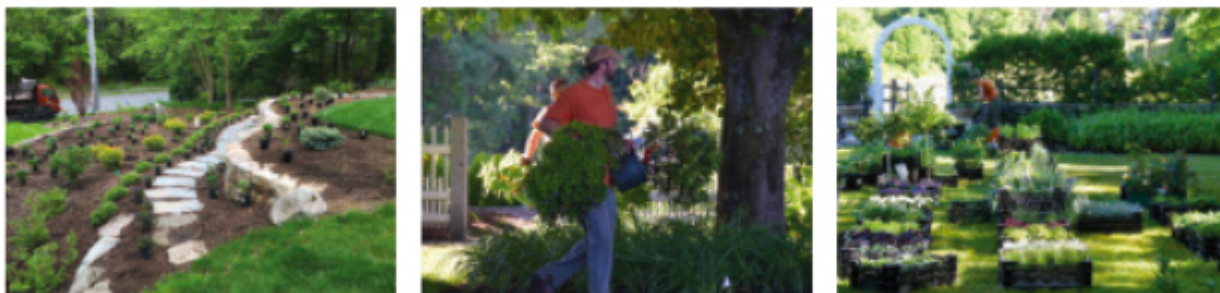
Of course, a concern I often hear is, "I don't want to share the property with another contractor. What if they take my work?" This is where relationship building comes in. Most specialists want to stay in their lane of expertise. Be clear about what help you need and equally clear about the services you expect to keep. This is easy for me when I'm bringing in an

irrigation contractor, but can get tricky if I'm bringing in a general landscape firm. The point is clarity—who does what and when. Don't be above getting it all in writing.

Dare To Design

All humans are intrinsically equipped to design. If your company trucks have signage—it was designed for visual impact. If you have equipment trailers—the structure was designed to fit gear efficiently. How about a website? You most likely had a hand in designing it. The font selections and colors that represent your company—these are all elements of design.

The point is, each business design decision you make is steeped in the same basics as landscape design. Namely, the ordering of space in a pleasing and high functioning manner for the best overall outcomes. There are certainly rules for design and to excel, you need to pursue training eventually, but that doesn't mean it's totally off limits to someone who doesn't have a landscape design degree.



The Garden Continuum specializes in landscape design-build and fine gardening, as shown here. But when clients need services outside TGC's realm of expertise, founder Monique Allen believes in the power of partnerships. Insurance policies, codes of conduct, clarity on responsibilities, and written contracts can help the partnership run smoothly.

First, find beginner landscape design training that will help you or a key employee develop some basic skills. There are online and association seminars as well as botanical gardening classes available. Once you gain some skills, start small and let your clients know that you're learning. This isn't something to be ashamed of, it's totally honorable. Some clients will love the idea of being on the cutting edge of your business growth!

Also find certified landscape designers interested in partnering with you. If you're new to the design process, be sure to align yourself with a seasoned professional willing to share their expertise about in-field application and delivery. Working with them in a mentor/protégé capacity can be a lucrative win-win for you both.

If you're considering hiring an in-house designer, I highly recommend the candidate also have estimating and project management skills. It's worth the increased salary investment to work with a well-rounded individual that will help to grow your business without adding burdens to your already busy maintenance roster.

Build Your Build Knowledge

When we endeavor to build a landscape from start to finish, there are many moving parts. The outside environment is a living, breathing system that includes diverse levels of detail that require some patience and training to manage. So you may want to start small, offering planting upgrades or small hardscape additions.

Even small projects will require an understanding of the living elements you'll encounter. Details from the soil layer up to the plant layer will need consideration as do environmental factors such as: sun and shade conditions; water availability and drainage; and topography and exposures. It sounds daunting, but you may be familiar with many of these elements already. The difference is that working with turf is more streamlined than working with the plethora of trees, shrubs, perennials, and groundcovers available.

Growers, nursery pros, and greenhouse managers have been excellent resources to expand my knowledge of specific plants. They love plants and are invested in keeping them alive. Partner up with their expertise to increase your plant education. Also take the time to learn about plant classifications (taxonomy). This seemingly complex system, once you get the basics, has coded within it extremely useful guidelines to help you make the best decisions about plants under your care. Botanical gardens are also a great resource!

Be patient with yourself—it's a long game. As long as you're incrementally learning, you're doing right by your clients. The plant kingdom is huge and no landscape professional knows it all. What's important is that you know how to access learning resources.

The peripheral disciplines—hardscapes (walls, patios, walks, asphalt, concrete, etc.), irrigation, low voltage lighting, and water features—require developed skills to deliver those services effectively. I don't recommend taking any of these on without some training and/or team building to ensure you have a high skill set on your side for the project.

When it comes to plant knowledge or hardscape skills, it's not about already having the expertise, it's about knowing how to access the right learning resources. More on this below.

Associations & Vendors

Trade associations will participate in, or put on, training events, conferences, and trade shows annually that offer education in various hardscape and peripheral disciplines. At TGC, we participate in all five of the annual meetings put on by the Massachusetts Association of Landscape Professionals. Almost every association we belong to holds an annual trade show event: the Massachusetts Nursery & Landscape Association Trade Show; the Ecological Landscape Alliance Conference & Eco-Marketplace; the Northeast Organic Farming Association regional conferences; and The Green Industry & Equipment Expo. These all offer training we use to build new skills. The hardest part is carving out the time to attend. All I can say is, "Do It!" You'll be happy you did once you can confidently offer these services.



Monique Allen (right) shares her insights on landscape business growth through the TGC Academy™. Her latest book was just released in March.

Keep in mind that many product suppliers also deliver affordable training annually. Some will even help with designing, estimating, ordering, and installing your first projects. They want you to succeed, because when you do, you will buy more products from them. Take full advantage of this amazing and cost efficient resource. For instance, we've attended Techo-Bloc (techo-bloc.com) product training and then had help working through the actual paving design from our materials yard. We also took a class with CAST Lighting (cast-lighting.com) and they were totally on board with reviewing our designs and materials specs. They also offered to come to the job site to help us with our first install.

Business, Business, Business

As you expand services, running your business will become more complex. It's easy to take on the in-field work—working **IN** your business—because building trade skills is hands-on, comfortable, and most likely why you entered landscaping. Yet working **ON** your business—recruiting, onboarding, and training new staff; building internal systems and policy (including safety programs); and setting budgets and pricing—is often more tedious and less comfortable. But when you don't tackle these elements early and head on, you could be setting yourself up to become overwhelmed as services expand. These support elements may not be all that sexy to think about, but doing so will protect your business and ensure you are truly realizing tangible current or anticipated future revenue growth.

I recommend signing up for some basic business training as a way to avoid getting bogged down in the all-too-common owner stress cycle. Trade associations often offer annual landscape business building seminars which will come in handy as you expand your services. There are also online training programs and virtual business coaches that can help you develop your business mindset, streamline your service offerings, and solidify your sales strategies. Investing in self-development ensures a more positive owner experience.

Keep Learning & Expanding

I've built my professional expertise by doing everything I've listed above. These efforts have made my business very successful and fun to run. I have a fantastic team of managers and field staff that I encourage to do the same kind of skill building each year.

No one knows it all, but as long as you stay hungry and humble, and use your ambition to drive you toward new business adventures, the landscape industry should keep you satisfied for at least another decade!



Allen is the founder of The Garden Continuum, Inc., a landscape design/build & fine gardening firm in Medfield, MA. She is an industry blogger, trainer, and landscape business coach through the TGC Academy™. Her new book, *Stop Landscaping, Start Life-Scaping*, was just released in March and can be found [here](#). She's also the author of: *Landscape Business Owner's Survival Guide* – a free cash flow management eBook; and *The Landscaper's Freedom Formula* – a three-module business video training series. A free library of short training videos, including topics such as "How to Build A Bluestone Patio," and "How to Renovate a Perennial Garden" can be found on the [TGC Academy page](#).

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