

INTERVIEW



LEADING LADY

By Marisa Palmieri

When *Lawn & Landscape* honored Linda Novy with a Leadership Award in 2000, it was primarily for her efforts leading a company. At the time she was president and CEO of Gardeners' Guild, the Richmond, Calif.-based landscape firm where she'd been since 1976.

Since exiting Gardeners' Guild in an ESOP (employee stock ownership program) transaction in 2003, she's been on her own, acquiring as much knowledge as she can about ecological landscape management.

Today, as a sole proprietor of Linda J. Novy & Associates, you could say she's leading in a new arena: helping both commercial property managers and landscape maintenance contractors down a path where they can work together in a sustainable way.

What have you been up to since you were a Leadership winner in 2000?

I started an ESOP program at my company in 1998 and sold 40 percent of the stock to employees. We had a plan and timeframe to go from there and in 2003 I sold the rest of the stock to the employees. I consulted for the company for two years following that. Then I started consulting to other landscape companies and to property owners and managers.

One of the reasons I transitioned was I wanted to get back into horticulture more personally and directly. From 2004 to 2008 I started a nursery called Mellinor Farms with my sister. We grew native grasses and other perennials starts, also vegetables and other plants that we sold at the farmer's market, to the water district and to private parties. It was so fun and I learned so much.

I also went back to school, and that's

been really enriching. I studied ecological landscape management and soil management at the local junior college, and then I attended Sonoma State to get my certificate in Sustainable Landscape. It's a year-long program with classes and a project submittal. And I did complimentary training to that, which is the Bay-Friendly Landscaping certification, which a lot of landscape contractors here are getting. It's pretty leading-edge stuff.

How is being a sole proprietor different from working at Gardeners' Guild?

We had 125 employees, so a lot of my time was administrative and employee relations when I owned Gardeners' Guild. However, I did have strong relationships with many clients. At least half my time was out in the field looking at properties under our care doing quality control and seeing what kind of plants and problems

there were and how we were managing them. That really is my true love. Like many, you become gradually more successful and larger and pretty soon you lose the time to spend with your clients and the gardens. That's what I get to do now and that's what I love.

Describe what you do now.

I'm serving as a consulting landscape manager/designer helping to educate property managers in the basic concepts of ecology and apply sustainable management to their properties. Once property managers start to understand this, they're excited about it. Of course, there are savings when you save resources. I don't have employees, so I will work with the property managers and I'll interface with the landscape contractor. For example, with one client we have team meetings with the arborists, landscape contractor,

property manager and myself. We review soil management, IPM, etc.

Many property managers, they either don't have the expertise in landscape management or they don't have the time, so they really appreciate having someone with the maintenance experience and the expertise to support their sustainability

“ You just have to wind down and **create some space** and figure out what you're going to do next.” – Linda Novy

initiatives. Many commercial properties are either LEED certified or moving that way. They want their properties to be managed to LEED-EB (Existing Building) standards.

Have you seen progress in the industry when it comes to sustainability?

The public is more open to native species now. I just recently gave a talk where five of the people there were CEOs of companies talking about how the economic and sustainability environment had shifted. In 2000 even, it was still an uphill battle to talk with people about IPM. A lot of times you heard clients say, 'I don't care; nuke it.' There wasn't an openness to be ecologically smart in property management. I have definitely seen a shift.

It's really fun to have been a landscape contractor running a business and now work with property managers and now see how the landscape industry presents itself. I've gotten to see a 360 view. It's like an understanding I have for waitresses. I waitressed throughout college, so now when I go into a restaurant I have empathy for the waitresses. I have empathy for landscape contractors, too.

There's been a lot of progress, but there is room for more in the delivery. A lot of landscape companies promote themselves

as having ecological core values, but when it comes down to delivery, companies are trying to make do with fewer managers; they may not have the time to be in the field. I'm seeing a lot of good promotion and a lot of landscape companies are investing in training managers, but I also think they're pressed for time and

efficiency and want to do things the same old way. There has to be more thought in the field, and I think there is a role for independent consultants to team up.

There are simple things landscape companies can do. You can't manage what you can't measure. So it's looking at water use on site. Tracking that helps the client see very clearly the return on investment, and that lets them help owners know a building is more valuable because we got operations costs down, for example.

Is this where you thought you'd be today?

I didn't really have a plan. I knew that I was moving toward my exit strategy from running a large business. But I knew that whatever my future held it would be in horticulture and nature somehow, but I didn't know what that was going to look like. I was with Gardeners' Guild from '76 to '03 – that was a big chunk of my life. Then I worked for the company for two years after, so it was such a big commitment. You just have to wind down and create some space and figure out what you're going to do next.

It's funny that you say that. In your Leadership profile in 2000 you said, "I always think that you have to create a

void. If there's no space there, nothing new can come in." So you still feel that way?

How funny. I totally believe that. If your cup is empty, the universe will fill it. It can be scary, but sometimes you have to step into that void and know that something good is around the corner and co-create that.

What advice can you give other business owners about exit strategies?

In your exit strategy, certainly think about how you'll be compensated, but also about how your values and environmental ethics will be carried on by the new owners.

A lot of people sell their business and the business dissolves or fails or they go on in a way that you don't like. We sometimes forget about the deeper satisfaction of keeping a company culture and environmental values going and growing into the future. That way it feels more like a legacy and makes the accomplishments of that period of your life all the more real.

You first bought into Gardeners' Guild when you were 27. Knowing what you know now, what advice would you give to yourself then?

I probably would say create a business plan as soon as you can. Even if it's a one-page business plan. And get great professional input.



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For more on what Novy's been up to and the industry issues she's tracking, visit www.lawnandlandscape.com/leadershiplessons.



Lawn & Landscape Leadership

LEADERSHIP LESSONS

Welcome to Leadership Lessons, a new feature from *Lawn & Landscape*. This month we spoke with Linda Novy, former president and CEO of Gardeners' Guild, now principal of Linda J. Novy & Associates in Fairfax, Calif. Starting next month on our back page, we'll catch up with former winners of *Lawn & Landscape's* Leadership Awards. The Leadership Awards program, founded in 1999, honors professionals who've made a difference in the environment, their businesses and helped shape the green industry. Would you like to nominate someone for a Leadership Award? E-mail Editor Chuck Bowen at cbowen@gie.net.