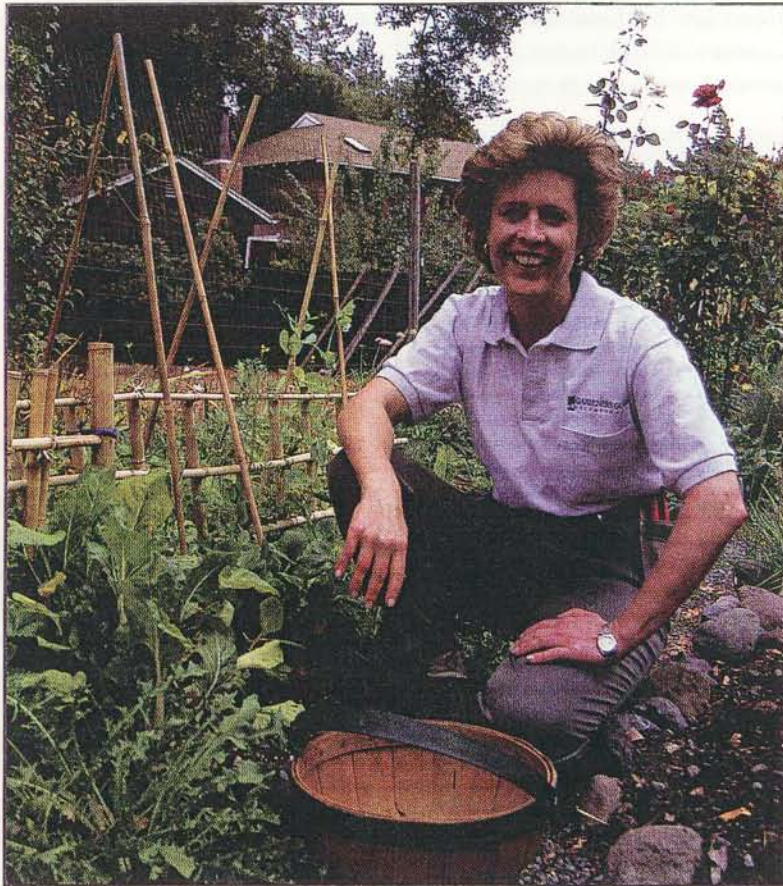


# Linda Novy

*As a backyard gardener at heart with a reverence for the environment, Linda Novy is a natural leader.*



Luckily for the landscape industry, secretarial work didn't pan out for Linda Novy, whose foray into the plant business began when she was working an unfulfilling job at a San Francisco office. In search of something more in keeping with her long-time interest in plants and love of nature, she began moonlighting as the Plant Lady and launched her "Power Plants" business (complete with a snappy, memorable logo of a fist thrusting through a flower pot). She soon landed a job tending plants at an accounting firm and her business snowballed from there. "I didn't

really know what I was doing," remembered Novy, now president and chief executive officer, Gardeners' Guild, San Rafael, Calif. "I just plunged in."

Novy eventually was let go from her secretarial job because it was "obvious my heart wasn't in it," she said, adding that being fired was a "cosmic boot" to go after what she really wanted to do — to turn her part-time hobby into a full-time pursuit.

This early professional experience taught Novy a key life lesson. "You have to choose a career you feel passionate about," she urged. "That's what will

## Profile

### Linda Novy

Company:

**Gardeners' Guild**

Location:

**San Rafael, California**

#### Career Highlights:

Leading a widely respected, innovative landscape management company, promoting sustainable landscape management practices, being honored by the National Association of Women Business Owners with its "Trailblazer" award in 1998.



carry you through. If you don't love what you're doing, you don't have the heart in it to guide you through those (difficult) moments."

Again, the fates were at work when Novy first came into contact with Gardeners' Guild in 1974. After answering a classified ad regarding two horses in need of sponsorship, Novy met the company's first owners, Alan Weiss and Adam Blackwelder. In 1976, she ended up buying into half of Gardeners' Guild with the help of a loan from her father. In

1980, she bought the remainder of the company, which currently brings in more than \$5 million in annual revenue.

#### LEARNING ALONG THE WAY.

Novy credits Weiss with introducing her to the many facets of the landscape industry. "Being 25 years old and new to the whole business, it was enlightening to see how you brought people and materials to a job site and created this landscape," Novy remembered. "It was very exciting for me. I soaked it up like a sponge."

"Weiss showed me how you get

things done. I saw the model and saw how it worked," she said, adding that her mentor had strategic alliances with "some really talented people throughout the landscape industry," which helped her learn the business and establish contacts.

Much of Novy's management training has been "trial by fire," she said, especially when growing the company from six to 115 employees while adjusting her management style in the process. "How do you get there? How do I learn to manage in a more executive way?," she said of the issues she constantly dealt with as she grew along with her company.

One early management challenge for Novy was geographic: The question of where to locate her constantly expanding company. "Whenever you relocate it's a big challenge for a company," Novy noted. Gardeners' Guild was first at a horse ranch, then out in a remote rural area, and then moved to San Rafael, where it soon outgrew its space and needed to relocate yet again.

Tired of contending with landlords, this time the company found financing to buy its own building, which has been a wise financial move and has given the company a sense of security, according to Novy, who advises all contractors to own their own space, if possible. "It's been an excellent investment," she said.

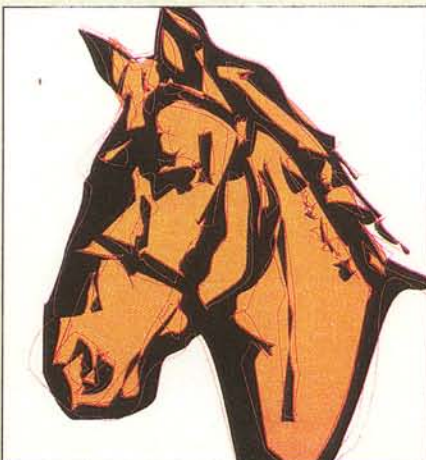
Another smart investment for Novy has been learning how to lead. For the most part, this means knowing how to follow, she pointed out.

"To lead, you need to know what it's like on the other side of the coin," Novy said. "If you don't have a sense of appreciation of the people you're leading, how are you going to reach them? How do you communicate your vision and get people on the same page?"

With an eye on constant improvement, Novy often has worked with Maureen Hochler, a personal coach who helped her make the leap from a flat management style to one that complements Gardeners' Guild's dynamic state, she described. Revamping her initial approach, for example, meant adding

## Equestrian Insights

"You've got to know what your company is capable of doing. Go with it, get in the rhythm of it and then start to implement change."



As a rider since childhood, horses have always been a big part of Linda Novy's life, personally and professionally. In particular, riding has taught her how to be a better boss, she noted. "There are so many parallels between dressage and management issues," she said. "When I'm riding and I ask Spyder (her horse) to do something, I give him an instruction and release and see if he does it. If I keep hammering at him and never give him a release, however, he never has a chance to do it correctly.

"That is such a metaphor for my management style — I continue to learn that I must do it right and then give the instruction again if it's needed, to give people a chance to respond," she said. "When I'm asking (Spyder) to change a gait, to slow down or speed up, I need to accept what he's doing first and ride it though. Then I can ask for a change of gait. It's the same at work. You've got to know what your company is capable of doing. Go with it, get in the rhythm of it and then start to implement change."



additional management layers or infrastructure to the company so it wasn't simply her on one side and her employees on the other, Novy added.

Having a coach also has helped her to better solve problems and deal with the occasionally overwhelming issues that come along with leading a company, such as implementing organizational changes or dealing with sensitive personnel issues, she said.

"More people need personal coaches than is recognized," Novy observed, adding that all managers should be open to outside advice and guidance. "An executive needs a sounding board from time to time before bringing certain issues to senior management."

#### ENVIRONMENTALLY ORIENTED.

Novy's reverence for nature dates back to her childhood, while growing up in La Grange Park, Ill. near a forest preserve. "I spent all of my free time outdoors, in the woods, with trees. I grew to love being outside and in nature," she recalled, noting that the great irony is that her mom was always trying to get her to work outside in the garden and she always resisted.

Novy's interest in environmental issues traces back to her youth as well. "I've always been concerned about doing what's right for the environment," she said. "I grew up in the era of everyone spraying chemicals, when they sprayed DDT on all the elm trees. I grew up seeing migrating canaries dead on the ground."

A severe drought in California in the 1970s also helped shape Novy's environmental consciousness. During this time, Novy and her employees were trucking in as much water as possible to save whatever they could. "It was an emotional experience to see plants die," she said. "(The drought) felt like it was so hard on nature but it showed the resilience of native plants."

That drought inspired the Marin County Municipal Water District to launch innovative conservation programs. It also motivated Novy and Gardeners' Guild as a whole to partici-

## A Few Testimonials

Linda Novy's industry success is not that surprising, according to two of her long-time advisers and friends, Richard Reasoner, president, Dendron Landscape Consulting, Stinson Beach, Calif., and Maureen Hochler, Novy's personal coach and a human resources consultant and mediator with Hochler and Associates, Corte Madera, Calif.

"Her company is one that when you walk in, employees have a high *esprit de corps*. Most people really like being there. They're filled with certain kind of energy."

When Reasoner first met Novy almost 20 years ago, his immediate impression was that she had potential, he recalled. "She had the energy to be successful," he said. "She is very employee and customer-oriented and has a holistic approach to business."

Hochler, who has known Novy for about 15 years, agreed with this assessment. "Linda cares about people, about her clients and quality of services she provides," she said. "She hears and responds to their needs."

"She has an open and warm personality and people like her. She responds positively to them and they respond positively back."

Hochler added that Novy's hands-off management style entrusts employees with their individual responsibilities. "People have a lot of freedom and autonomy to do their jobs," she said.

Novy's management approach filters directly into the Gardeners' Guild culture, Reasoner pointed out. "Her company is one that when you walk in, employees have a high *esprit de corps*," he observed. "Most people really like being there. They're filled with a certain kind of energy."

In terms of her environmental leadership, Novy's concern and dedication is the real thing. "She practices what she preaches," Reasoner said. "It's not just a sales thing. A thousand years ago she might have been a farmer."



pate more actively in local environmental issues. Novy currently serves as chair of the water district's citizens' advisory committee in order to broaden her understanding about water policy and issues such as water recycling and conservation, she said. This community involvement also helps her hone her leadership skills in a public forum and bring more of a holistic approach to her job with Gardeners' Guild. "Each involvement has such a great reward," she said.

Under Novy's leadership, environmental stewardship has been a critical component of the Gardeners' Guild philosophy and has garnered the company plenty of regional recognition and awards.

Novy admits that getting the message out about sustainable practices has been a demanding but rewarding undertaking. "How do you take something you feel spiritually and emotionally strong about and get it out there into the market?" she said, describing her initial challenge.

The company's well-received sustainable landscape management program, which promotes a gradual shift toward less synthetic, less toxic practices such as reduced chemical applications and organic fertilizer use, according to Novy.

Selling customers on this program simply has been a matter of education — getting clients to look at the bigger picture and understand how conserving, recycling and reusing resources fits into the larger framework of landscaping's relationship to the environment, Novy related.

Gardeners' Guild's environmentally-conscious services are helping to transition landscape maintenance from being "high input/output industrial practices," Novy said, adding that there is a critical need to retain a small company sensibility even as the company expands. Otherwise, "something gets lost along the way," she said. Through Gardeners' Guild, Novy wants to show that a company can remain independent, environ-

***"Landscape managers are not just working with a commodity. We're stewarding living things that deserve our respect for the many values that they provide."***

mentally-minded, employee-owned and succeed, she said.

Novy's devotion to environmental issues is fueled in part by her extracurricular gardening pursuits — a one acre, creek-side plot filled with fruit and vegetables. The garden also features a once-barren restoration area that now includes more than 65 varieties of native trees and shrubs that Novy has reintroduced. "My garden at home is my inspiration," she said. "It keeps me in touch with that spiritual dimension (of plants). Landscape managers are not just working with a commodity. We're stewarding living things that deserve our respect for the many values that they provide, such as habitat and erosion management."

#### **LOOKING AHEAD.**

Novy's focus on the broader picture and her desire to create a succession plan led her to transition Gardeners' Guild into an employee-owned company in the late 1990s. Implementing the Employee Stock Ownership Plan (ESOP) was really a metaphor for her own management style — a need to continue evolving, Novy said. While she's been comfortable making independent decisions for the company, the ESOP was a way to bring more voices into the company's decision making process and get more feedback, she said.

Novy predicts that in five to 10 years, another gradual transition will occur: The

employees will buy into her 60 percent ownership of Gardeners' Guild and she'll become a minority owner in the company, she said. This doesn't mean she's going to disappear, however. "Gardeners' Guild is my baby. As long as they need me to consult, be a part-time CEO, I'm here," she said, adding that she appreciates the fact that there are so many people to learn from throughout the company.

Unlike many managers who rarely see the outside of their offices, life has always extended beyond Gardeners' Guild for Novy and will continue to do so. In addition to being an avid gardener and equestrian, she wants to expand on her environmental studies and learn more about ecology, farming, land restoration and biodynamic gardening, to name just a few interests.

"There's a lot to be learned from every discipline that can be folded into (the landscape business)," she said, "It all weaves together." As she thinks about her future, Novy looks forward to leading a less premeditated life. "I want to be unplanned. I've been structured for 26 years, and every minute has been planned," she said.

"I always think that you have to create a void. If there's no space there, nothing new can come in." ■

*The author, Cynthia Greenleaf, is Associate Editor of Lawn & Landscape magazine.*