

Connecting People to Plants



Source: www.TurfMagazine.com

Three decades later, Heidi Heiland still passionate about landscaping



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Heidi Heiland who started her business in 1981, says she still loves running it but is turning over more of the day-to-day decisions to her team, which she admits is difficult for her.

IMAGES COURTESY OF HEIDI HEILAND LIFESTYLE GARDENS.

An old piece of advice by Confucius says, “Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life.” Although some business experts now dismiss this concept – after all, work is work – it’s safe to say that enjoying your job sure makes it easier to show up each day.

Just ask Heidi Heiland, owner of Heidi’s Lifestyle Gardens in Plymouth, Minn., which is about 15 miles northwest of downtown Minneapolis.

She’s been showing up every day for 32 years and is still passionate and committed to her business, her clients and her employees.



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Heidi Heiland shows some of her favorite plants during the taping of a television spot. Her message is “Gardens to enhance your life.”

“If you like what you do, it isn’t a burden,” Heiland says.

Heiland’s cadre of loyal customers can follow her on a regular segment on the local television news, subscribe to a monthly e-newsletter or just browse www.BloomOnMN.com for a wealth of horticulture tips, seasonal highlights or

inspiration from hundreds of professional-quality portfolio pictures. On every page, potential clients are encouraged to contact Heidi's Lifestyle Gardens for more information.

"I work with an amazing woman who produces our website," Heiland credits. "Karla loves what we do. She believes in holistic foods and a lifestyle that brings great joy." The heading on each page reads "Gardens to enhance your life. Landscapes to inspire your spirit."

Heidi's Lifestyle Gardens.

Founder and Owner: Heidi Heiland

Founded: 1981

Headquarters: Plymouth, Minn.

Markets: Minneapolis-St. Paul and surrounding communities

Services: Consulting and coaching, design/build, garden maintenance, horticultural therapy, seasonal services, mulching, container gardening and landscape lighting

Employees: Five fulltime, 15 additional seasonal employees

Website: <http://bloomonmn.com>

"We've struggled about what to give away for free," Heiland notes. "Maybe we could start a garden club for \$5 a month. You get Plants 101 for free, but with your membership you get plants 303. It's hard to figure out how to monetize it."

Her television appearances also offer a way to get the word out about her business, as well as educate consumers on proper horticulture procedures. Her enthusiasm onscreen is contagious.

"My mom made me take public speaking and art appreciation in school," she laughs. "It really helped, but I was still very nervous in the beginning. But I'm a enough of a ham to enjoy it now. The more I do it, the better I get at it."

One of the biggest challenges is to compress her enthusiasm into four-minute segments. "I bring too much stuff and run out of time," she says. "Afterwards I'm always thinking that I should have said that. Or I missed something. I'm my own worst critic."

To supply Lifestyle Gardens, a 10,000-square-foot greenhouse and nursery in Plymouth, Minn., allows the company to offer a wide range of plants. They can house or locate specialty plants for unique landscape projects and cultivate Minnesota-adapted annuals, perennials, roses, shrubs and ornamental trees.

Core values

Heiland's philosophy centers around the people/plant connection, which is embodied in the company's core values:

1. Horticulturally passionate
2. Dedicated and ambitious
3. Teamwork oriented

4. Caring
5. Positive
6. Flexible

"I was at an MNLA (Minnesota Nursery & Landscape Association) meeting of CEOs and the speaker asked how many of our companies had core values," Heiland recalls. "Out of 50 people, only two of us raised our hands. I was surprised."

Heiland finds that using core values makes the often-challenging task of personnel management a bit easier. "We use them to hire, fire and compensate our employees," she says. "In a small business, your employees can become your friends, and having core values backs up your decisions."

Lifestyle Gardens has five full-time, year round employees who serve as the leadership team, with about 15 more coming on to work through the gardening season, late March to early December. "We've become more strategic of late," Heiland notes. "As we get better in the field, we work on our front office. The team is making more decisions and I'm letting go, which can be hard!"

To that end, Heiland and her staff have worked through several business exercises. "We're now following a book called 'Traction,'" she explains. ("Traction: Get a Grip on Your Business," Gino Wickman). "We redid our organizational chart and talked about responsibilities for our staff members.

"It's actually holding me more accountable," she continues. "When you start a business with a partner when you're 17, you're used to being in control. Now I have an advisory council to keep me in check!"

When her business first began to grow, Heiland tried to do it all with the help of outside consultants for legal and accounting backgrounds. "I did that for two years," she recalls. "But now I prefer holding a board meeting with a leadership team. They give ideas wheels."

As hard as it has been to delegate, Heiland notes that her staff has blossomed. "What I've noticed is how they transform when I empower them," she says. "They're hungry; they want it. They've taken off. It's great."

Another valuable business tool has been StrengthsFinder (Tom Rath). The personality test evaluates five different strengths. "It's like an online Myers-Briggs Type Indicator," she says. "My first strength is W00," she says (Win Others Over).



"My second strength is Maximizer," Heiland notes. Maximizers focus on achieving both personal and group excellence. The strength combination is ideal for a small business owner.

As well as creating a business that runs more efficiently, Heiland has an end goal in mind as well. "I'm trying to figure out succession strategies," she says. "I don't want to turn 60 and find out that the business is not worth anything or I don't have a buyer. So can they buy me out? I recently had a

business valuation. It's comforting to be planning."

Restructuring necessary

Even with the leadership team in place, Heiland understands that a small business still needs some outside help. "We restructured after having an independent human resource consultant evaluate our practices," she says. "I'm a small business. I don't have an HR department; I don't know the latest laws."

When seasonal employees returned, they were routinely given a dollar an hour raise. However, although she appreciated having loyal employees return year after year, their compensation began to outweigh the value of their jobs.

"So now we have restructured tiers. Positions have a clear job description and pay scale, and some of our seasonal employees had their pay reduced," Heiland explains. "Some people left, but it had to be done. I need to get to a place where my business is salable or scalable."

Finding the right employees is a challenge she shares with most small business owners. "Twenty-somethings are taught to collaborate in school," she observes. "They understand how to work in groups."



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Heiland says she was very nervous when she started her four-minute television news segments on gardening. "But I'm enough of a ham to enjoy it now," she claims.

While that characteristic might be good for team building, she also notes that, "Young people don't want to be field staff with boots on the ground, unless it's urban agriculture, which is trendy now. There are many designers," Heiland says. "When you give them an internship they want a lot. They want to go back to boardroom. We are in a western suburb of the Twin Cities and we try to recruit farm kids. They have a good work ethic."

Although more and more women are choosing horticultural careers, women-owned businesses are still relatively rare in the green industry. Heiland has not let this phase her in the least.

"For the most part, I haven't really felt the glass ceiling," she says. "But sometimes, especially when it comes to landscape contracting, I'm not always invited to the table. You'd think that would be the case; I'm 51, 6 feet tall and have been in business for more than 30 years!"

More concerning is the gap that exists between landscape architects, landscape contractors and master gardeners.

"We all need to play together," she says. "We all have our challenges. Landscape architects are engineers. I respect what they do. But they don't understand plants."

Which all leads back to Heiland's primary passion: the people/plant connection. "We need to talk about the importance of what we do," she says. "We don't talk about how we heal through the plant connection. Look at corner greening and city plots, everyone is gardening together. Cultures learn about each other; there's less crime. We need to elevate that."

Heiland is pursuing a degree in horticultural therapy from Colorado State University and believes that everyone can benefit. "We need wellness programs for whole populations," she says. "We need to set measurable outcomes and goals. And we need to pay the people who do it more."

"Wherever you go, go with all your heart," says another Confucius quotation. Heiland is the embodiment of that life philosophy – and that's good business.

Alex Harris is a freelance writer who live and works in Sacramento and specializes in writing about green industry business owners, their companies and their successes and challenges.