

First Class Service for Second Homes

The logo for Turf, featuring the word "Turf" in a bold, black, sans-serif font. A green grass blade graphic is integrated into the letter 'T'.The logo for Tree Services, featuring the words "Tree Services" in a bold, black, sans-serif font. A small green leaf graphic is above the 'e' in "Services". Below the main text is the tagline "Taking Tree Care to New Heights" in a smaller, italicized font.The logo for DesignBuild, featuring the word "Design" in a black, sans-serif font and "Build" in a bold, orange, sans-serif font. A small orange square graphic is above the 'i' in "Design".The logo for PLOW, featuring the word "PLOW" in a bold, blue, sans-serif font. The letters are slightly slanted to the right.

Source: www.TurfMagazine.com

New Hampshire company owner credits dedicated employees for her firm's success



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Erin Peterson learned early on that dependable, motivated employees that possess a variety of experiences and skill sets are what make a landscape company successful. Ever see so many smiles or differently colored company shirts?

Photos courtesy of Simple By Nature Landscape.

Erin Peterson learned early in her career that it's the quality and dedication of employees that make a company successful.

"I can tell you I would not be here if I didn't have the people who work for me," says Peterson with total conviction. "We help each other. When one of us needs help, we step up. This isn't a one-person show here. We work together as family members. That does mean that we argue, too, though."

Simple By Nature Landscape

President: Erin Peterson

Founded: 2001

Headquarters: Meredith, N.H.

Market: New Hampshire's Lakes Region

Services: Design/build, lawn maintenance, masonry, walkways, walls, patios, fire pits, water features, gardens and flowers, and commercial snow plowing

Employees: 15

Website: <http://www.simplebynaturelandscape.com>

Equipment: Four Ford F350 trucks and one F250; one Exmark 52-inch ride-on mower; one Husqvarna 54-inch ride-on mower; two Exmark 48-inch walk-behind mowers, five Exmark 21-inch mowers; four Fisher plows; one Hi-Way sander; one Meyer sander, and Stihl string trimmers, blowers, and hedge trimmers.

Peterson's workforce came from referrals from existing or former employees. Some employees have been with her since or almost since she started Simple By Nature Landscape in 2001 in Massachusetts. Peterson and her husband decided to move to Meredith, N.H., not too long after for personal reasons and she took the company with her. College students round out her crews each summer.

Simple By Nature Landscaping specializes by providing services to customers with second homes in and around the Village of Meredith (pop. 6,200) and beautiful Lake Winnepesaukee. More than 80 percent of customers' properties are the properties of customers with second homes. "When people come up here, they want their properties to look nice. They want to be able to enjoy it and not have to do the work," Peterson says. They also want the properties to look nice – very nice. That involves a lot of detailed work, says Peterson.

"We do a lot of flowers," she explains "We have a lot of knowledge in the ornamental department as well as in construction and in turf. We're able to do full service." The company also provides irrigation installation and service as needed for properties that have irrigation systems that pump from local lakes.

Peterson takes a hybrid approach to caring for turf. "I would like to do as much as we possibly can for the environment," she explains. "Most people who like to do it because they think it's the right thing to do have no idea what it entails. When a lawn is on [synthetic] fertilizers, you have to wean it off of them in order to go organic. You can't just be chemicals one day and the next day not. We have to come to a better balance between the two."

Stormwater runoff is a major concern in her market, its pristine lakes a source of beauty and regional pride. Peterson says that her company is promotes and is skilled in designing and installing permeable pavers, rain gardens and bioswales. She says the issue of runoff from lakefront properties continues to grow as affluent property owners tear down small summer cottages and replace them with mansions. Usually, this results in less turfgrass and other runoff-catching greenery on these properties.

Cross-trained employees

Peterson notes that her company has to offer various services and organize those services year-round to stay in business. In the beginning of the season, everyone does maintenance while construction is temporarily halted.

"The men and women who work for me are willing to do whatever they need to do," she says. That entails cross-training to ensure everyone can handle the

task at hand.

"We hire people for different crews but the more universal you can be, the better off we all are," Peterson points out. "People get sick, have lives, so the biggest thing that always has to happen no matter what is lawn mowing, maintenance. We make sure we have enough people to know how to do that work."

Like many other landscape contractors, Peterson has had to get inventive about how to fill in down time during the year and retain as many employees as possible.

In addition to providing snow services during the winter, Simple By Nature Landscape also does holiday decorations. The company also takes care of a sizable complex, Mill Falls at the Lake, which has multiple properties.

Her company provides housecleaning services, too. "The reason why we do housecleaning is that there are many females who work for me during the summer. My longest-standing employee when we first moved up here didn't want to plow or shovel. We added one more tier to what we offer, especially our higher-end customers and took on housecleaning," she says.

On the other hand, Peterson says she knows where to draw the line. "We don't do anything that's outside of our scope, but we would help customers find somebody," she says.

Peterson believes her company retains clients because "we do what we say we're going to do when we say we're going to do it. If not, I'm on the phone explaining why. Trucks break down. People get sick. We close the gap on the fly-by-nights to make sure we stay up on our education."



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Cross-trained employees give Simple by Nature Landscape the ability to offer property management services from mowing to house cleaning.

Small business challenges

Keeping up with the ever-changing laws and regulations put on small business is one of Peterson's biggest challenges. Although she went to college to study landscape contracting, plant and soil sciences and business, she says she finds the changes in the business world immense.

"We do our best to keep up, but with new OSHA regulations, taxes, insurances and general HR issues, it is nearly impossible and at times it feels like the blocks are stacked against you," Peterson notes. "There should be a better way to streamline what is required to be of more help for the smaller companies."

To address that challenge, Peterson networks with others in the industry and in other industries to ascertain how they deal with the changes in an effort to stay educated.

Another challenge she faces is keeping office staff year-round, especially when work falls off in the winter, even though her company does offering plowing services.

"We've started using HindSite, which is the software that tracks all of our maintenance," she says. "Our employees use tablets, which help us cut down on communications."

The software helps her crew keep track of work that needs to be done and information can be downloaded into QuickBooks.

One of the improvements Peterson has made this season is to update her company's website.

"It's been phenomenal," she says of the response. "A lot of contacts come straight in from the website as a lot of our customers are finding services via the Internet."

If Peterson were to have done anything different, she says she would have taken in more business education, even though she studied it in school.

"It's hard in the scope of moving from the classroom and into the real world," she points out.

Going forward, however, Peterson says she's happy to continue doing what she's doing.

"I want for us to do as many flowers and maintenance and installs that we can," she says. "We have a very short season and to keep the amount of people we have, we have to run really fast. We plant an unbelievable amount of flowers. That's what makes me the happiest."

Peterson sees the industry becoming more competitive.

"In order to stay up with everybody, we have to keep finding ways of streamlining what we're doing, keeping up on anything that's going to help us get our job done more effectively," she says.

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