

## Get to Know Jody Shilan



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Volunteerism and education are the order of the day for landscape designer and design/ build contractor Jody Shilan.

As he's pursuing lecturing and consulting adventures, he's also quite passionate about his members-only website, [FromDesign2Build](#), created specifically for professional landscape design/build contractors.

Shilan is also executive director of [The New Jersey Landscape Contractors Association](#) (NJLCA).

**Year founded:** 2005

**Client mix:** 90% design, 10% project management

**Service mix:** 70% residential, 10% commercial, 10% religious properties

**Business motto:** Make your home your vacation home.

"After 35 years working in residential design/ build for myself and three of the premier landscape design/build companies in New Jersey, I've turned my efforts toward the growth and professionalism of the green industry," says Shilan. "Although I still provide design and project management services in a limited capacity, I have found writing, speaking and managing the NJLCA to be the next natural progression in my career."

Shilan is especially proud of his unique abilities to think outside the box – never seeing problems, only solutions – and making people laugh.



**Proudest moment in the landscape business:** The completion of the Fairview

9/11 Memorial Plaza built in 2011. I was never more proud of the members of our industry until that day.

This was a volunteer project for the NJLCA and the 10th anniversary of 9/11. It took us approximately eight weeks to build on evenings and weekends. There were physical and emotional challenges with a tight timeline. The project included more than 2,000 square feet of pavers (many of which were inscribed), a wet-laid seat wall, tree and shrub plantings, lighting, irrigation, benches and containers.

We also incorporated a 13-foot steel I beam and two marble floor tiles that were from the wreckage of one of the twin towers. These were donated to Fairview by the city of New York. The steel I beam was installed vertically with the two floor tiles flanking it. The tiles were placed less than 2 feet away from the beam so that you had to fall forward in order to keep your feet on the marble and touch the steel at the same time. This was done intentionally to emulate the collapse of the World Trade Center towers. Lastly, a beautiful, hand-painted, metal bald eagle sculpture was positioned at the head of the memorial plaza.

**Biggest business challenge:** My biggest challenge revolves around my work as executive director of NJLCA. As an industry we still have so much to overcome. This includes the negative perception of landscape professionals, governmental over-regulation and labor shortages, to name a few. In addition, there's also poor business practices, low barrier to entry and general lack of design/build and maintenance knowledge in our industry. Trying to create a level playing field while also working to raise the bar for our industry is a continuous challenge.

**Best sources of landscape design / build inspiration:** My degree in landscape architecture from [Cook College and Rutgers University](#) is the foundation for my design sensibilities. The installation knowledge and experience came from working for myself as well as larger design/build companies in New Jersey like [Doerler Landscapes](#) in Yardville, [Jacobsen Landscape Design and Construction](#) and [Borst Landscape and Design](#) in Allendale. There is nothing like the experience to teach you what works well and what doesn't when it comes to designing and building landscapes.

I also give credit to three of my college professors: Roy Deboer, Cook College, whose passion for planting design was truly infectious; Steve Strom, Cook College, who told me that I would not always be a "B" designer because I was never satisfied and desired to constantly improve my work; and Joe Volpe, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, who taught me to think deeper and pay close attention to the details in grad school.



The negative edge pool (left-hand page) was designed by Jody Shilan and built by Woodside Pools to highlight the view of Manhattan. Shilan says he loves using deciduous ornamental trees and ornamental grasses in his designs and prefers groundcover to mulch, as seen in the photos above.

**Favorite plant or plant combination:** I love deciduous ornamental trees, including my all-time favorite, Paperbark maple (*Acer griseum*). It has cinnamon-colored bark that peels like paper and has a beautiful habit. Also, I like Japanese maples because of their cost.

Hydrangea, spirea, lilac and butterfly bush, viburnum and weigela are also deciduous with two or three seasons of interest. My staple evergreens are Norway spruce, Dragon Lady holly and any boxwood – except American boxwood – resistant to boxwood blight.

Although my knowledge of perennials is not as developed as other categories, I still plant an abundance of them (those little plant tags really come in handy). I am also very fond of the more typical ornamental grasses, including miscanthus, pennisetum and calamagrostis. I also love groundcovers, including pachysandra and vinca (or periwinkle).

I hope to one day do away with mulch and replace it with groundcover. You will never find any weeping trees, pom-pom junipers or spiraled Alberta spruce in my projects. There is just something so wrong about them, and they are really tacky, too.



**Monday morning motivation:** The fear of my trainer if I don't make it to the gym by 5:45 a.m. Seriously though, I truly love what I do regardless of whether it's designing, consulting, writing, overseeing an installation or planning an NJLCA membership meeting. There is always so much to do every day and 99 percent of it is really interesting and challenging. I couldn't ever see doing anything else.

**Business worry that keeps you up at night:** Business-wise, my biggest fear is keeping up with the demand and getting back to clients within a reasonable timeframe. After being in this industry for about 40 years, I have realized that there are very few, if any, landscape emergencies. Most problems can easily be solved if you remain calm and think outside the box. My most recent revelation is that you really can't make everyone happy. It sounds strange to be saying this at age 55, but I have finally turned in my rose-colored glasses for a lighter shade.

**Landscape design mentor:** My work has been influenced by landscape architects like Thomas Church for his clean lines and simplicity and Wolfgang Oehme and James van Sweden for their New American design style, including masses of grasses and colorful perennials.

**Favorite business or landscape design book:** ["The Poetics Of The Pragmatic"](#) by Emilio Ambasz. I purchased this book more than 25 years ago because I was fascinated by both the architectural and landscape designs presented. The work of Ambasz is beyond traditional outside-the-box thinking, yet much of his work is simple in shape and form. His work is quite inspirational. I try to apply the same principles and theories to my own landscape design work, while still conforming to the needs of my clients and their properties.



**Landscape design project that makes you smile every time you drive past it:**  
My all-time, hands-down favorite project was the Rabbi Andre Ungar Walkway and Garden at Temple Emanuel in Woodcliff Lake, New Jersey, when I worked at Borst Landscape and Design.

I created an amphitheater, seating 100 people, that served as a classroom and meeting space for special religious occasions. When all was said and done, Temple Emanuel raised enough money to fund both projects with plenty of money left over to do building repairs and buy new books.

**Describe your business in five years:** Truthfully, in five years, I would like to be doing the same thing that I'm doing now – running the association, doing some design work, consulting, speaking and teaching workshops. If I could do one more thing it would be becoming a professor at Cook College, bringing things full circle.

**Connect with Jody Shilan:**

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