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THE ROOT OF SUCCESS

Heritage Green has successfully diversified beyond lawn cutting to complete lawn care
By Meredith Macleod Behind the scenes of a successful local business

What started out as a sideline job while teaching business in a Hamilton high school, has turned into a thriving family landscaping operation. Herman Schutten taught for 13 years before throwing himself full time into his role as president of Heritage Green Landscape Contractors in Ancaster. The company was recently recognized as the city's outstanding small business for 2005 by the Hamilton Chamber of Commerce. The award sits on a shelf in Schutten's office alongside many industry honours for design and construction projects.

"Last year we also won The Hamilton Spectator's Readers' Choice award for the first time. That and the chamber award both came in our 20th year, so that was kind of neat for us." While teaching at a Christian school, Schutten worked summers for a local landscaper and had a part-time tax business. He started up his own landscaping company in 1985 when a teaching colleague who had a number of lawn maintenance contracts on the side, moved out of town. "He was going to let them go. I saw that as a lost opportunity so I took them over." Schutten's sons helped out with the work and the original company name followed a time-honoured tradition: Herman & Sons. In 1987, Schutten's brother, Bernie, came on board as a partner.

Incorporation two years later involved a name change to Heritage Green as well as diversification beyond lawn cutting to lawn care, construction and design. It was 1988 when Herman made the tough choice to give up teaching. "Eventually, reality checked in. I couldn't continue to do justice to teaching while juggling two businesses." The tax business was sold off in 1992 as Heritage Green continued to grow.

The company does residential, commercial and institutional contracts and also specializes in sports field maintenance and renovations for leagues and schools.

Heritage Green operates out of a 3.6-acre property on Garner Road. Schutten and his wife, Christina, live there, as well. At one time, the office was in the house but it soon required a separate building. "We didn't know what to expect when we started this business. The growth has been nice, but it's something you work at. You need to be able to manage it. Too much growth can be counterproductive," he said. "We've had spurts and plateaus of growth so we've always been able to deal with it." Now five children between Herman and Bernie work for the company. All of Herman's seven children have worked there at some point and now three are among the 40 full-time staff. Herman and Bernie's younger brother, Marc, who sold his own landscaping company in Toronto, now runs Heritage Green's construction division.

Schutten says he has a straightforward motto for doing business, especially when building a relationship with customers. "You've got two ears and one mouth. That means you should be listening twice as much as you talk. "We want to create what our customers are looking for, not imposing our will."

The Schuttens followed the market into satisfying demand for environmentally friendly lawn products. The Schutten brothers are 50 per cent owners of Turf Revolution, a line of natural horticultural products free of animal byproducts, processed sewage, manure or pesticides. The products are sold across Canada and they are looking at a move into the United States. The company's motto is KIS&S: Keep it simple and scientific.

"We've spent a lot of energy and money in the development of the products. We feel a lot of problems with our lawns are in the soil below. We do soil tests to get to the root of the problem and we know what we're doing isn't depleting the soil."

Heritage Green customers can choose between the traditional products and services or the more expensive ones of Turf Revolution offered through a separately operated Schutten landscaping company called Healthy Lawn Care Specialists. Schutten says since starting the natural portion of his business seven years ago, his client portfolio has shifted. He has more contracts for natural services now than traditional ones. Those clients

include Ontario Place, Sunnybrook Hospital and the John Deere plant in Stoney Creek. School boards and municipalities are making the shift for sports fields and green areas, too.

"We're convinced it will become the norm and we wanted to be among the first out of the gate. We believe in it philosophically and we know it works." 'Don't promise what you can't deliver ...'

Biggest challenge:

"The biggest challenge, and it's not restricted to our industry either, is attracting experienced and capable tradespeople. We have a great team here at Heritage Green, however, there is always more work than qualified people to meet that demand."

Biggest surprise:

"A pleasant surprise: winning the Hamilton Chamber of Commerce outstanding business achievement award in the small-business category in our 20th year, 2005."

Best decision:

"Learning to delegate and empower our staff to make decisions and run their respective divisions."

Worst decision:

"We expanded into the 100 per cent natural lawn care market. This was a pioneering move on our part, in answer to the market demands for natural lawn care or, at least, no pesticides. We started by partnering with two different companies. The first of the two went bankrupt and the second was less than honest, even fraudulent. What we finally did after this lesson in hard knocks was start our own new firm called Turf Revolution."

Learn the most:

"We learn the most out in the field, from our clients, from our staff, from trade contacts and from reading trade journals. You've got to stay current. You have to be progressive, cutting edge."

Best advice ever given:

"Continued training of committed people. We usually promote from within and provide in-house training to those who want to advance. By training and moulding our staff, we hope to ensure the continued success of Heritage Green and, hopefully, receive a long-term commitment as well."

Best advice to give:

"It took my partner and me too long to learn that we can't be everything to everybody. One does not have enough hours in the day to manage everything. As our company grew, we had to learn that you have to delegate and empower your staff ... Typically this is appreciated and then as a company, you can grow because you're building on this broader base of committed people."

Secret to success:

"First, God's blessing. We believe that. Also, you have to provide clients with value. Don't promise what you can't deliver and always deliver what you promise."

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