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Building Loyalty

DENNIS' 7 DEES' EMPLOYEES HAVE CREATED ITS REPUTATION FOR SUCCESS. BY KATE BURROWS

Although Dennis' 7 Dees celebrates its 55th anniversary in 2011, its experience in the business dates back much further, back to 1927 when grandparents Bernard and Florence Esch launched a one-person lawn mowing business, and later lived their dream by owning a wholesale rhododendron nursery. In 1956, their daughter Merle met Robert Snodgrass. The two were married and had seven children, all with the first names beginning with the letter "D." Robert operated the family garden center, nursery and landscaping business, which he called Seven Dees, until 1975 when sons Dennis and Drake took over.

Two years later, David purchased the landscape portion of the business from Dennis, then brought in brothers Dean and Drew as partners, ensuring the business stayed in the family then in its third generation of ownership.

Today, the company is in its fourth generation of family ownership, and President David Snodgrass believes a longstanding commitment to quality landscaping design and installation has kept the organization in business through the decades. "We've always been committed to quality, and we've never wavered from that," he says. "We've always tried to do a great job in every project, and to build relationships with clients that last over the long term."

Six Snodgrass family members are still involved in the company today, and although family run businesses have their own unique challenges, Dennis' 7 Dees has successfully aligned people in positions that

fit the skills of its employees. "Working with family can be difficult at times, but we've made sure our roles do not overlap in any way," Snodgrass says. "This way, there is plenty of room for each of us to contribute and grow our own particular part of the business without interfering with each other. It's kept us separate but still in a position to work for the good of the company."

Building Relationships

The company has developed a sense of loyalty not only in its employees, but also in many of its long-term customers. "A very big part of our business comes from loyal customers," Snodgrass says. "When times are

tough in a slow economy, we are able to stay busy with our repeat customers and the referrals we gain from these relationships."

Dennis' 7 Dees

www.dennis7dees.com

- Sales: \$20 million
- Headquarters: Portland, Ore.
- Employees: 260
- Specialty: Landscape design build and maintenance

"We've always tried to do a great job in every project, and to build relationships with clients." —David Snodgrass, president

Dennis' 7 Dees recently completed a \$1.5 million project at Portland Airport.

Dennis' 7 Dees operates as a design/build landscape contractor, which allows it to add value to each project, whether it is a commercial or residential contract. "We have the capability and skills to effectively value engineer any landscape project, and we look for ways and offer suggestions to improve every project we're on," Snodgrass says. "Our goal is to be such as asset on the team that we're helping the entire project be successful rather than just [performing] our part of the job."

This team approach has served the company well throughout the years, and many local general contractors have come to rely on Dennis' 7 Dees in their projects, according to Snodgrass. "We try to make the job easier on the general contractor, so if we're a good team player, they will find a way to put us on the next project they're working on," he relates. "These projects do not always come down to the lowest bidder when they see how much value we can add to a project."

High-Profile Project

One of Dennis' 7 Dees most recent projects is for the Portland Airport, where it built a 10,000-square-foot green roof. In addition, the company installed planters inside airport offices, as well as a patio area in this \$1.5 million project. "This is one of the top sustainable projects in the northwest, and it's not only LEED-certified, but everything that went into this project is sustainable."

One of the unique elements of the project is the sophisticated water filtration system installed inside the building referred to as the "living Machine," which virtually eliminates any kind of waste. Gray water is collected from the building to fill the toilets. Toilet water is then flushed into a system of carefully planted interior planters, where it goes

'We're happy to have built a culture of trust and belief in people.'

through a channel of six different filters to come out pure enough to go into an exterior landscape bioswale. "This is a self-sustaining system that we're very proud to have been a part of creating," Snodgrass says.

This large-scale project was well-coordinated and completed on time for its May 2009 opening, he adds. Meeting all the project deadlines was a feat that tested the limits of all employees involved. "This was a difficult project, with a lot of craning involved," he says. "We had to crane over 500 yards of soil up to the 8th floor of the building, plus there was extensive green roof planting on the 10th floor. We were taking on many tasks you wouldn't normally think of in a landscaper's scope of work."

Employee Advantage

Employees at Dennis' 7 Dees are proud of their work and, as a result, tend to stay with the company for the long term. In fact, many have been with the company for upwards of 20 to 30 years.

"We're a true extended family here," Snodgrass says. "It's amazing to see how many people who are still here after so many years. We're happy to have built a culture of trust and belief in our people, and I believe that's why we've stayed successful." ♦

Congratulations to Dennis' Seven Dees on 55 years of making outdoor dreams a reality



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