

Shannon Decker

President of The Landscape Association, Shannon Decker is the Director of Now & Zen Landscapes, an award-winning Blue Mountains-based business. Passionate about sustainability, education, and mentoring the next generation of landscapers, he took time out to chat to *Landscape Contractor* at the recent TLA Landscape Expo.



As Director of Now & Zen Landscapes, Shannon is very much hands-on with Australia's landscaping industry. Images: Shannon Decker

"I started as a 14-year-old," said the affable Decker. "I was a tradesman by the time I was 18, a very early school leaver, and I fell in love with the landscaping industry."

Shannon's Now & Zen Landscapes has been operating for around 26 years, specialising in home and garden design, landscaping, natural pool building and garden maintenance.

"We have a builder's license," said Shannon. "We're also building small homes, architectural granny flats, studio flats and doing renovations. We do pools, drystone and all kinds of similar work."

Landscape Contractor had listened to Shannon explain to a captivated room how

the ups and downs of the landscaping industry had been a challenge for many decades, but how, with some flexibility and determination, it offered a great lifestyle and a rewarding career.

Changing times

Shannon told of some industry changes during his years of involvement.

"I started out doing landscaping and horticulture," he said.

"The TAFE course back then was quite extensive. It included landscape construction, plant identification, botany, soil science, business studies...it was a great course.

"TAFE is still the recommended

deliverer for the Certificate 3 in Landscape Construction qualification, but the course seems to have shrunk over the years.

There used to be a big crossover between construction and horticulture, and it was quite harmonious because we were taught both. The delivery now seems to have become divided between construction hardscapes and softscapes."

With a wrinkled brow Shannon thought about that circumstance before continuing.

"I'd rather see 'landscape tradespeople,'" he offered. "When we're planting a garden at the end of a job, I'd like my staff to know what they're planting, how to look after that plant and what soil it's going into. Drainage and ▶

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Shannon is President of The Landscape Association. Image: TF

the soil are the foundations of a really good landscape. If staff are building or planting and not knowing why, it can have adverse effects on the future of the garden."

Improvements

We asked what major improvements Shannon had seen in his time on the tools, and he had the answer ready.

"Landscapers were once considered cowboys," he said with some intensity.

"If you look back 30 years, everyone called themselves a landscaper, and a Buffalo or Kikuyu runner was a precious commodity. We'd trade it with our neighbours because there were no turf farms.

"Through dedication and the efforts of people like those on the TLA board, you now need to be licensed to be a part of our association and to claim the title of 'landscaper'. We're setting up an affiliated membership for closely allied trades, but as a rule, you need to be licensed, and that's a strong accreditation. The consumer can now feel confident their money will be well

spent with a professional who knows their trade.

"We're now looked upon as professionals, and that's a great improvement."

Looking after each other

We didn't want to derail Shannon's happy train of thought, but the question was begging: were there any low points in the landscaping industry?

"I think each independent businessman would have different opinions of that," he said, deep in thought.

Then he brightened and said, "I don't think there have been real lows. I think we've policed the lows out of the landscaping industry."

Shannon's strong on looking after people, especially those in his employ, and is doing his best to ensure the future of landscaping in Australia.

"I'm fairly steadfast and black-and-white," he said with a steely gaze. "At Now & Zen we want to make sure our staff are paid over the award. The award is poor for what we

do. It's a tough gig when you're out there working in the middle of winter and your hands are chilled to the bone, or in the middle of summer when it's 35 degrees. We like to ensure our people are earning the right money to support their families, and we're affiliated with supportive companies with a good team culture."

Looking forward

A relative newcomer to the role of TLA president, Shannon is clearly well-suited to the role. He's very approachable, friendly, and a great listener. He also has some definite goals for TLA and the landscaping industry.

"Advocacy with government is important" he said when we asked about the future. "We need to strengthen our position and have government listen to us, and we also need to look at elements of compulsory insurance and education.

"The stronger we are in numbers and the stronger the affiliations we have, the more those things will assist us in moving forward and making change for a positive future." **LC**

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