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Cover Story/2008 Landscaper of the Year: Snow's Garden and Landscape Center

By Christina Jesson

If you think you've got landscaping in your blood, you need to meet Corbin and Jonas Snow. The two young brothers are the fourth generation of their family to enter the landscaping business. And like their father, grandfather and great-grandfather before them, the Snow brothers, along with long-time family friend and co-owner Scott Price, are committed to continually improving a business that has deep roots

Those roots have given the Snows and Price incredible advantages in their highly competitive marketplace. But the company still faces issues any landscaper in the country can relate to: in their hometown of Charlottesville, Virginia.



Left to right: Jonas Snow, Scott Price, and Corbin Snow.

The need to "go green," immigration issues and knee-jerk watering legislation in the wake of a severe drought last summer are just a few of the challenges on their plates these days. Still, as older brother Corbin Snow notes, each generation has left its mark on their family business. And he, Jonas and Scott are determined to so as well.

All in the family

It's rare to find a fourth-generation-managed company like Snow's Garden and Landscape Center.

Snow's got its start in 1912 when Leroy H. Snow and his wife Maggie founded a produce garden and nursery on a downtown lot in Charlottesville.

In 1936 the Snow's first child, Leroy W., took over the business and expanded its services dramatically by selling trees and shrubs along with maintenance, landscaping, large tree removal and replanting services. His wife Viola was the company bookkeeper.

The innovations didn't stop there. Recognizing that many of his customers were just as passionate about landscaping as he was, in 1950, Leroy W. started the "Snow Knows" radio program, giving advice and tips to weekend gardeners and do-it-yourself landscapers. Fifty-seven years later, the show is still broadcast on WINA 1070 AM every Saturday morning, and hosted by Corbin and Norman Carlson, Snow's chief horticulturist for more than 20 years.

"We bill 'Snow Knows' as the oldest continually running gardening radio program in the world," Corbin says. "We recognize some of the regular callers right away, and they always seem to have a new gardening problem or question. It's a lot of fun."

Many of the calls, Corbin notes with a laugh, will be from older customers wanting warranty work done to a tree or a shrub their grandfather planted 50, 60, even 70 years ago. "And we always go out and honor that request," he adds.

In 1970, Leroy W.'s son Duane – Corbin and Jonas's father – graduated from Brigham-Young University and returned home to Charlottesville with his wife Rena to work in, and put his own mark on the family business,

eventually taking it over.

"When I came back from BYU, the minimum wage was very low, and we didn't pay anyone above minimum wage," Duane says today. Recognizing that he needed good people to compete locally and keep his long-term customers happy, Duane set out to hire good crew leaders, pay them good wages and build a corporation out of Snow's Garden and Landscape Center.

"In the early '80s, no one was hiring Hispanic labor," Duane says, "but I had a challenge to grow a business that required hard work and dedication."

Snow's became the first Charlottesville company to employ immigrant workers, and even provided workers housing for a while. Duane worked with a Texas-based immigration agency called Amigos to secure four or five Hispanic workers to come to Virginia and work for the company. "It was wonderful! They wanted to work six days a week; they took such a sense of pride in what they did," he recalls.

Corbin, Snow's only non-Hispanic bilingual staff member, has a close relationship with the more than 30 Hispanic employees. Many of Snow's Hispanic employees are related to one another, and they like the convenience of driving to work and spending time together. "I've been here 11 years, and it's really nice to be able to work with my family," Jaime Mendoza says.

"The hardest part is making sure everyone is legal, but we are 100-percent government compliant and are working through the H2-B visa program to secure additional employees," Corbin says.

Taking a three-tiered approach

Corbin, Jonas and Scott took ownership in 2003 when Duane and Rena decided to retire. Today Snow's employs more than 50 people, including seasonal employees, and has become an icon in the Charlottesville area. It is renowned for its landscape design, the quality of its plants and the expertise of its staff.

Corbin says a three-tiered approach – retail/garden center, landscaping and maintenance – serves their ever-expanding customer base. Snow's is also the only full-scale exterior landscape construction company in the area that does site prep, hardscaping and carpentry. The beauty of this business model, Corbin notes, is that it provides the company with the chance to lock in new customers regardless of which tier they initially turn to Snow's to do business.

"If they start out buying plants from us, it often leads to installation jobs," Corbin says. "If they contract with us to do an installation job, they inevitably end up buying the plants to be installed from us. So all our customer services and product offerings are interlocked and support one another."

Most of Snow's customers are mid- to high-end residential who are concerned with the quality of all materials used, as well as the look of the finished product.

"Our process for landscaping someone's yard is very fluid," Scott says. "We always discuss budgets up front. Maybe someone has a complete landscape overhaul in mind, but can only do it one piece at a time. That's OK; we can work with that."

Hand-drawn sketches provided by the company's design department give the customer an idea of what the finished project will look like, but the plans remain loose and conceptual. "We can start our plans this way because we communicate with ourselves; we don't work with subcontractors," Scott explains.

Scott, who earned degrees in landscape architecture and ornamental horticulture from Virginia Tech, has been with the company 13 years and is the first non-family owner. He heads up a design staff that is designated projects based on their strengths. "We are a unique company because our designers are responsible for all customer contact, and they accompany the work crews to the jobsites," Scott says.

A community staple breaks new ground

"We've been around since 1912, so we have fourth- and fifth-generation clients who recommend us to others," Corbin says. "It's a good feeling to have that kind of connection to the community."

In 2003, the company added a bulk materials division to make the preparation process for jobs easier and to serve

as a materials provider for other companies and will work hard to expand those operations even further in the near future.

"We were finding that our crews would leave the yard at 7:30, but not get to a job until 10 because they had to make so many stops to pick up material," Corbin explains. "Now our crews have most everything they need, and when they leave they go straight to the jobsite. It makes us more efficient as a company."

Another efficiency recently added to Snow's garden/retail center is the "Bulletproof All Stars" program to denote which plants grow best in their area of the Shenandoah Valley.

"When we sit down to choose plants with a homeowner, we always bring out the regional plant list with corresponding photos," Scott says. "We definitely want our customers to think about using native plants in their projects; it helps us take better care of the plants and makes their landscapes look more natural."

Winning the water war

Like much of the southeastern United States, Charlottesville suffered from an extensive drought last summer. The city of Charlottesville's reaction was to put a lock on every irrigation meter. This stopped most new plant and sod installations, and put pressure on Snow's to take the initiative to find a solution.

"We were sitting in our weekly management meeting when we decided that something had to be done to convince local authorities that the water restrictions were hurting our customers and our business," Corbin says. "We knew we couldn't be the only company affected, so we got the phone book and called every green industry professional in the area."

What resulted was a summer and fall full of grassroots meetings in a local hotel conference room of about 50 area landscape professionals who decided to band together and take their concerns to the water board. Snow's and its contingent of green industry partners were so persistent that the water board rewrote the water restriction policies to allow for irrigation of new plant installation, among other changes.

"It was a clear lesson to us," Corbin notes. "As long as we'd been in business in this area, we'd had very little contact with many of our competitors until these watering restrictions were enacted. But banding together with other landscaping companies was the right thing to do because all of us were being affected by these new laws. So it really re-emphasized how important both community and industry involvement is for all landscaping companies."

"We've been active with the Piedmont Landscape Association and the American Nursery and Landscape Association for years, but it felt so good to gather local peers and make a difference. As an industry, we need to do more networking so that we can call on our friends to help work out issues that impact us all."

From its beginning as a produce garden and nursery to the technologically advanced landscape design, installation maintenance and garden center it is today, it's clear that Snow's certainly does know how to grow a good business.