

# The right culture and a sense of pride FUELS COMPANY GROWTH

## COMPANY PROFILE:

### DENNIS' SEVEN DEES LANDSCAPING:

Portland, Oregon

### OWNERS:

David Snodgrass, CLP  
Dean Snodgrass  
Drew Snodgrass, CLP

**FOUNDED:** 1977

**EMPLOYEES:** 300

**ANNUAL REVENUE:**  
\$20 million



**David Snodgrass (seated) with brothers Drew (left) and Dean created a culture that fosters trust and a sense of pride.**

Portland, Oregon, beckons visitors with beautiful rose-filled gardens, mild weather, and an abundance of recreational opportunities. To the east, Mt. Hood stands majestically only an hour from downtown. Looking west, one can almost sense the presence of the Pacific Ocean, another hour or so away. The city is also situated on the northern edge of the Willamette Valley, one of the most productive agricultural regions in the country.

It's in this environment, favorable to visitors and residents alike, that Dennis' Seven Dees has evolved from a small design/build company in 1977 to a multimillion dollar, full-service design/build and landscape management company, today.

"We've come a long way in 30 years," says company president David Snodgrass, CLP. "In the first year, we brought in \$70,000 in sales, all from residential design/build projects. We quadrupled that figure the following year and continued to grow exponentially until we reached the million-dollar mark. Then, five years ago, when we were sitting at \$10 million in sales, I challenged our team with the vision that we crack the \$25 million barrier. Here we are today standing very near that threshold."

If you know David Snodgrass, you know that he considers dollar signs to be only one measure of success. He defines true success as having a business that provides exemplary service to customers and growth opportunities for employees, in addition to one that makes a healthy profit. A successful business also garners the respect of the community and, in his words, "carries with it a sense of pride about the work it does."

Dennis' Seven Dees roots stretch back to 1927 when David's grandfather, Bernard Esch, launched a one-person mowing business, and later lived a dream by owning a wholesale rhododendron operation. In 1956, Esch's daughter Merle met Robert Snodgrass. The

two were married and had seven children, all with 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, along with brothers Dean and Drew, purchased the landscape portion of the business from Dennis.

Today, there are two Seven Dees operating in Portland: Dennis' Seven Dees, which David, Dean, and Drew operate, and Drake's Seven Dees, which is run by brother Drake. This story, though, is about Dennis' Seven Dees, a company that employs 300 people and has an annual revenue stream of more than \$20 million. Residential design/build and commercial build account for approximately 60 percent of the sales. Landscape management services for residential and commercial customers and four garden centers account for the remainder of the business.

### Best foot forward

When asked how his company achieved its growth and reputation, Snodgrass thinks for a moment and then brings up the word *pride* again. "It all begins with pride," he emphasizes. "If you have pride in your appearance, in your work, and in virtually everything you do, you will enjoy what you do ... and success will follow. I truly believe this, and when our people take pride in their work and operation, they will surprise customers by delivering a service that goes beyond their expectations. Then, we have customers for life."

Pride alone, however, doesn't fuel growth and success, he relates. Having a culture that creates a feeling of trust among employees and empowers them to make decisions is another important requisite. "I credit our employees for the growth of our company,"



says Snodgrass. “So much has changed over the last 30 years that we simply couldn’t grow and thrive without everyone pulling together in the same direction. Projects are bigger and more complex. Now, we install landscapes on high-rise roof tops, design and build elaborate water features, and pay more attention than ever before to sustainable practices and wet land preservation. Compared to today, it was easy to be in business 30 years ago. Now, we have to be smarter about doing business and pay more attention to all the details.

“Risks are greater and profit margins are tighter, too. Landscape companies cannot afford to assume the additional risk that is being pushed in our direction. We cannot afford to go into a large commercial project without paying close attention to very specific scope, insurance risk transfer, and the overall clarity of the contract’s language. We have learned the importance of challenging any contract that is not fair, and have learned the value of good communication prior to signing. It all comes back to having team members you can trust to deliver during all stages of a project.”

Snodgrass admits that his company has made many mistakes along the way. What is important is that the owners have openly talked about and learned from them. “We’re not practicing lean management principles per se,” he notes, “but we have been and continue to be on the road to continuous improvement. We constantly look for better ways to get the job done, to deliver an even higher quality product



**Residential design/build and commercial build account for 60 percent of Dennis’ Seven Dees sales.**



(above) Four garden centers provide a one-stop resource for customers. (right) Five years ago, Dennis' Seven Dees moved from a collection of mobile offices into a new 19,000 square-foot facility.



to our customers. Internally, we focus on fine-tuning our reporting systems and getting accurate figures in time to recover if costs are exceeding estimates.”

He continues, “Technology has played a huge role in our success, allowing us to operate at a higher level than ever, and it’s not just number crunching where this hi-tech excels. Our Web site is paying back dividends, as is our presentation materials. Customers expect to do business over the Internet and to see a project in living color before agreeing to a design.”

### Watershed moments

This landscape contractor identifies several key moments in Dennis’ Seven Dees history. One occurred eight years ago when the company introduced a formal, rigorous training program. The management team identified and documented 120 topics for training and conducted training sessions as necessary to ensure foremen and new hires

attended. “The program had a tremendous impact,” says Snodgrass. “Just getting everyone together has been a great exercise in team building. The training has also helped us standardize procedures and develop a higher level of consistency.”

The next key moment occurred a year later when the owners challenged employees to reach for the \$25 million mark. “We didn’t stipulate a time limit, we just put the figure out there to open people up to the possibilities ... sort of permission to think big,” says Snodgrass. “It’s amazing what people can do when you give them a goal, along with the tools and the freedom to reach it. We also strive to promote from within, which creates another incentive for employees to excel.”

When asked what he and his brothers will do for an encore dollar goal, Snodgrass smiles. “That goal,” he says, “will likely come from within and not from us. Our company has reached a point where it is growing on its own momentum. Key employees are already

making important decisions, and they will be instrumental in determining and directing our future growth.”

This growth potential was given a shot of adrenaline five years ago when Dennis’ Seven Dees moved from a collection of mobile offices into a new \$1.6 million facility. The 19,000 square-foot structure did more than eliminate a cramped working environment. According to Snodgrass, it also allowed the company to have a home office that matched the work its employees were delivering. He explains:

“There’s something wrong about working hard all day to install beautiful landscapes on prestigious properties and then returning to a less than inviting office environment. Our new facility made employees feel better about their jobs and workplace, and it helped customers make the connection between us and the quality of work we do. If we had it to do over, we would have built the facility five, possibly 10 years earlier. Sure, we might

have outgrown it, but its value to the company would have been well worth the cost and effort.”

### Green roots

Three years ago, Dennis’ Seven Dees purchased the garden center business (three locations) from a retiring Dennis Snodgrass. A year later it added another garden center in nearby Seaside to bring the total number of retail outlets to four.

“The move back into the garden center business has been a watershed event for us, as well,” says Snodgrass. “Yes, it’s where our roots are, and we enjoy the business. But even more significant, the garden centers have allowed us to more fully serve our customers, to be a one-stop resource for them.

“Most of our landscaping customers start out owning a simple home and doing their own landscape. Our garden centers, which are open seven days a week, give us an entrée into that market, to start developing a relationship with customers early on. We get the opportunity to do more than sell them products. We can help them design their projects with our “Planscaper” Program. Other garden centers have similar programs, but we have the ability to tap into the expertise of our in-house landscape designers. For the garden center do-it-yourselfer, if they purchase their product from us, the design is free.

“Retail is challenging in a different way from designing, installing, and maintaining landscapes. It has opened up a new world of opportunity for us, and the stores have become a source of leads for our design/build and landscape management departments.”

David, Dean, and Drew are very hands on in the business, yet thanks to a culture that fosters trust and a sense of pride in employees, a powerful momentum from within the company drives growth. The brothers, no doubt, wonder if their grandfather had any idea where his dream would lead. 

## A STRETCH IN TIME

In 1993, Dennis’ Seven Dees management team was invited to attend a logging industry presentation on stretching. Three years earlier, the company had formed a safety committee to help reduce back injuries and overall improve safety. The stretching presentation piqued the committee’s interest; and how!

The committee soon implemented its own stretching program. Every morning, crews gather to enjoy a 10-minute warm-up exercise before work, and before long the regimen grew to involve all company employees. Today, passersbys will see Dennis’ Seven Dees parking lot filled with associates stretching, bending, and enjoying the morning start together before moving on to their day’s activities.

“I cannot say enough about what stretching has done for our safety program and our company,” says company president David Snodgrass, CLP. “Stretching and warming up has definite physical benefits, but the exercise has demonstrated returns that go far beyond the physical. In addition to being another good team-building event, the morning stretch encourages participants to see themselves as being safety conscious — a perception they carry with them throughout the day.

“In other words, stretching in the morning created a safety culture that has literally driven our safety program. We have an active safety committee that involves people in all our departments. Safety is a topic at every company meeting. We report incidents and time-loss accidents, enter PLANET’S Safety Recognition Awards Program every year, have a strong back-to-work program, and we translate all written and verbal communication into Spanish. We are also a member of PLANET’S STARS Safe Company Program.

“Our current record for days without a time-loss accident is 390 (previous record was 1,867 days). Our experience modification (MOD) rate is .74, significantly below the industry average of 1.0. We pay less than the industry average for workers’ compensation, and clients look favorably on us as a safe company to work with.

“I’m not overstating the case at all when I say that implementing a 10-minute stretch in the morning was one of the smartest moves our company has ever made.

I’m proud to be a champion of stretching and what it can do to improve a safety culture.”

Dennis’ Seven Dees employees share a stretching moment.

