



Top-Notch Training

Aiello Landscape of Vero Beach stays at the head of the class by giving employees all of the tools they need to succeed.

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Relaxing at the ocean or tinkering around with his antique gardening tools, Tommy Aiello exudes an easy-going, carefree attitude. But there's more than one side to the owner of Aiello Landscape of Vero Beach and chairman of the Florida Nursery, Growers & Landscape Associa-

tion's (FNGLA) Landscape Division. Beneath the cool exterior lies a shrewd businessman who knows exactly what it takes to succeed in the green industry.

Education Foundation

Aiello credits success to his staff. "Our employees are encouraged to further their knowledge and abilities through ongoing training sessions, seminars, and industry-sponsored events," he says.

The foundation of employee education is the in-house Training Challenge, a 27-step, hands-on learning program that covers everything from tree planting to record keeping (see "Putting Employees To The Test" sidebar). The Training Challenge expands on FNGLA's Florida Certified Landscape Technician program, covering an additional 15 categories. Both Aiello Landscape of Vero Beach and Aiello Landscape Inc. (Tommy's original business in Hobe Sound) serve as FNGLA certification training and testing facilities.

"I've never seen a person with as much focused, tireless energy as Tommy Aiello," says fellow landscaper Joe Baglia

Aiello Landscape of Vero Beach

Owner: Tommy Aiello

Year Founded: 2005

Services: High-end residential landscape installation, renovation, and maintenance

Customers: Landscape architects, builders, and homeowners

Member of: Florida Nursery, Growers & Landscape Association; Professional Landcare Network

Annual Sales Volume: \$1.4 million

Company Philosophy: To provide the best possible service with the highest quality product achieving customer satisfaction in a professional manner.

Aiello Landscape of Vero Beach earned an FNGLA 2006 Award of Excellence in the category of Residential Single-Family New Installation (\$100,000-\$250,000) for its work at the Minotty residence.



of Terracon Services Inc. "He has been involved with FNGLA certification since the beginning. On testing days, he is the first to arrive in the morning and the last to leave at night. You have to run to keep up with him."

In the Training Challenge, employees have the opportunity to learn new skills. If they pass a test, they can earn a raise.

Managers receive training at trade shows and conferences as well as in-house seminars. Last year, Aiello invited Dr. Hannah Carter of the Wedgworth Leadership Institute to speak to his

managers on Jim Collins' book *Good to Great*. Managers from Jenkins Landscape and Terracon Services also were included in the event.

Learning takes place at all levels in the business, beginning with internships. Unable to find an internship while in college, Aiello vowed he would provide students with learning opportunities when he went into business. Aiello visits South Fork High School annually to speak to horticulture students on landscape careers. About half of his interns have gone on to work for the company.

"Our internships offer students an excellent overview of the landscape industry," says Aiello. "They rotate through all positions of the company."

Interns plant a tree, run a loader, and stake a tree; ride with truck drivers to pick up plants; visit nurseries to tag trees; spend a day with the accountant; design a project, and learn estimating, sales, and marketing.

Buy new trucks, put your employees in uniforms, and look like a professional to be paid like a professional. Your reputation is the most important thing. Anyone

On Display

Aiello Landscape of Vero Beach is the recipient of FNGLA's 2007 S.J. Blakely Award, which recognizes visual promotion of the industry through the landscaping of a place of business. The grounds serve as a display garden, including at least 35 species of palms, as well as an example of proper planting, maintenance, and design techniques.

"Nothing was planted at maturity," says Aiello. "As the company grows, so do my plants. Part of the fun is watching the plants develop. Overplanting is overdone."

Putting Employees To The Test

The Training Challenge is a program in which Aiello Landscape employees participate to gain position in the chain of command. Workers are tested annually on their knowledge and skill in the following areas:

- ✓ Tool identification
- ✓ Plant identification
- ✓ Tree planting
- ✓ Tree staking
- ✓ Palm branching
- ✓ Mulching
- ✓ Plan reading and layout
- ✓ Grading and sod
- ✓ Irrigation and operation repair
- ✓ Replace and repair
- ✓ Fertilizer application
- ✓ Hand trimming and pruning
- ✓ Safety
- ✓ Chainsaw operation
- ✓ Edging installation
- ✓ Step stone installation
- ✓ Vine espalier
- ✓ TCM equipment operation
- ✓ Root pruning and transplanting
- ✓ Retaining wall construction
- ✓ Instrument operation
- ✓ Grading and drainage
- ✓ Job evaluation
- ✓ Personnel management
- ✓ Customer service
- ✓ Record keeping
- ✓ Class "B" commercial driver's license

Tommy's Tips

For those thinking about a career in the landscape business, Aiello offers some advice: "If you really enjoy it, it can be a lot of fun. Work for someone reputable who can show you as much of the industry as possible. It's a great career with much opportunity and diversity."

For those already in the business, Aiello offers these words of wisdom: "Image is everything. Project yourself as a professional and deal with other professionals. If you buy cheap, old, broken-down trucks, then you will probably attract cheap, old, broken-down clients.



Tommy Aiello is thrilled that his daughter Kelsey, an Indian River Community College horticulture student, has recently joined his company to work in purchasing.



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During their first year of hire, employees are expected to learn to identify 25 different plants, which are all on display at the company's grounds.

can be the low bidder. How many can be a middle or high bidder and still get the bid based on reputation?"

While many business owners subscribe to the philosophy that bigger is better, Aiello has no intention of expanding his business. "I want to keep things simple, keep people working, and pay the bills. My two main goals are to maintain quality standards and make a profit. Don't be hung up with growth of 5%, 10%, or 20% every year. Focus on profits of 5%, 10%, or 20% every year."

Aiello also advises landscapers to pass on a job every now and then. "Check out your potential clients; they check us out. Call other subs for information. What's their pay schedule? Do they pay on time? Require deposits. Mark up your subs. Why manage their work for free, when you're the one doing the coordinating?"

One last suggestion from Aiello: "Find out who the best clients are in your area (i.e. landscape architects, general contractors, developers) and go after their work. Work hard to establish yourself as the best landscape contractor and not the cheapest. We work in a great place and get hired to create lush, tropical paradises. Celebrate the opportunities by creating not only beauty, but also value for your clients, and they'll be glad to pay accordingly." ■