

London Business Magazine

From the ground up

From home-based start-up to one of Canada's fastest-growing companies, Steve Check cultivates Nature's Image one garden at a time.

By Suzanne Boles

After a long, cold winter, sun-starved Canadians welcome the first signs of spring and begin eyeing the new offerings at temporary garden centres popping up at retail outlets on just about every street corner. Homeowners start making plans to enhance their outdoor living spaces with new gardens and fishponds, and the landscape design and build industry moves into full swing.

With ten to 15 new landscape companies opening for business in London each year, this is one of the city's most competitive industries. So it's easy to understand why one man's unparalleled success in this highly competitive industry has made him a Cinderella story of unique proportions.

In 1996, Steve Check, then 29, launched his landscape design and build company, Nature's Image, after graduating from one of the London Small Business Centre's business training programs. He worked from home and with one truck, a tractor-trailer and one employee, took his vision of "enhancing London's landscape, one garden at a time," and started looking for business.

This month, Nature's Image will be named one of Canada's 100 fastest-growing companies by Profit Magazine. With 900% to 1,000% growth in six years, and \$1.35 million gross income at the end of 2001, Nature's Image has become the largest landscape design and build firm in London. It's a milestone Check never envisioned, with business plan predictions being far less than reality year after year.

A native of Thamesford, Ontario, Check spent his summers as a teenager working on farms. After graduation, he headed off to Carleton University in Ottawa with an eye on a degree in public administration and economics. But that didn't last long, he concedes, "because I realized I wasn't going to be a suit and tie guy."

"I always worked outside and realized I wanted to be in the construction landscape field. I just knew that was what I wanted to do."

Check moved to London and spent the next ten years working in the landscape industry, learning the ropes in a variety of jobs, including his first stint as assistant greens keeper, designing and building a golf course. He enrolled in correspondence courses through the University of Guelph to "get some more education in the horticultural field," then decided it was time to try it on his own.

"I guess I always had an entrepreneurial spirit and realized I wanted to be the one calling the shots," he confides. It's a statement imparted with humility.

Despite his tremendous success, people who know him say Check is "every man's man." There's never a hint of arrogance. When he talks to you there's a sense of the utmost sincerity. He digs into any project with a hands-approach and is happiest building water ponds or in his retail stores selling pots to customers. Many of his staff have been with him since his humble beginnings and the vast majority of his customers remain loyal.

"The first year went very well," he remembers. "I guess because I'd been in the industry so long my reputation had started to precede me, which was nice." Net income that year was \$120,000, "which exceeded my business plan. I predicted about \$80,000."

Year two saw an opportunity to purchase land at 258 Exeter Road and expand into retail products. The complement for the construction company was perfect, and wife, Joanne Marchant, also a horticulturist, ran the retail side for two years with their newborn son, Ocean, in tow. The design side of the business also grew and expanded, necessitating more staff including a designer, two full crews and three garden staff in the store. Sales in year two hit \$235,000 and the pace continued to accelerate. Year three was \$357,000 and then a leap to \$875,000 in year four, followed by the real milestone, "cracking the million mark" in 2001.

That same year, Nature's Image opened a satellite store in north London at 1635 Fanshawe Park Road West, "(It's) for our clients, so they don't have to come all the way across the city," says Check. Although a smaller store, about a quarter acre, Check says it still has "a good selection of plants, perennials, big trees and so forth." The Exeter Road store grew from half an acre the first year, to its present size of about five acres.

But despite the big numbers, Check says he's "hugely" in debt, with just everything going back into the business.

"The company's turned a profit, no doubt about that, but it's the financing of the company to deal with the expansion," says Check. "Leasehold improvements on Exeter Road alone were probably in the \$200,000 to \$250,000 range, so you're talking large volumes of money being put back into the business. And we have eight trucks and four pieces of machinery. With the inventory alone we're spending \$300,000-\$400,000 to stock the garden centres in the first quarter of the year, so the debt load is significant to operate this type of industry. And with growth and exposure comes additional promotion campaigns and so forth."

Perhaps Check's strongest business attribute has been marketing — and the ideas keep flowing. From the outset, design and build clients have received a garden club membership giving them discounts on plant material and garden accessories in-store, to help "create a sense of loyalty to the company." They also receive a copy of Nature's Image quarterly newsletter, and the firm is a regular fixture at the London Home and Garden Show. Check donates time and products to

many local organizations and is becoming a media personality, appearing on 1290 AM radio as part of their Ask the Expert segment. He also does a short televised gardening feature every Thursday — spring, summer and fall — on The New PL.

His most recent venture turned out to be London's own answer to reality TV, a two-hour live broadcast from the Exeter Road store, aired on The New PL and sister stations The New NX (Wingham) and The New WI (Windsor), in April. Teams of contestants were chosen by each of the stations, competing for \$8,000 in products and landscape build services. By all accounts, it was a huge success.

Asked if he has other ideas for marketing and promotion, Check says, "I always joke that when McDonald's or Tim Horton's stop advertising, I guess I will. I think you always have to be in the public's eye because it's a very competitive industry and you need to offer something different."

The business growth comes from a number of sources. Referrals are a big part, as are repeat customers. Marketing continues to spur new calls and walk-in customers to the retail sites.

The biggest challenge now is managing the explosive growth and knowing when to say when. Expanding the landscape design and build segment of the business isn't an option. There's a risk of getting too big and losing the focus on quality — something he won't jeopardize.

"Our popularity is catching up to us," says Check, "to the point where people might wait three or four weeks for us to get on their property. And I regret that, but there's nothing to do because I'm not willing to hire more people to do more work, and not necessarily do the type of work that reflects the image that we've created here.

"We're still the largest design build firm in the city by far, it's just that we don't like to be like Toronto firms where you have 100 to 150 employees and, I think, lose some of that personal touch."

That said, there is still a push to increase sales, and Check is setting his sites on the retail end of the business, where millions of dollars are spent by Canadians each year.

"Our share is still very minute. The housing industry's booming in London and growth of London for landscape design-build should remain strong. But people are always gardening, so I don't see a problem maintaining the growth we have or keeping it constant."

As the saying goes, "nothing succeeds like success", but as with any business, there have been glitches along the way.

"I've always worried about what people thought of the company so I've never really created a lot of rules," says Check. "If something (plant materials) didn't make it a year or two later we didn't question it. We just replaced it. I always thought that was good PR.

What Check didn't anticipate, however, was just how far that "good PR" might stretch. "You expect that when the fridge warranty expires, it expires. There's no grace period. (Yet) we're still honouring things for people years later because we want them to feel good about Nature's Image. There's never a price point built into that, so I don't have anywhere in the margin to cover for that bush that died three years later."

Another challenge has been keeping up with growth — and maintaining cash flow.

"We expanded to meet demand, but without proper financing," says Check. "We put a stress on cash flow to the point where we're not financed the way we should be. Business plans are great, but it's hard to revamp a business plan almost monthly as growth is almost exploding. You can't really account for expenditures at such a fast pace."

Another requirement of growth is the need to ease the desire to be hands-on with every detail of the business, something that's been a personal challenge for Check. "When you get to this size you certainly have to let the people, the professionals, do their job and just let them go at it."

Keeping his eye on the future — and anticipating further growth — Check is adamant about continuing to provide quality product at a fair price and workmanship at a reasonable rate. This commitment, combined with his generosity within the community, led to an award from The Small Business Centre as part of their five-year celebration. This year, Nature's Image was the winner of the Small Business Centre Vertex Award. The company was also a top-four finalist for a London Chamber of Commerce Business Achievement Award.

Check describes the honours as "very thrilling and exciting." They are tangible reminders of his success, like the many beautiful gardens he's created in and around the city.

"When I drive around now and I see some of the stuff I planted before Nature's Image, and during Nature's Image, it's really amazing all the plants and patios and water feature's I've done in the community. And it's neat to know that you're making a bit of a difference in London."