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the **ART** of
LANDSCAPING

BY TINA GRADY BARBACCIA

Two fiercely independent women have taken their business savvy and love of landscaping to create a thriving company.



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Voted North American
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When sisters Nancy Marshall and Becky Whitacre grew up working for their parents' landscaping business, making a mistake was not an option, and the word "can't" was not acceptable.

Recalling their father, Walter Small, fondly, Marshall explains, "Dad was our teacher. He taught us and then he made us do it by ourselves – or sometimes even learn on our own."



Becky Whitacre and Nancy Marshall

North American landscaper of the year

Marshall remembers learning to operate heavy equipment at the ripe age of 8 years old. "It was scary, but we had to learn," Marshall says. "It wasn't like you had an option."

Marshall says she didn't realize it at the time, but her father was trying to instill in the family that work had to be done right the first time or it had to be redone: correctly.

This quest for perfection has stuck with the sisters and how they operate their business, Smalls Landscaping in Valparaiso, Indiana, which is certified as a "Woman-Owned Business" through the Women's Business Enterprise National Council (WBENC). They are also *TLC's* Landscapers of the Year, which is a yearly, nationwide program that recognizes the best in the industry.

Setting out on their own

Whitacre was up against the odds when it came to her college career in landscaping. Not quite sure what to expect, she embraced it and took on the landscape nursery program at Michigan State as a challenge.

Whitacre was the only female in her class and just the second female to go through the rigorous program and not quit. "It was really a reality check," she notes. "You're sitting in class, and it hits you: 'I better study.' But I also realized I loved the program, so I worked hard."

This perseverance has been integral to the success of the sisters' business, says Marshall, who attended a local business school for accounting.

The family business continued to expand when a couple hundred acres were purchased in 1972 and a nursery was planted. In 1997, the year Walter Small died, the family opened a retail gift store. The business grew to include a wholesale and retail garden center; a nursery; a gift store that sold an eclectic mix of antiques, furniture, art and even crystal; and the mainstay, the landscaping business.

In April 2000, the sisters decided to venture out on their own and moved into a new facility in Valparaiso, Indiana. Despite all of these challenges, the principles their father instilled in them helped the two to surge ahead without any regrets. They

pared down their business to just landscaping – no garden center or wholesale.

"Landscaping is our passion," Marshall says. "We started here with just the intention of doing landscaping. It's what we do best."

Their list of services includes landscaping, hardscaping, maintenance, waterscaping, custom containers, irrigation, outdoor kitchens and seasonal décor.

A palette of plants

To further hone what they do best, Whitacre and Marshall have developed specialty crews, including ones for landscaping, hardscaping, maintenance and irrigation. "When we are designing a job, we think in terms of what the crew can do," Marshall says. "We actually figure out how many days we'll need with each crew's work. The crews know what they are doing, so we don't have to reinvent the process. It is unbelievable how much work they can push out in a day."





(Above) Their 1-1/2-acre perennial area is organized in alphabetical order to easily pull orders. (Here) The landscapers used diverse plant and stone materials, as well as undulating beds, on this project.

WORKING WITH OPRAH

Sticking with the independent, strong-woman theme, Nancy Marshall and Becky Whitacre designed and landscaped the property for TV talk show host and philanthropist Oprah Winfrey at her former Indiana home.

They used myrtle ground cover, ferns and a few conifers for a winter accent around a log cabin Winfrey had built. Dogwoods and Japanese maples completed the project. They also used boulders and their blended soil mix to make undulating planting beds. A flagstone walk was installed from the driveway to the front of the house that split into a path to the back patio.

One fall, they designed beds and planted 32,000 tulips. When Winfrey saw them bloom, she said, "I feel like I'm in Holland." After the tulips finished blooming, they planted thousands of impatiens annuals.

Marshall and Whitacre worked for Winfrey for nearly 16 years, and when she sold the estate, Winfrey recommended Smalls Landscaping to the new owner.

At Smalls Landscaping, Marshall and Whitacre pride themselves on being different. Clients won't see the common burning bushes or lilacs. "There is no 'cookie cutter' landscaping," Marshall says. "We have some unusual and odd plants, such as dwarf conifers. You know our landscaping the minute you drive by it. Each project is tailored to the client's taste."

The clients are guided through a process where they look through books and discuss preferences including colors, shapes and smells. Clients are recommended to associate anything with their particular house when determining preferences.

"When we observe clients flipping through landscape project books, we get something out of it," Marshall says. "Clients tend to keep going back to the pictures that have elements they like, even if they say they don't want it at their house. We get

North American landscaper of the year

an idea of their likes and dislikes.”

Whitacre and Marshall then go through their inventory, incorporating a client’s preferences, and come up with a design. They have a list of more than 30,000 plants in their nursery. Each plant is easily found and identified because every row in the nursery is numbered, and the plants have their own SKU to prevent mistakes.

Whitacre and Marshall even make their own soil to use on their client’s projects to ensure their landscaping works of art have the best chance of survival. “We are artists,” Whitacre says, “but our palette is with plants. For us, going to a nursery is like going to an ice cream store for some people. There are so many flavors to try out.”

Family atmosphere

The sister’s close relationship extends to everyone they come in contact with. “Landscaping is very personal. Some of our best friends are our clients,” Whitacre says, noting how one of her clients called just to wish her a safe trip before she embarked on a several-week trip to Australia. Another customer called Whitacre after her cat, Maxie, had to be put down.

7 TIPS TO SUCCESS

1 Have a passion for the work you are doing, and let it show in your projects.

2 Flexibility is key; be able to change plans on a moment’s notice.

3 Empower your employees to make their own decisions.

4 Continuing education: Constantly research materials, plants and equip-

ment to look for the next “new idea.”

5 Be prepared to do most anything for your clients.

6 Establish personal relationships with clients. Don’t look at them as just a paycheck: They are great people.

7 Put family first: It’s important for employees to be able to be there for their families.



Winning the 2008 Indiana Nursery Landscape Association (INLA) Residential Landscape Maintenance Award of Excellence, this project includes thousands of perennials, a koi pond, flowering trees and shrubs for a “golf-course appeal.”

Sometimes clients call because they are not sure who else to call, and they know Marshall and Whitacre will take care of whatever they need. “We’ll do anything they want us to get the job done for them,” Whitacre says. “We’ll clean their gutters, hang up their hose caddy or even put on window covers.”

Their service and work ethic has created loyalty and trust with not only their clients, but also with their employees.

Rhonda Deutscher, who has been with the company for more than 24 years, feels like a part of the family. During her time at Smalls, Deutscher has had four children and become the right-hand woman – now the operations manager – for the business.

“It doesn’t feel like a company,” she says. “It feels like family. You can take time off of work for your own family and not be worried about being hired back. It’s family first here. If you have to take time off to take your mom to the doctor or see your child in a performance, it’s not a problem. They don’t even question it. You just keep going and work around it.”

This family atmosphere extends beyond the typical workplace, too. “I’ve been invited over to Becky’s and Nancy’s houses for pizza parties and bonfires,” Deutscher says. “They make me part of their family.” **tlc**

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Smalls
Landscaping

VALPARAISO, IN

Sisters, Nancy & Becky



Congratulations to our 2013
 Landscaper of the Year Finalists!



WINNERS:
 Nancy Marshall
 and Becky Whitacre
 Smalls Landscaping Inc.
 Valparaiso, IN



Jason Cromley
 and Matt Seiler
 Hidden Creek
 Landscaping Inc.
 Columbus, OH



Darin Brockelbank
 Metro
 GreenScape Inc.
 Charlotte, NC



Eric Bruss
 Bruss
 Landscaping Inc.
 Wheaton, IL



Michael Madarash
 Kokobo Greenscapes
 Long Island City, NY



David Barglof
 Mid Atlantic
 Enterprise Inc.
 Williamsburg, VA



David Katz
 ELITE
 Landscaping Inc.
 Poughkeepsie, NY



David Adams
 Landscape
 Associates Inc.
 Aldie, VA



Jason Gordon
 Total Turf Inc.
 Wappingers Falls, NY



Rene West
 Executive
 Landscaping Inc.
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How It Works

Every year, the *Total Landscape Care* editors choose the top 12 landscapers from across the country to be honored in our Landscaper of the Year program, presented by New Holland Construction. Some factors that affect our decision are the landscapers' portfolio of work, services offered, business techniques, community involvement and what sets them apart from others in the industry.

The chosen finalists are each featured in a full-length magazine article, along with photos of their projects. They also join our staff on an all-expense-paid cruise to the Bahamas hosted by New Holland Construction where they can network with other landscapers, enjoy nightly gala events and relax on the sandy beaches.

Continue to watch the magazine and our website for more coverage on the 2013 finalists, which includes photos from the cruise and profiles of the finalists. See more photos from the 2013 cruise at totallandscapecare.com/landscaper-of-the-year/loy-gallery. To be considered for our 2014 Landscaper of the Year program, submit an application at totallandscapecare.com/loy. You can also print and mail the application to:

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Nancy Marshall shows off her award with Curtis Goettel from New Holland Construction.