

*Town & Gardens provides an amazing service in an amazing place.*

**H**ave you ever wondered what it would be like to be a landscape contractor in New York City? On one hand, it would be exciting to feed off the energy of a city that never sleeps. On the other hand, imagine trying to find a place to park, to move equipment from one site to another, and to deal with horns blaring and non-stop traffic every day. Where do employees eat, go to the bathroom, and wash up, and, by the way, where is the one necessary ingredient all landscapes require — soil?

Yes, working in New York City would be daunting for most landscape contractors. But then again, Don Sussman, president of Town & Gardens Ltd., located in the heart of downtown Manhattan, is not your ordinary contractor. In fact, he was not a contractor at all in his first career.

Born and raised in New York City, Sussman taught high school biology until the mid-1970s, when he grew tired of the escalating public school financial crisis. He had been working summers for a landscape contractor and decided it was time to strike out on his own. He



did that by starting Pistils & Peat on Fire Island, a Long Island summer retreat for New Yorkers.

The former biology teacher grew a green thumb, and by 1988, his company, which provided installation and maintenance services to area residents, had three locations on Fire Island. He sold his business at its peak and continued to manage it for another six years.

#### **Back to his roots**

In 1995, Sussman joined forces with New York-born and Irish-raised Chris Fitzpatrick to start Town & Gardens. "Chris was a landscaper in Ireland before coming back here to live," remembers Sussman. "One of the first jobs we went after was for Donald Trump. We got the job and installed a rooftop garden on the top of Trump Tower. In fact, we still maintain the project."

Sussman remembers the project for many reasons. Yes, it was for Donald Trump. It was also

one hot summer in New York, and his two-man company hired four interns to help with the installation. Furthermore, the garden was located on the top of the 71st floor, and the elevator only went to the 70th floor. The dilemma was how to get 40 yards of soil plus plant material and supplies inside the building and get it up two flights of stairs. The project was published in *In Style* magazine which gave Town & Gardens a nice boost with its marketing effort.

The fact that many of Sussman's Fire Island customers owned city property did not hinder his startup effort, either. All Town & Gardens had to do was provide the same high level of service in the city that Pistils & Peat had done on the island. To do that, the company cofounder quickly built on his previous experience.

"I was able to bring more back to the city than my knowledge of horticulture and landscaping," says

# LANDSCAPE

Sussman. "Maybe that is one reason why the logistics of installing a roof garden did not seem overwhelming. On Fire Island, everything had to be freighted over on a boat, from a bag of soil to 15-foot-high eastern red cedar trees. Once material arrived, there were no roads to use to haul it to a site. To add to the challenge, we could not use heavy equipment on the island, and in most instances, we were working in sand."

In addition to helping him become logistically astute, the Fire Island experience taught Sussman how to landscape windy sites (New York's tall buildings are notorious for creating a wind-tunnel effect). As mentioned above, he also knew or at least understood many of his new prospective customers. "You cannot underestimate how important it is to know your customer," he adds. "The same holds true for understanding how to run a business. The person who purchased Pistils & Peat had more business

savvy than me, and I learned a lot from him that I later incorporated into our new business venture."

### City experience

Sussman was a fast learner. That first year in business, he and his partner grossed \$250,000 in sales, and for the next several years the company grew by 100 percent annually. Today, Town and Gardens brings in between \$2.3 to \$2.5 million annually. The company employs 25 to 30 people, depending on the season, and operates both a residential and maintenance division with individual profit centers for lighting and irrigation, design, holiday décor, and seasonal color.

In addition to the famous Trump Tower owner, customers include owners of townhomes, penthouses, condos, institutions such as Columbia University, The Met, and many prominent area parks. This winter, Town & Gardens crews will be installing

a roof garden at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA). The project will be one of the company's largest, not to mention one of its most unusual undertakings. The garden will be completely artificial to eliminate any risk to the priceless works of art below.

"I think one thing that separates us from the competition is our willingness to take on the unusual project," Sussman relates. "The Trump Tower may have been our first experience on a New York City roof, but it was not our last. We have installed countless rooftop gardens since then, each one more complex, and have added green roof installations to our service offering.

"We also strive to deliver an amazing service. If customers cannot find an answer to their landscaping questions in our office, I suspect an answer is not in the offing. Our employees are creative, they have a broad

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*Don Sussman says having excellent relationships has been instrumental to Town & Gardens' growth and success.*



### PROFILE

**TOWN & GARDENS, LTD.**  
**NEW YORK, NEW YORK**

**President:**

Don Sussman

**Founded:** 1995

**Employees:** 25 to 30

**ALCA Size Category:**  
\$2 million - \$5 million

**PLANTING IN NYC**

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base of knowledge, and they maintain strong relationships with vendors and other suppliers. Lighting, plants, materials, special designs, and even the out-of-the-ordinary is ordinary for us. If customers give us a call, we will be there for them.”

The company’s revenue stream is divided equally between commercial and residential accounts. Although many of its first projects were bid-build, Town & Gardens rarely submits a bid today and relies, instead, on good relationships with landscape architects and others to not only pique customer interest but pre-sell them on its service.

“It is not uncommon for architects to tell their customers to ‘go to Town & Gardens and tell them what you want,’” Sussman adds. “That’s a good position to be in no matter what market or business you are in.”

He continues, “We have a talented staff and an excellent reputation, and both are incredible contributors to our success. But it is difficult to express in words how important building relationships has been for this company. Having excellent relationships with general contractors, architects, subcontractors, and vendors is critical to our growth. This is a relationship business, and if you put your best foot forward with everyone with whom you do business, it will always come back. I sincerely believe that.”

### Learning curve

This owner attributes his company’s profitable growth to a myriad of other influences as well, including bringing in industry consultants and sharing important financial information with employees.

“When we started the company, we made money,” Sussman relates. “But it was not until I attended a Kevin Kehoe seminar that I real-

ized we could be more profitable. We hired him as a consultant and, as I hoped, we started to grow the bottom line.”

Kehoe was not alone in lending a helping hand. Town & Gardens employs the Gary Kinman approach to selling. Customers are not only invited to its facility to discuss design alternatives, they are encouraged to participate in the design process. “We are selling ourselves instead of being a low-cost commodity,” explains Sussman.

His staff routinely attends design seminars, and the company as a whole has benefited from sharing ideas with other ALCA members. Benchmarking and networking, for example, led to the purchase of ASSET software to help integrate scheduling, estimating, and billing and to develop systems to better track profit and loss. “You have to

know where you are making money and where you are losing money,” Sussman adds.

Like many successful owners, he openly shares this information with staff members and shares in the company’s success with a graduated profit-sharing program for all salaried staff.

“I think the bottom line to our success has been our desire to do the right thing,” Sussman adds. “It really is as simple as that. From the beginning, we wanted to do what is best for our clients, our employees, and our suppliers. Yes, I think we provide an amazing service, but when it comes right down to it, our success depends on following a few simple rules of business and of life. Fortunately for us, we practice those rules in an amazing setting.” 

