

Signature Plantscaping Finds Design for Success Through NRG

By *Debbi Mack*,
STAFF WRITER

Sandy Powell owns an unusual business - not because of what she does, but because of what she is. Powell's company, Signature Plantscaping (www.signatureplantscaping.com), is one of a handful of landscape design and installation businesses owned by a woman.

For Powell, Signature Plantscaping represents the perfect marriage of her skills, training and a lifelong interest in creating beauty outdoors. Powell has "just always loved planting. ... I grew up in New Jersey, the Garden State," where growing flowers and vegetables kept her happily occupied as a child. She enjoyed this hobby so much, her first job in high school was working for a landscaping and florist company. When it came to choosing a career, Powell knew without question that she was meant to work in the landscaping field. "For me, it just made sense," Powell said. "It was just a natural fit."

Hands-On Education

Powell attended Penn State University, where she double-majored in horticulture and landscape contracting. She said landscape contracting differs from landscape architecture in that landscape architects are primarily designers, whereas landscape contractors learn

both design and construction. So, her work not only satisfies her creative side, but "lets me get my hands dirty, too."

The landscape contracting program was limited to 30 students and she was one of only three women who graduated from her class. "I took a lot of flack from the guys," she said, some of whom questioned her ability to do the "hands on" work the program required. For that reason, Powell spent six months in Jacksonville, Fla., as an intern at a nursery and landscape firm called Second Hand Rose. There, she handled "everything from managing the nursery center to sales and design to 'hands on' installation work."

After college, Powell worked at Sunset Hills Foliage in Laurel, handling sales and design for more than 10 years, then moved on to a couple of other companies. She had almost 15 years experience in the field before striking out on her own.

Her Own Vision

She decided to start her own business when she "realized I was making an awful lot of money for someone else," plus she wanted to implement her own vision for doing her work - "and there's only one way to do that." So she opened Signature Plantscaping six months ago. Her business handles residential and commercial landscaping design and installation through-

out Maryland and in parts of D.C. and Northern Virginia.

Powell has developed a niche for "high-end" design, and has done landscaping for many four-star hotels in the Washington area, as well as high-end residential projects. Her work has won awards from both the Baltimore and Washington Home and Garden Shows.

Because Powell knows from experience and training what designs will or won't work for a specific terrain, she is able to put her own personal stamp on a project, while bearing in mind what her crew of seven employees must do to achieve it. In fact, she can often be seen working alongside her crew at sites - something that surprises her clients, she said, but that she thoroughly enjoys. It's her way of making sure the project gets her personal touch.

She notes that she's very fortunate to have spent her entire professional life in a career she loves, based on interests she's had since she was young. "Not many people can say that."

Plants and Personal Growth

Powell got involved with NRG three years ago after meeting Mike Weiner at a networking event. "We just clicked," she said.

Although Signature Plantscaping is only six months old, Powell has

"closed quite a few deals already, all through NRG." She particularly likes NRG meetings for their warm, friendly atmosphere. It's neither stuffy nor cliquish, and "we're there to help each other." Through NRG, she made contact with a writer from Suburban Scene Magazine, which is doing a feature article about Signature Plantscaping. She has also learned about other networking events through NRG.

In addition, Powell said NRG has enhanced her personal growth and she's not only gotten business from the group, but made friends along the way. "Personally, it just gives you such a boost," she said, attributing it to the NRG philosophy of not just getting contacts from others, but sharing what you have, too. "You could have the worst week ... and you just feel so much better when you come out of a meeting."

Powell is in the Columbia II NRG group and intends to join another. She's already planning to expand her fleet to two crews next year. She said NRG has contributed greatly to her success so far, not only through its marketing and networking opportunities, but because it can also give one new ideas for or perspectives on one's business.

"It gets you out there and forces you to look at your business in a whole new light," she said.