

Landscape Ontario Podcast

Inside Scoop:

The challenges, opportunities and benefits of interior landscaping

Host: Karina Sinclair

Guest: Hella Keppo, CHT, Stems Interior Landscaping Inc.

INTRO:

Karina: Welcome back to the *Landscape Ontario Podcast*, the show where we explore the inspiring stories, innovative ideas and diverse expertise of professionals in the landscape and horticulture trades. I'm your host Karina Sinclair, and today, we're taking a closer look at the niche sector of interior plantscaping.

While lots of landscapers like you might spend much of your time outdoors, many people, including your clients, friends and family, work indoors, surrounded by screens, cubicles and walls that could use a little life. That's where today's guest, Hella Keppo, comes in. Hella is the founder of [Stems Interior Landscaping](#), a thriving business that brings lush, tropical plants into work spaces throughout the Toronto area. Her mission? To help reconnect people with nature — even if it's within the walls of an office building.

Hella's passion for plants started early, having grown up immersed in the countryside. She's turned that love into a career that not only beautifies indoor environments but also delivers real benefits — cleaner air, reduced stress and enhanced creativity, to name just a few. From moss art and blooming displays to impressive living walls, Hella and her team are transforming spaces and changing how people experience their work environments.

As always, I love hearing from you, the listeners! If you have feedback on this episode or ideas for future topics and guests, send me a message at podcast@landscapeontario.com. Your suggestions help me shape the podcast and bring you the stories you care about most. If you're attending the [Landscape Ontario Congress Trade Show and Conference](#) from January 7-9, maybe we'll cross paths! I hope you stop to say hello when you see me on the show floor with my camera.

Now, let's dive into the world of interior plantscaping with Hella Keppo, as she shares her journey, insights, challenges and skills needed to be successful in this niche sector.

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INTERVIEW:

Karina: I am so grateful that you've made time to join us on the show, Hella. Thanks for being here today, and I can't wait to help tell the story about what it's like to work in interior plantscaping, because that's such a unique niche part of the green trades.

Hella: Well, thanks so much for having me on your podcast, Karina. It's such a thrill to be here. I really appreciate it.

Yeah, so I got into the interior landscape business, I guess, from a child. I've always loved plants. Instead of buying candy with my allowance money, I would buy plants at the grocery store.

My collection started, I'm assuming, the same as most people, with begonias and a lot of African violets. Then I got a summer job at Cullen Country Barns in Scarborough. I worked in the tropical plant department, and that really opened my eyes to indoor plants and the amount of variety you could get.

By the time I was in high school, I had a grow light unit with over 50 species of plants and hundreds in total. From there, I went on to the University of Guelph, got a double major in horticulture and business, and that was also a co-op program. So I was able to dabble in all kinds of different areas of the horticulture industry.

Then, when I graduated, I was fortunate to get a job with Bruce Jensen Nurseries. They did indoor landscaping, and that's where I started my career with interior plants. We looked after offices, malls and lobbies. I quickly moved up in that company and was in the sales department.

After I left there, I worked for my grandfather, who had a small cheese import business. We imported cheese from Europe and sold it to delis in Toronto. That's where I learned how to run

a small business, because I was in charge of everything — from doing deliveries to hiring and bookkeeping.

Karina: Oh my goodness, that's quite a journey! That exposure to business management is probably one of those key elements a lot of people are missing when they get into any job path they're passionate about. Running a business tied to that passion is totally different from actually doing the thing, so I think it's probably lucky that you had that early exposure, even though it was a cheese company, you were able to apply it to what you really wanted to do.

Hella: That's right. After I wound down that business, I was able to jump back into my true passion: indoor plants. You're right, though — all those hats you wear are transferable from business to business. But as you know, with my business, it's all about the plants and the passion I have for them.

Karina: I imagine it's all about the plants, but also the people — the clients and the people who help you run the company. Managing that and fostering a passion for plants within them is such a big, holistic aspect of running a plantscaping business.

Hella: It's true. But a lot of the people I hire are already passionate about plants, so that's not the hard part. Looking after the people, though — that's another huge part of the job, for sure.

Karina: Tell me a little more about what it's like to have an interior plantscaping business. What do you do? How do you find and foster clients? And what does it mean to care for plants indoors?

Hella: I guess the main thing we do is install and then maintain indoor office plants. It all starts with putting the right plant in the right spot, which sounds simple, but it takes a lot of years of trial and error — seeing what works and what doesn't in certain circumstances.

For most of our clients, we'll do an initial walkthrough with their floor plan in hand and figure out which plants to put where. Then we go back, do a proposal, send it off and once it's approved, the real work begins. We deliver all the plants. It's funny because when we deliver them, people will literally come out of their offices and ask, "Do I get one in my office too?" People just get so excited when this cart of plants rolls by their door.

Karina: That's sort of like getting happy mail — something people can actually look forward to. They can become little plant parents in the workspace.

Now, unlike traditional outdoor landscapers, who are starting to get pulled into consultations earlier than they used to when a building is constructed or a property is renovated. And they get to help decisions like “don't put this tree here because of this reason” or “we should do this over here to improve drainage.” That's not often the case with an interior plantscaper, right? Have you ever had the chance to provide input on how a workplace might be redesigned or laid out so you can improve the green space within?

Hella: Typically, not really, especially in an office setting. Although a lot of the designers now are trying to pull in biophilic design. It's kind of a buzzword right now. But basically it involves patterns and shapes and textures that are found in nature. As well as, obviously, you want to use plants. But that also requires a lot of natural light, movement, like a lot of airflow.

But I guess with the plants, some of the furniture that the designer will order, that's kind of set in stone, I guess you could say, that we're constrained to those containers that are inside the furniture. But basically we would be the ones who specify what container will work best on the size of the plant that they want. So usually they'll say, “oh, yeah, we want a 5 to 6-foot tall tree here.” And then I know that that has a 14-inch root ball, which then requires a 16-inch container. A lot of it is a bit of give and take.

And sometimes the designers also procure their own containers, and then we have to try and retrofit the root ball to fit into their container, so sometimes it's a bit of a challenge.

Karina: Well, speaking of challenge, what are some of the other obstacles or challenges that you face with interior plantscaping? What might other people not realize is a complication of your job?

Hella: One of the big complications, especially when designers or a client has existing containers, is we cannot have those containers leak. A lot of the cheaper big ceramic pots have a drainage hole in them. You just can't water a plant and have a hole in the bottom in the indoor environment because that water is just going to pour through. Then you have a risk of mold growing under the container, like if it's on carpet, or even slip and falls if there's a puddle

on a hardwood floor. Our containers are completely watertight, so that's one of the big challenges.

Some of the other ones are pests. A lot of the plants will get spider mites, mealybugs, scale, fungus gnats and all of those we're able to deal and make sure that everything is clean. We can't spray anything because it's indoors. We're not allowed to use pesticides or anything. So most of the treatment for pests is just physically wiping them off the leaf. Sometimes we can spray with soapy water, literally a drop of dish soap in a sprayer, and clean the leaf off. That's the best way we can control insects.

I do use some IPM (integrated pest management). If it's a larger atrium area or a solarium, then we can release some biological insects that are tiny. They're as small as the plant bugs, and the regular person wouldn't even know there's a bug there at all. So sometimes we can use that.

Karina: How about with Covid? Did that create any changes in how you had to operate within these buildings during lockdowns and the move to hybrid work environments?

Hella: Yeah, that was a complete nightmare. Getting into the offices was a huge challenge. As the world knows, we were locked out for at least four weeks. Before the lockouts began, it was all hands on deck. I told my staff to just flood everything. We need them to get through these next two to three weeks. And so we did that.

Luckily, Landscape Ontario was a huge benefit, rallying the government to try and get landscapers deemed essential. I also had a couple of essential clients who said, "you guys need to get here because you're part of our operations, and we need you to continue looking after these plants." A couple of those clients were hospitals, and they basically said, "get back over here." So I got that in writing, and we were able to start doing our work again.

Then, of course, the next challenge was actually gaining access in to the offices. Many clients were great. Most of them had security, and the ones that didn't would meet us to let us in or gave us fobs. You know, we have a lot of trust with our clients, and they did allow us to get access again.

Karina: And has that resolved since everyone's back in the workplace? Or for those that have that hybrid model, is that a challenge or has that helped?

Hella: That's a challenge. So Monday and Friday are skeleton staff. I think that's pretty typical. Wednesdays seem to be the day that all the meetings occur.

Getting into meeting rooms and boardrooms has become a challenge. When that happens, we'll first try to get into meeting rooms that we know are always busy, especially if there's obviously plants in there. If we can't get in, then we'll do our other work at that office, check in again, and if we still can't get into water, we sometimes ask the receptionist if she can throw some water on there. Otherwise, sometimes, depending on if that plant requires more water, we'll make a special trip back.

Karina: And I suppose with the knowledge that you have of interior plants, you might look at something where you've traditionally had trouble getting into a space and think, "well, maybe we'll swap this out for something that is a little more drought-tolerant," and move it around so that the plant isn't quite so dependent on that regular access.

Hella: Yeah, that's right. And we also utilize containers from Germany. It's called Lechuza Containers and they actually have a water reservoir in the bottom. So then what we can do is fill the reservoir, and that will extend the amount of time needed in between the watering schedule.

Karina: Since you are a year-round business, you know, a traditional landscaper may stop maintaining around this time of year — October, November, maybe pushing it — but you go year-round. What does that mean for changes in how you care for the plants and for the plants that are in different vulnerable locations within an interior site?

Hella: Yes, we're year-round in the indoor environment. You think it doesn't change much, but it really does. As soon as fall comes and the temperatures outside start to go down, the heaters come on in the buildings. That just dries the plants out so quickly. It's pretty shocking sometimes. The air in the office starts to get really dry as well. Obviously, in the winter, it gets very dry. February is bad for that, but at least then it's lower light as well, so it starts to balance off a little bit.

In the spring, when the air conditioners come on, it's the opposite. We get cold breezes, and the plants don't dry out as quickly. Although then, with the longer days and more sunshine, it starts to work itself out again.

Karina: In a lot of buildings, the atrium or entrance have a grand display. Maybe there's a living wall, larger arrangements or those really impressive big potted tropicals. When they're so close to an entrance, what sorts of issues might a plant experience in that case?

Hella: In the winter, it's terrible. Especially at these big entrances to big buildings and lobbies with handicapped doors. You press the button, and now I believe it's regulated that the door has to stay open for 10, 15, maybe even 30 seconds. That's a long time to have that door open and freezing cold air pouring in.

I have had plants freeze solid. Well, maybe not quite solid, but they definitely turned black from the freezing cold air hitting them. It does not take long. Tropical plants are as perishable as a head of lettuce. If you freeze it and then thaw it, it just goes to mush.

Karina: Is that on you to replace, or does the client cover the cost of replacing those plants?

Hella: Well, typically it would be the client if we're told that that plant needs to stay there. Otherwise, we would notice that it's starting to get some cold damage. You see that kind of in the fall, and then we try to move it to another area so that it won't get that initial blast of cold air going by it.

Karina: Oh my goodness, that's so much to consider. A few minutes ago, you mentioned the term *biophilia*, which is a design trend that incorporates more organic plant material, natural textures, things like that. Let's dive into that a bit more and why it would be a benefit to incorporate biophilia into an interior design.

Hella: Well, first of all, biophilia literally translates into love of life. It's the innate, biologically driven need to interact with other forms of life, such as animals and plants. The mission of Stems, my company, is to connect people to nature with lush, thriving tropical plants. And that's really important because we need to be connected to nature. I mean, that's what biophilia is all about, connecting with nature.

The problem is that we spend 80 to 90 per cent of our time inside. So how do you connect to nature? Especially, you know, we're Canadians. We love nature. We love going outside and experiencing it — canoe trips, hiking and everything. But how often can you do that? We have

winter here. That's why I figured it's best to connect with nature where we spend our time, and that's by bringing plants indoors.

Karina: And if you were trying to convince a potential client to do this, are there studies out there that demonstrate the value of improving mood, wellness and other important elements like that?

Hella: There's all kinds of resources out there. There's a really good website, [Green Plants for Green Buildings](#). We can put the link in the show notes if you want.

Karina: You bet.

Hella: They have tons of information, resources and reports. That's a great wealth of information there. There's also TPIE, which stands for [Tropical Plant International Expo](#). It's a trade show down in Florida, Fort Lauderdale, in January. Not a terrible place to be in the middle of winter.

Another resource is the [National Interiorscape Network](#), which I'm a member of. We meet twice a year to dive into our numbers, do benchmarking and share best practices. A lot of these resources are really great to keep us up to date and in the loop as to what's going on.

Karina: Have you faced the same challenges as a lot of other landscaping and horticulture companies with staffing?

Hella: I don't think I have, mainly because I believe I've become a better leader. I did have a little bit of turnover a few years ago. I think a lot of that had to do with COVID-19, though. But right now, I have some great, really loyal employees who love their job. A couple of them came through the [GROW Program](#) through Landscape Ontario, so you know they have an interest in horticulture already. They were just a really great addition to our team.

Karina: That's always great to hear that something from Landscape Ontario has been a benefit. Are there other ways being a [member of Landscape Ontario](#) has helped your business?

Hella: Yeah, we've been a member for many years. We used to be active in the interiorscape sector. There was a commodity group at Landscape Ontario, but that kind of wound down before COVID. But I love attending the [Peer to Peer workshops](#) and a lot of the other

business-related seminars that Landscape Ontario puts on. I did the [Employer of Choice program](#) last year, and now this year I'm in the [Intent-Based Leadership program](#). So yeah, there are so many benefits through Landscape Ontario.

Karina: What do you think are some of the most important skills needed for somebody who wants to run a business focused on interior landscaping?

Hella: Well, the first thing you need is a passion for plants. Then, I guess the second thing is you need to love people because it's not like an outdoor landscape job where you're outside not even seeing the homeowner or business owners. We're inside their office, inside their buildings. And we need to be approachable and, yet, also very quiet and get our work done without too much chitchat. We like to be efficient.

Karina: Thinking of the kinds of people who might be on your team who go into these interior places. Like you said, they need to be quiet and yet approachable. So is this a good job for an introvert or somebody who is new to Canada and maybe still developing their English language skills?

Hella: I would say everyone. Extrovert, introvert. I'm personally an introvert, so I do like just doing my thing and looking after the plants. But extroverts also love the job because they get to see lots of people all day long. You know, we're going from office to office. Yeah, I think language might be a bit of a barrier, just because there is so much communication with the clients. But it's certainly not a problem either.

Karina: Sounds like there's room for everyone to explore this career path. Now, speaking of opportunities, where else can this kind of business go? Like, are there different verticals or areas that still have room for growth? Or have you reached the point where this is pretty settled and all you can do?

Hella: Wow, good question. I think there's always opportunities. Right now we're getting into a lot of the living walls, moss walls. We do what's called our live art program. So we bring in potted blooming, I guess, dish-garden type of things on a rotation basis. That's usually done in the reception areas, so they always have a fresh look.

We also do bloomer rotations, where we put in bromeliads or orchids into big lobby areas. So there's always room for growth, especially with this biophilic design. Designers are putting in all kinds of beautiful natural decor, and it's just so exciting to see what they come up with as well and how we can help them.

Karina: Do you have any favourite plants that you like to bring in that always just seem to be a real hit in your landscapes?

Hella: Well, I personally really like the Ming Aurelia because it's got such feathery foliage. However, it's a bit more finicky than the other plants in the Aurelia family. But there are some other ones too. Like, I guess the thing is, with the Ming Aurelia, when it starts to dry out a little bit, it kind of puts off a scent. So it's kind of neat in that way.

But also there are other plants that smell and bring in that scent into the indoor space as well. I think we were talking before about the Hoyas. You had a Hoya, and when they bloom, the scent just fills the room. It's actually a nocturnal type of plant. It puts the scent out at night because in the wild it's the moths that pollinate the flowers. So that's kind of interesting.

Also, when we're topping up the soil in the plants or repotting a plant in the office, people always comment, "Oh, it smells wonderful in here. It smells like spring or like walking in the woods." So it's really kind of interesting when you bring natural scents into the office place.

Karina: You mentioned walking in the woods, and I know that you have some experience with that at a really deep level. Tell me a little bit more about your experience with forest bathing.

Hella: Yeah, so I just came back from Japan where I did a forest bathing tour. That was done through [ANFT](#), which is an association that has accreditation to be a guide in that. The Japanese have called it "*Shinrin-yoku*," which is a direct translation to forest bathing.

So this is not, you know, stripping naked and running through the woods. It's more of a very slow, meditative walk. You're using all your five senses. It's very mindful. In Japan, they've been prescribing *Shinrin-yoku* for years for very stressed-out mostly businessmen who need to disconnect from computers, cell phones and all that stuff, and really connect with nature.

Karina: For those who can't make it out to a forest bathing session or find themselves in a good deep wilderness area, it sounds like being able to have a plantscape, living walls and potted

plants on your desk might be a closer way of getting back to nature, even when you are stuck at your desk.

Hella: There's so many benefits to indoor plants and just looking at a view of nature or the plants on your desk, can improve your mood. Plants make people happy, and they can also reduce stress, they filter pollutants out of the air. Plants inhale carbon dioxide and release oxygen, so that's great for indoors as well. They create this natural, feel-good environment. In offices, plants have been shown to increase productivity and creativity while reducing stress. So it's kind of a win-win.

Karina: There's no good reason not to have plants.

Hella: Exactly. And you know what? There's also a great [infographic on the Nich website](#). So I can give you that link as well. It goes into all kinds of benefits of plants, both indoors and outdoors.

Karina: Well, you've sold me. I mean, I plan to run out and buy more plants right now!

I want to step back just for a minute and talk about when you started your business and how you've grown it over the past number of years. So how long have you had Stems, and what did it look like in the beginning compared to now?

Hella: Well, I started Stems in 1997, so a long, long time ago. It was just me. I hung my shingle out there and started to grow it. And because I had already had some sales experience, I started pounding the pavement, throwing out brochures and business cards, as well as doing a lot of cold calling, trying to drum up business. And I did, you know. But back then, I had all the hats on, so I was doing everything, as I'm sure a lot of landscapers starting out do. You run out, find the work, procure all the items needed to do the work, you do the work, and then, you know, you have to do it all over again.

For me, I got the work, did the work, and then maintained the work. I was the one looking after the plants as well as trying to get new installations. So it was a lot, you know. I've grown this business slowly and steadily, probably for a good decade, because I had three children in that time, as well as earned my MBA.

Karina: When did you decide to take on staff for the first time?

Hella: Well, I was six months pregnant with my first child, and I literally couldn't fit behind the reception counter to water the plant that was behind there. So at that point, I thought, "Oh no, I'm going to have to hire someone now." And so that's what I did. It did not work out as well as planned. She did stick around for a while, but the plants took a little bit of a toll. But I have such wonderful clients that knew my situation, and I'm just so grateful that I had so many great clients.

Karina: And how many staff do you have now?

Hella: Well, we have a total of nine plus me. So ten staff.

Karina: And are they all doing installations and maintenance?

Hella: No, I have admin staff as well. A lot of my staff wear many hats, so we do maintenance, installations, some admin work. We all kind of share the burdens.

Karina: That sounds very holistic. Do you have plans to continue growing, or is this a good, comfortable size for you?

Hella: No, that's kind of my motto — always growing.

Karina: It makes sense, given what we do.

Hella: Yup, we're always looking for new clients and new places where we can install our plants.

Karina: With the future in mind, but also looking back to those early days, what would you tell 20-year-old Hella?

Hella: I think I would tell myself to get help sooner. Although putting myself back in that situation, I'd probably do it exactly the same. Just because when you're just starting out your business, if you hire someone, you have to give them some of the pay you'd normally be taking home. At that time, I wasn't really making enough money that I thought I could justify hiring someone.

You know, I've read a lot of leadership and business books, and they say, "If you start delegating some of your work, you can level up." Well, I didn't have enough work to level up. I was still wearing all the hats and doing everything. But I think it's because when you're pregnant, life throws it onto you. The timeline isn't your timeline anymore. That's the difference.

If it was on my timeline, I would've been able to build the business up to a level and then hired someone. But the timing was wrong. But you know, that's okay. There are no regrets. It's all good.

Karina: It's interesting that you say on your timeline, because a lot of people might think that they have to wait for the perfect timing, and that perfect timing never seems to be right now. There is something ethereal in the future that you can't quite ever get to, and so a lot of people are held back by that.

Hella: Yeah, I can totally see that. I didn't want to be held back. I've heard that as well, that some people will hold off having children until they have enough money, or they have the house, or they have whatever goal they've set in their head. But a lot of it is a moving target, so it never quite comes to fruition.

And then time has gone, you know, and you missed your opportunity. So I think things like having children, you just got to jump in and figure it out afterward. And of course, everything does work. You know, everything works out. You just have to make it happen.

Karina: Well, I think those are very wise words to end on. So for all of our listeners out there, if you are tempted to start a new idea and you think that the timing isn't right, maybe it's never going to be right so this is the exact moment to go ahead and get started.

Hella, thank you so much for coming in and giving us some of your business acumen and that look behind the curtain of what happens with interior plantscaping. I certainly learned a lot, and I think our listeners will have a new appreciation for all those beautiful plants, those tropicals that are thriving and growing and making all those interior spaces that we enjoy that much better.

So again, thanks for coming on the show. I really appreciate it.

Hella: Well, thank you for the opportunity. It was just such a thrill.

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EXTRO:

Karina: As we wrap up today's conversation with Hella Keppo, I hope you've gained a new appreciation for the care, creativity and expertise it takes to be an interior plantscape professional. I had no idea there were so many seasonal challenges that can still affect indoor plants. The knowledge needed by maintenance technicians cannot be understated, but it sounds like it could be a really fun and rewarding job to foster an interior workplace environment that offers so many benefits to the people in that space.

Relevant links and a transcription of today's conversation can be found on this episode's page at landscapeontario.com/podcast.

And, I'd love to hear your thoughts on this episode! Whether you have feedback, suggestions for future topics or ideas for guests, send me a message at podcast@landscapeontario.com. Your input helps me continue to bring valuable conversations and insights to the *Landscape Ontario Podcast*.

Thanks for tuning in, and until next time, stay curious!

Resources relevant to this episode

Stems Interior Landscaping Inc: www.stems.ca

YouTube Channel: <https://www.youtube.com/@stemsinteriorlandscaping>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/StemsInteriorLandscapingInc>

Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/stems_interior_landscaping

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/stems-interior-landscaping-inc/>

Interiorscape:

Green Plants for Green Buildings: <https://greenplantsforgreenbuildings.org/>

National Interiorscape Network: <https://interiorscapenetwork.com/>

TPIE (Tropical Plant International Expo): <https://tpie2025.smallworldlabs.com/education>

Nich (National Initiative for Consumer Horticulture) Infographics of plant benefits:

<https://consumerhort.org/plantsdothat-3/>

Shinrin-Yoku (Forest Bathing):

ANFT (Association of Nature & Forest Therapy): <https://anft.earth/>

Article by Roger Ong about the tour in Japan:

<https://zenbird.media/shinrin-yoku-connections-with-the-forest-its-past-and-our-future/>