

## Landscape Ontario Podcast: June 2025

### Growing beyond limits:

A tale of green thumbs and grit

**Host:** Karina Sinclair

**Guest:** Joe Steeves, recent University of Guelph horticulture certification program graduate

### Transcription

**Karina:** Thanks for tuning in to this special follow-up episode of the Landscape Ontario Podcast. I'm your host, Karina Sinclair. The very first episode I recorded when I took over as host of this podcast was with Joe Steeves, Joe is a young man from New Brunswick, who's finding his path to success through horticulture.

He also happens to have cerebral palsy, but thanks to his employer's open minds and some minor but meaningful accommodations, Joe is flourishing in what he calls his dream job. When I last caught up with Joe in May of 2024, he had wrapped up the first year of an online horticulture program through the University of Guelph, and now a year later, it's time to see where Joe is in his education journey as he pursues a future in horticulture.

Explore how educators and employers can create more opportunities for people with disabilities who want to work within the green trades. And guess what? We're also trying something brand new. You can now watch a video version of this episode. Just head over to Landscape Ontario's YouTube channel to see our conversation with more photos, and be sure to share some feedback and let me know if you'd like to see more episodes presented in video form. If you're still here with me on the audio only version, let's go ahead and catch up with Joe Steeves.

### Music transition

Thanks for coming back to the podcast, Joe. This is your third time on the Landscape Ontario Podcast, and I like to keep revisiting with you because you have such an interesting story as a

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young person who is exploring and discovering what a life in the green trades can mean to you. I know that you've had a lot happening in this first year.

The last time we spoke, you had just finished your first year with a certification program at the University of Guelph. Talk to me about what's happened with you with your education since.

**Joe:** Yeah, thank you so much for having me on today. so I'm in the process of getting my Guelph horticulture certification through the OpenEd learning program. It's all virtual, it's all online. To get my horticulture certification, I completed all the courses to get my certification, so that's really great, huge accomplishment for me.

**Karina:** It absolutely is. Did you think that you would go to university and have this sort of experience?

**Joe:** No, I actually, I have some cerebral palsy. I'm gonna be living at home a little bit longer than the average person would, just to build on more life skills and stuff like that. So it's great to have an OpenEd student learning program where I can do it virtually from home. So that was great.

And all my professors were awesome throughout my courses, and they gave me accommodations, like extra time on the tests and extra review. And shout out to my tutor, Mrs. Haley she um, was actually my high school math EA throughout all of high school. So she's a sweetheart and she was a major part in helping on this journey and great accomplishment.

**Karina:** Wonderful. What about the program itself? What classes did you have to take to fulfill the certification?

**Joe:** So I took soil diversity and pest management, and also plant identification and arboriculture, the study of trees.

**Karina:** And what did earning the certification allow you to do? Why was it important for you to complete that program?

**Joe:** So earning my certification was really important. I found, like, a great addition for my resume because right now I'm on with the town of Riverview in the summertime, which I love in

the community garden. That's right up the street and they've been so accommodating and I found it would be a great kind of piece for my resume because some of my goals towards the future, it'll just open up more opportunities basically for my passion in the sector.

**Karina:** I wanna talk about your work with the town of Riverview in a few minutes, but tell me a little bit more about the program.

I saw a photo of you holding up your certificate and not only had you completed the program, but it said "with distinction". So what did you have to do to earn "with distinction"?

**Joe:** I wasn't aware that it would say with distinction, honestly. I just thought I was getting my certification and yeah, I opened it and was honoured that it said that. And I just really enjoyed my courses and I think my professors knew that I really enjoyed them and worked hard at it and really gave it my all.

It was a nice little surprise actually, because I didn't realize it was gonna say that.

**Karina:** And over the course of your studies, being that this was an online program that was with the University of Guelph, which is in Ontario and you are in New Brunswick, what sorts of habits did you have to develop or practices to set yourself up for success knowing that this was a different learning experience?

**Joe:** So for sure, I am back in New Brunswick and I just set up morning routines, get up, get myself something to eat and make sure I'm nourished and kind set up time slots of when I would study. So downstairs I have a study room full of plants, very inviting, and we spruced my study room up so well to get me inspired to really get into my courses.

So yeah, just having those routines and stuff like that to kind of balance out your workload throughout the weeks.

**Karina:** So not only were you learning about plants you had surrounded yourself with plants for success. I think that's pretty cool.

**Joe:** Yeah, for sure.

**Karina:** With some of your courses, did you learn anything that maybe opened up your eyes to a different part of horticulture that you hadn't considered pursuing before? Did it make you go, "oh, I didn't realize that's something I could learn even more about and go in that direction"?

**Joe:** Yeah there was certainly a lot of interesting aspects within my courses. I took plant identification, soil diversity, pest management, and arboriculture, and there's so many topics within those courses that really I didn't even think would be in my courses.

They were just very interesting and fun to learn. These courses are great. I love working remotely here in New Brunswick and they really have a great online platform.

**Karina:** Now, how do you study certain things that have a physical quality? If you didn't have different samples of soil in front of you or perhaps the physical element of going out and looking at trees, how do you do something like that online when you might go out as a group with the instructor to see things in person.

**Joe:** Yeah, there's activities throughout the courses, so it just is all very scheduled and you can take breaks and go outside and as if you were working in a group. But just go and learn and take photos and discover yourself outdoors, and then bring all your findings back with pictures through email. So it's very hands-on, even though it's remote.

**Karina:** Okay, very good. I imagine there's a lot of people who are wondering how that might work out, but it sounds like the system was ideal for you.

**Joe:** Yeah, for sure. I love it.

**Karina:** Now let's go back and talk about where you're working now. You've completed this program. You're working with the town of Riverview as their community garden facilitator.

You had started that role last year and at that time you said that this was your dream job. Did that...

**Joe:** Yeah.

**Karina:** ...over the course of the summer, did that feel and continue to feel like your dream job?

**Joe:** Oh wow. For sure. Yeah. I just love it up there at the community garden. The people are so friendly. The town's been amazing and provided me with a lot of accommodations. Huge shout out to Alicia, my boss, who is absolutely amazing. Really with the CP and things that I can work on to get myself better is like retention in having to do multiple tasks, so she just sends me notes on my phone and reminders and stuff like that because she knows if I get too many tasks in a row that I might forget a few things. And that's just because of the CP and it's just she's been so accommodating.

In the garden aspect, I just love it. Like we have food bank plots that I take care of all summer and grow crops for the food bank and there's also a landscape aspect of the job, like keeping the whipper snipping like the grass, the garden's looking good and helping people with their gardens. Edging and helping them weed from time to time if they need help. If seniors have mobility issues or anything, I love to help them with their garden and they make me smile every day. So it's just like you said, a dream job for me.

**Karina:** Do you have any fun stories of interacting with people in that community space?

**Joe:** Yeah, for sure. Like we have events too that go on throughout the season. Like last week we just had a garden barbecue. It was cleanup week last week for the town of Riverview. The people who participated come out and get a burger and stuff like that.

I had my own garden booth. Just talked a lot about the garden, promoting pollinator plants and stuff like that. So there's a lot of events that go on within the summer that make it more fun and gets the gardeners really involved and they get excited about it.

**Karina:** So you had your own booth to help educate local residents about pollinator gardens? That's pretty cool.

**Joe:** Yeah, so I had my own booth, I would talk stuff about the garden. I promoted to plant pollinator plants in your garden. It's so important and just attracts a lot of wildlife and bees and stuff like that, so it's great.

**Karina:** I love that. It seems that building community within that space and helping getting others excited about the ecosystems and different kinds of plant techniques and then just being part of those events that get people together and outside and enjoying the outdoors

together — one of the great things about working in landscaping is creating spaces for people to come together.

**Joe:** Oh yeah. And I take a lot of pride in making the garden look really good. And, I just really love doing stuff like that and I've had a lot of help through that because the garden is so big. We have 45 to almost 50 in-ground plots, and then nine raised garden beds. Lots of the time, Alicia and my coworkers will help me get the garden all cleaned up and looking good so we can be on track to plant and stuff like that for the food banks. So it's really awesome.

**Karina:** Wow. Now, you mentioned Alicia there and that one of the accommodations that she's been able to do with you is just to send some written reminders because anyone who has spent time in a garden knows that there's always a long list of to-dos.

**Joe:** Oh yeah, sure.

**Karina:** And it's not that you can't do it. You know how to do it, you're physically capable. But keeping track of all of that is a bit more of a challenge. So that simple accommodation of getting little reminders in written form allows you to keep going without missing out on the opportunity to complete your job.

**Joe:** It's really awesome. She's been amazing and huge shout out to everybody there. The town of Riverview is an awesome place to work, and I hope that this turns into something. They're gonna actually try me in maintenance after the summer season's over in the garden.

I'm not sure what they'll have me doing in maintenance, but it's just like a thing that I get to have this amazing opportunity at.

**Karina:** Okay, so there could be quite a broad range of skills that you'll pick up with that. And it's nice to have some employment over the winter, because it can be a seasonal job working in landscaping. So to have that year round employment must feel pretty great.

**Joe:** We'll see where it goes. My dream is to have an all year round job, like you said. That would alleviate a lot of stress for me and just fulfill that goal because I just need to make a living all year round, right?

This is just, again, an incredible opportunity and shout out to the town, like they've been amazing. I hope it all goes well and I'll be able to impress them and yeah, that's one of my big goals, I guess.

**Karina:** Now, there's a big difference between being given a job and being a valued member of the team. It sounds like the town is really looking at you as a valued member of the team. How can landscape or horticulture businesses employers create a supportive and inclusive work environment to help people with disabilities thrive and find a space within that team?

**Joe:** I'm a very open person about my cerebral palsy, so I know what I struggle with. Like if we had a list of tasks or something like that I'd have to have my phone handy to write them down and just little reminders and stuff like that.

So just the big thing is just be yourself and just be your own advocate. I've worked on that throughout a couple of years and I just really found a difference when you were open and honest.

**Karina:** When I first interviewed you on the podcast about two years ago, you had told me about how the pruning and deadheading and working with the flowers in the greenhouse really helped with your fine motor skills, which was something that was an issue caused by cerebral palsy. Is that still a sort of therapy for you?

**Joe:** It's awesome. I get to weed every day and I'm so much more stable. So it's like therapy every day for my fine motor.

**Karina:** So when you have a break over the winter, do you find you have to start over again in the spring or has it been gradually better year over year?

**Joe:** In the off season, I work out. I have a home gym downstairs, so I can keep my muscle tone up, and I found myself pretty consistent at it, just so I wouldn't have a harsh transition getting back into such a physical job.

**Karina:** That's really smart. So, when you hit the spring season and you have to pick up bags of soil, push wheelbarrows, pull weeds, it's not a shock to the system.

**Joe:** Exactly.

**Karina:** Okay.

**Joe:** I have really felt quite the difference from working out in the off season and being back. So it's really great.

**Karina:** Is it just like a physical sort of therapy? Are there any other benefits?

**Joe:** Definitely, I'd say mental too because I love nature. I'm such a nature guy, and it's a passion, so I just go into work every day feeling great. I come home covered in dirt, from head to toe, and I love it and it's just such rewarding work for me and especially that I feel a big difference come the end of the summer regarding my stability.

**Karina:** What might you say to people who maybe have physical challenges or a sort of disability, and they might be looking at landscaping and horticulture and going, "I wanna work in that field, but I don't know if I could handle the physical challenges or the labour involved in it." What might you say to them?

**Joe:** Yeah, I would say just never give up and just keep moving forward and just love what you do. And yes, I have CP but I've just been able to get accommodated and again, the town's been absolutely amazing. So just try to make a difference and work hard and eventually you'll be able to achieve your goals, and just take comfort in knowing that you're supported and in some cases accommodated.

**Karina:** Hmm. Fantastic. So you are having a lot of success with your job with the town. You've got this horticulture certification. What's next? What are you looking forward to next? What's that future look like for Joe Steeves?

**Joe:** So the future for me, after I am done in the garden for another year, I have the option of getting my diploma in horticulture, but I'm okay with the certification right now because I'm not sure what they're gonna have me doing in maintenance and for how long. I'll probably be able to stay in the garden till the beginning of November.



And then, just my dream is to impress them there and hopefully gradually make my way up to getting that goal to being full time down the road.

**Karina:** Have you thought about what that might look like in five or 10 years from now?

**Joe:** So yeah, I'm just gonna keep giving it my all in the community garden and I just love the landscape aspect of it and love my work and I get to try a great opportunity working in maintenance. So down the road I would like to achieve a role in maintenance in the off season.

And that would just be a dream just to eliminate the seasonal aspect of the job so I can make a living. And down the road not having to deal with the seasonal aspect because I just wanna make a living, like I said.

**Karina:** Some of your work experience in the past few years has involved working in a greenhouse, the community gardens, you've been on a couple of farms. What do you think you like best: being outdoors, being in the greenhouse, a combination of the two, and when you get up and you go, "I get to go do this," what is it that you're most excited about getting to go do?

**Joe:** I'm just really excited that I have a job that I can be outside and still embrace nature because I'm a big nature guy and I just love working outside and the aspect of growing food. And, there's so many different aspects working in the community garden. So it's great.

It's the best of both worlds because you get to work outside and I usually work primarily alone in the garden most days. I just love the outdoor aspect and it's just what I'm passionate about and the greenhouse is just so awesome. It makes me happy every day.

**Karina:** Isn't that what everybody would wish to be able to say, to look at their job and go, "that makes me happy every day." I'm ...

**Joe:** For sure.

**Karina:** ... so glad you found that, Joe. That's amazing.

**Joe:** Yeah. Thank you so much.

**Karina:** Hopefully it all goes well. I'm sure it will. It sounds like you're off to a great start already and I look forward to hearing about all your success in the coming years.

**Joe:** Yeah. Thank you so much for having me on and this is an incredible opportunity. I'm just gonna keep being me. And let's see, like, how it goes. Maybe I can build something here like a career. I would love to build a career here.

## Music Transition

**Karina:** I hope you enjoyed my conversation with Joe Steeves. Once again, I am delighted to share proof that there really is room for everyone in the green trades. You can see how just a few tweaks can make space for someone to bring all their enthusiasm, passion and knowledge to your team.

Let's share more of these stories. If you know someone working in landscaping or horticulture who has had a life-changing experience by stepping outside of their comfort zone, reach out to me at [podcast@LandscapeOntario.com](mailto:podcast@LandscapeOntario.com). As always, we have a full transcription of today's interview on this episode's webpage at [LandscapeOntario.com/podcast](https://www.LandscapeOntario.com/podcast). That's where you can also find Joe's previous episodes. Thanks again for joining me on this podcast journey. I'm excited to bring you even more stories from the landscape community so you know what to do: share, subscribe, and until next time, keep growing.

## Resources mentioned in this episode

Town of Riverview: <https://www.townofriverview.ca/>

University of Guelph: [Horticulture Certificate](#)