

Landscape Ontario Podcast

Beyond Pink:

Why proper fit is key for women's workwear

Host: Karina Sinclair

Guest: Dianne Finnigan, Founder, The Dirty Seahorse

Karina: Welcome to another episode of the Landscape Ontario Podcast. I'm your host, Karina Sinclair, and today we're shining a light on an issue that many women in the trades battle every day finding work wear that actually fits and functions the way it should. I am joined by Dianne Finnegan, founder of the Dirty Seahorse, who unexpectedly became an entrepreneur when her daughter needed proper gear for her new job as a mason.

What started as a mother's determination to solve a problem, became a mission to create thoughtfully designed workwear built with and for real women on real job sites. We dig into why properly fitting workwear matters for safety, confidence, and performance. How women's bodies simply aren't served by a shrink it and pink it approach, and why you should never let anybody tell you that you can't build the solution you wish existed.

If you've ever struggled to find gear that works as hard as you do, this conversation is for you.

This episode is also available in both audio and video form. So head over to the Landscape Ontario YouTube channel to watch the conversation and see photos of the Dirty Seahorse clothing line. Don't forget to subscribe to the podcast so you stay up to date on the topics and issues facing landscape professionals just like you across Canada, and now on with the show.

Karina: Dianne thank you for taking the time to meet me on the Landscape Ontario podcast. I'm really glad you're here and, I'm excited for us to talk about women specific clothing for those who work in the trades. And, you're here today because you own your own company that does just that. Why don't you tell me a little bit about the Dirty Seahorse.

Dianne: So The Dirty Seahorse came about when my daughter Chantel went into the trades.

And what I thought was a one-off turned out to be a huge problem for women in skilled trades, and the more I looked into it and the more women I talked to in skilled trades, it started out as a little problem and then it grew to a gigantic problem because it's in multiple industries and it's a universal problem, as I found out later.

Karina: And the problem being that there was just nothing that would fit her right?

Dianne: Nothing would fit her right or it didn't function properly. It basically came down to fit because current workwear is basically what they call unisex workwear. And what it is, is they scale it down off a man's profile, so proportionally it does not fit a woman correctly.

Karina: Okay. Well let's dive into that a little bit. What are some of those specific elements in workwear that just aren't working, and then how did you research and develop ways to find solutions to that?

Dianne: So what I ended up finding out is the fact that these women are currently working with their crotch hanging to their knees, or they have dangling arms and dangly feet. And so in landscaping, they would get caught in trees, they get caught in machinery, so it's very dangerous for them. Or tripping hazards.

So what I ended up doing was I interviewed women from various backgrounds in various industries and they gave me feedback. And what I did was I had Chantel, my daughter, she tested the competitor's products.

We went over numerous different types and styles. And then from there we worked on correcting them into the new prototype.

I'll give you an example. When we did our Zenith overalls, they failed four times during prototyping because every time she bent down to do a squat, she was either being strangled in her crotch or her shoulders. So the first thing we had to do was fix the profile.

So then we went about it totally differently. We wanted to involve women in skilled trades and I wanted to build a really good product too. 'Cause that was one of the things that women said they wanted. They wanted durability. So what we did was it took a totally different approach and we involved women in trades. They actually helped us build this company from the ground up.

Karina: That's amazing. What about you that made you uniquely qualified to launch into this clothing journey?

Dianne: Well, let me tell you, I was anything but qualified when I started this, 'cause I had just retired and my daughter asked me, she said, "Mom, can you correct this problem for myself and for women in trades and for future generations to come?"

So let me tell you where it all started. So I had to go back to school. I had to upgrade my sewing skills. That was a start. Then I ended up, I had to learn how to do blocks, pattern

making, and garment construction. Then I had to learn how to source fabrics. And then from there I had to learn how to source manufacturing. And while I was doing all that, I took 16 different accelerator programs to get this far.

Karina: Wow.

Dianne: So it's quite a journey to get here.

Karina: Wow, that is quite the journey and a real commitment to taking on all of that new information at a point where you might've thought that things were going to calm down and maybe time in your schedule would open up a little bit.

Dianne: No, that did not happen at all.

Karina: Well, Chantel has a great mom who is willing to take on this big challenge, and it seems like it's working out. Tell me a little bit more about the women that you engaged from the trades to help test out the new clothing line. What were their key insights when you put landscapers to work in them?

Dianne: One of the things that came out was the fact that they didn't wanna wear pink, because pink on the job site, because it's already a man's world as it is. So they did not wanna wear pink. They wanted to be taken seriously in their jobs. So that was one of the first things that came out.

We also discovered the fact that women, not just women in trades, but women, period, like deep pockets. They don't like little coin pockets like what you get in your blue jeans. They do not like that. So that was one of the things. The other thing was they wanted it to be durable. So that's one of the reasons why we decided we were gonna put in the abrasion wear into the fabric to make it last longer.

And then women in landscaping, we needed to keep them dry. And then we found across multiple industries too, like the University of Guelph, they were really, really good because they told us to raise the cuff at the back. They told us to raise it to the back of the knee because when they're in the barns, they get wet.

So then we discovered too, that when they're landscaping, they also get wet. So therefore, we built it in also for landscaping. And then the other thing was women wanted a feminine hygiene pocket built into their workwear, so we did that. The other part that made us different was we actually sent this out to different industries and we had to test it for functionality.

'Cause we had to make sure that this workwear performed the way it's supposed to in industry. And safety was a huge factor too, 'cause we didn't wanna have tripping hazards and getting caught on stuff. So we had to make sure that we had the fit proper.

So that's one of the reasons why we put the cinch waist in. And not even that, we have a product, okay, that is adaptable for different seasons. So you could wear this workwear all year long if you choose to, when what I mean by that is these women can adjust their waist. So let's say they're pregnant or bloating, or they are wearing a t-shirt in the summertime, they can tighten this up.

In the wintertime, when they're wearing their layers, they can adjust it and it's expandable. So it's not your typical workwear by any means.

Karina: Well, it sounds like a lot of those features would also be useful in a menswear line. So is it just that those elements don't even exist at all?

Dianne: They don't. They don't exist. And we didn't realize until we went to Landscape Ontario to do the show there. That we had a problem because the biggest problem that we had was men complaining that they didn't have access to this workwear. Considering they...

Karina: That's rich.

Dianne: ...have 97% market, it is!

Karina: Wow. Wow.

Dianne: So it was a good problem to find out. But yes, we found out that men wanted it also.

Karina: That wouldn't have occurred to me. I mean, women for a long time have known that we want those deeper pockets and all those other elements, and it seemed like something that was so obvious in the menswear line.

Why do you suppose there hasn't been a focus on clothing, safety wear that fits women specifically? Why was that such a new thing to have to resolve?

Dianne: The market share was too small.

Karina: Mm.

Dianne: The big corporations, they don't care because they already have like 95% of the market. So the 5%, they don't really care about. It's not a huge market for them. And not even

that, the manufacturing costs are so much more too. To manufacture women's workwear as opposed to men's because of all the special features and, and you're doing different prototypes and sizing and profiles too.

Karina: I was taking a look at your website earlier and I think there's a pair of pants for about \$120. To somebody that might look at that go, "\$120, that's a lot of money." But it sounds like there's so much thought put into these pants and so many features that, that's actually a pretty good deal for everything you get from them and the way they would perform for you.

Dianne: Yeah, absolutely. Like, I'll give you an example with our pants when you buy them, and the same with our overalls, they come with removable knee pads right in them. So that's a \$35 value right there that they would normally have to go and buy separately. And not even that, our biggest complaint is our competitors, okay, are like a third of the price. But the way we look at it, the longevity of it. Like the longest we've had a pair of overalls is a year and nine months, where our competitors might be three to six months long depending on the profession too, depending on what you're doing in them.

Karina: And that's just because they work so hard that they wear out and seams split and things like that?

Dianne: Yes. Yeah. And not even that, like we even tried to make our workwear in Canada, which we found we couldn't do because of the cost, because they are so technical that, like, they have 14 pockets on them. Not even that, they're triple stitched. So we really don't have the skilled labour here to make them, and we don't have proper machinery either to make it.

Karina: So in a time where there's definitely a lot of interest in buying Canadian, not just Canadian brands, but Canadian made, you're saying that that's actually a real issue to fulfill because we just don't have the machinery and the people to do so.

Dianne: No, no, it's okay to do a basic design here in Canada, like for a T-shirt or hoodie, like something like that because it doesn't take long to make. Where you get into, like our overalls, they take two and a half days to manufacture. So you're talking huge labour here. Huge labour costs. Yeah.

Karina: And how did you go about finding where you were gonna get everything made?

Dianne: We did a lot of samples. We did samples from all over the world, and then we narrowed it down to two manufacturers to get the quality that we wanted and to get the design we wanted, too.

Karina: Okay. That's fascinating. Beyond general sizing, what considerations are made for different body types and movement patterns that might be specific to landscaping? And how does your clothing help with that?

Dianne: Uh, I'll give you an example. We use 97% cotton because it's breathable. Okay. And then we put in 3% elastic because the person has to be able to move and function in it. So that's one of the reasons why specifically we chose cotton and elastic. Because you have to be able to function in it and it has to be comfortable.

It's just like you putting on your favorite dress. You know how you feel terrific in it. It builds confidence and it should do all those factors as well as function.

Karina: You mentioned those cinchable waists and raising the pant hem at the heel and the water resistance uh, up the back of the leg. Was that something you said that goes up to the calf?

Dianne: And then it also goes up to the front too. If you look at our overalls and our pants, they actually look like you have chaps on because they go right up to the front. And that way you're water resistant and it keeps you dry, and it is durable. When we designed this, we actually looked at motorcycle gear for the abrasion wear.

Karina: Hmm.

Dianne: Because it's specialty fabric. So that's what we looked at because it had to be durable. So that was one of the factors that we built into it. And the same with our pants. They have reinforced thighs because that was one of the main concerns women have because that's the first place they wear out is your thighs.

We had to take all that into consideration too. Same with pockets and hammer loops and all that. We had to take into consideration if the person was left or right-handed too. So that's why we put hammer loops on both sides.

Karina: Does having clothing that fits well make a difference in somebody's efficiency on the job site? Is this something that employers should be looking at to provide for their employees?

Dianne: Yes, absolutely. The way you have the way you have to look at it is an employee can go on the job site and they can waste their time. Okay. They're not efficient because they're constantly adjusting their workwear for eight, 10 hours a day. They are not as productive, okay? And they're not as self-confident either, because your workwear, if it's built correctly, it works right and it functions correctly, builds confidence in employees.

Karina: What would be an example where somebody's confidence might be improved by having proper fitting workwear?

Dianne: Sure I can use my daughter Chantel as an example. The first day she set foot on that job site, she wasn't set up for success because she didn't have proper fitting boots. She didn't have proper fitting workwear and her anxiety was off the scale as it was because she's already worrying about what they're thinking about her and she's already at a disadvantage because her workwear doesn't fit.

Karina: You mentioned, like, sometimes the crotches hit too low or the shirts are cut too short, so when you reach your arms up, your belly's exposed or, uh, when you crouch down, it rides up in the back and, or down in the back if you are looking at pants. If you can remove those little details and moments of doubt, then that frees up somebody's mind to work on their actual skills.

Dianne: Right. They're self-conscious about all those little things. Yes. Absolutely, and not even that. Employers need to look at it from this point of view too. And this is my main argument I have is the fact that with all these injuries that occur due to ill fitting workwear, okay, they can either provide proper fitting workwear for these employers, or they can pay for it through WSIB on the backend when they get injured.

Karina: That can mean time off work. That can mean somebody not returning to a job that they love.

Dianne: Absolutely.

Karina: Their whole life trajectory changes in a split second because their sleeve got caught in something or they tripped or who knows what else, but there's all kinds of reasons why clothing needs to fit and function properly.

Dianne: Absolutely, yes.

Karina: Is there much difference in how you see somebody who might work in construction versus masonry versus somebody who does a lot of soft scaping and they're planting? Are there differences in the wear patterns between those particular chores on a job site?

Dianne: Yes, absolutely. And the other big main thing is too, that they absolutely love is our removable knee pads. They love the knee pads. I couldn't tell you how many people came up to us and said, I wish we would've had these 20 years ago.

Karina: I bet. And something earlier that you mentioned that I've never heard of being in any kind of product of clothing would be a pocket specifically for menstruation products.

Dianne: Yes, absolutely. Because that was one of the things that come out is some women get embarrassed on the job site because they'll go to go to the bathroom and the product will fall outta their pockets. So this way they don't have to, it's secured.

Karina: And that had to be something different than a regular pocket because...

Dianne: Yes, it's hidden we built that into all of our workwear. Everything. Our hoodie, our crew, like our pants, our overalls, all of them, it's built into every single item.

Karina: Okay. That's really fascinating. That's very progressive.

Dianne: Yes, it is. Yeah. And think it's funny, the fact that you thought you said we were thoughtfully made because that's the one thing that keeps reoccurring by all the customers we talk to, that it's thoughtfully made.

Karina: Yeah, it's, it is beyond just having a pink option or, something with darts in it or, you know, that's a real function because on a, maybe on a job site, there might just be porta-potties and you're not running to your desk or going back to your truck for those things that you need, uh, in an emergency situation. So, that's fascinating.

Are there plans to expand the line? Do you have more pieces of clothing in mind that you'd like to put out in the market?

Dianne: We do, we have plans. I can't disclose anything right at the moment. We're working on it with a manufacturer here in Canada, actually. But one of the areas I do wanna talk to you about is our advocacy, because one of the things that this company had to do when I set it up is this company must support women in skilled trades. It has to, that's one of the mandates of this company.

And, uh, we've been working with Mechanical Contractors of Canada, for about the last year now. We're advocating to the federal government for a PPE rebate for women because the cost of it is so high.

Karina: The PPE being something different than what men would use?

Dianne: No, it's the same, but the cost is twice as much money. So that's one of the reasons why we felt that women going into the trades need a rebate. So, my suggestion was to actually build it right into their toolkit. Because when you think about it, your PPE is a tool. When you

go to the job site, you get all your tools out, you get ready and your PPE workwear should be the same. Workwear period should be the same.

Karina: Mm-hmm.. It is required.

Dianne: It all depends on the job, what you're gonna wear. Absolutely. It's no different than the weather.

Karina: How do you envision the evolution of women's wear in this landscape industry, in the trades industry over the next few years?

Dianne: I've already seen it change in the last two years, for the better, actually. Very slowly, but it's coming along and I hope it grows more. And there's, there's far more brands out there, like when I started there was just myself and one other competitor.

But now there's a lot more and it's nice to see it.

Karina: What would you like women in the trades or young girls who are thinking about entering the trades but don't know if they see themselves there or see people like themselves there. What would you like to tell them, as somebody who has built this company from the ground up to help women in trades?

Dianne: When people tell you you can't do it, do not listen to them. I couldn't tell you how many people told me I was crazy and I would never succeed with this company. That's one thing, okay? You have to believe in yourself and what you can do. Forget your imposter syndrome. That's the main thing. And you're never too old to learn. Look at me. I'm a prime example of that.

Karina: I love that. And I, I don't think you seem old at all, but you seem like you've had a really great positive attitude about taking on something like this and exploring all the different options and still continuing to have a vision for what may happen in the future. So that seems very exciting for you, Dianne.

Dianne: Thank you. If you asked me five years ago if I ever envisioned myself doing what I'm doing now, the answer would be no. You could use me as an example, how much you're capable of growing and, uh, not even that. I used to be so introverted and now I love going out and talking with people in trades. Love it. Like when I go to trade shows, that's where my high is.

I had all kinds of people tell me that because of my passion for this, that I needed to be the brand ambassador. And I thought they were absolutely crazy. But now I'm very comfortable with the role and doing interviews like this. It doesn't bother me at all anymore.

Karina: Oh, that's great. Again, further inspiration for people who think they would like to try something, but aren't sure if they're the right kind of person to do it. So you just never know what you're capable of until you get in there and get your hands dirty.

Dianne: Right. And the other thing is too, with, uh, with being in the trades, okay, if you don't like something, go try something else. There's so many trades out there, and not even that, there's also transferable skills, you may not even know that you have the skills until you go and try it, and then you realize you have it.

That happened to my daughter actually. As a teenager, she used to do, uh, really fancy cakes, 'cause I used to sign her up at Michael's for cake decorating. So she used to make really, really fancy cakes. And then when she got into her masonry program, she got the highest mark in the course for parging because of her cake decorating skills, which is hilarious.

Karina: I could totally see that. Yes, it is very satisfying to have a nice smooth crumb layer on a cake, but if...

Dianne: Absolutely.

Karina: If you're putting it on a retaining wall, I see that makes a whole lot of sense.

Dianne: Absolutely.

Karina: Yeah. Oh, that's fantastic. What a great example of unexpected transferable skills.

What kind of feedback have you gotten from people wearing, you know, now that, that it's been out in the market for a couple of years now, what are people saying to you about having worn it for a while, and are they coming back and buying more pieces or is it so well made that they don't need to?

Dianne: It was funny 'cause we were at the Paris Fair this year and we actually had people come back to us this year that bought from us last year and because now we just added in new colours, so now they're adding the new colours to it.

We just recently came out with a cranberry colour and a gray colour and they absolutely love it.

And the only other thing I wanted to add, Karina, is the fact that the number one question we get asked everywhere, it doesn't matter where it is, why we named it The Dirty Seahorse. And I have to tell you the reason why, 'cause that's the number one question we get asked.

My son named it The Dirty Seahorse because women also like to work in the dirt, but in the seahorse world, the roles are reversed. The males have the babies.

Karina: And so we get to play on that twist of nature a little bit and show that, you know, things don't have to be traditional.

Dianne: Nope. There's nothing traditional about us.

Karina: I love it. Well, Dianne, this has been fantastic learning about you and your philosophy on women in the trades and the different options in clothing that maybe people hadn't thought of before, that make a world of difference. And I'm so glad you were able to share all of that with me today.

Dianne: Thanks for having me.

Music

Karina: Thank you for joining me for this conversation with Dianne Finnegan from the Dirty Seahorse. Her story is such a powerful reminder that when something isn't working, there's room to build something better. Especially when you listen to the people who need it most from fit to function to feeling seen on the job site.

Thoughtful work wear can make a real difference. If you'd like to explore the Dirty Seahorses designs or learn more about their work with women in the trades, check out the links in the show notes on this episode's webpage at LandscapeOntario.com/podcast. And if you have ideas for guests or topics, drop me a line at podcast@LandscapeOntario.com.

That's all for now. Until next time, keep growing.

Resources relevant to this episode

thedirtyseahorse.com