

BUSINESS

DeFranco Landscaping Inc. works to protect Lake George by limiting pollution from runoff



8 HOURS AGO • JAMIE MUNKS—JMUNKS@POSTSTAR.COM

HAGUE — It was Lake George that drew Tony DeFranco back to this northern Warren County town to work for his family's firm, which has a growing aim to plant landscaping features that protect the lake from pollutants.

DeFranco returned three years ago to work with his father at DeFranco Landscaping Inc. in Hague, the business David DeFranco started in 1984.

The younger DeFranco's interest in coming back to the area was piqued in part by projects like the West Brook Environmental Initiative in Lake George.

"If something happened to this lake, we wouldn't have this business," DeFranco said.

"Tourism is what we have here in the Adirondacks, in Lake George."

The family-owned firm, which has counted all five of the DeFrancos (both parents and three children) as employees at one point or another, has found a niche in northern Warren County — combining landscaping with stormwater and erosion control and property management.

Tony DeFranco, a professional engineer, also does consulting work and has expanded the scope of the business. When his father retires one day, DeFranco will take over the nearly 30-year-old business.

Much of their business comes from owners of seasonal properties, where the DeFrancos put shoreline buffers and rain gardens on the properties that are meant to be another line of defense in filtering pollutants from runoff before it enters the lake.

In the past two years, the firm has put in about 20 rain gardens, mostly at shoreline properties, which are depressions meant to catch runoff from nearby roofs or driveways before it enters the lake in a pollutant-filled stream.

DeFranco crews wrap rocks in fabric and bury them in soil, and then plant native plants in the rain garden.

The gardens are designed to soak up a large amount of liquid. Some of the water is held in the voids between the rocks beneath the soil, and the native plants take on many of the pollutants and nutrients in the water.

Climate change is also starting to change how certain elements are designed and what the rain gardens can accommodate, as weather patterns shift toward more severe but less frequent rain events, DeFranco said.

The rain gardens essentially mimic wetlands, and are all unique based on the property where they're located.

But the DeFrancos have a mix of clients, including commercial clients, in the area they serve in northern Warren and Essex counties.

The DeFrancos over the years have observed changes in the guidelines of regulatory agencies for site design that's meant to have a minimal environmental impact, and may be seeking approval from three to five agencies on any given project depending on where it's located. Those agencies can include the Lake George Park Commission, the Adirondack Park Agency, the state Department of Environmental Conservation, the Army Corps of Engineers, as well as town planning and zoning boards.

"As soon as you trigger one thing, you trigger another, then another," David DeFranco said.

The layout of lakefront properties has changed in the past few decades, as many homes built in the 1960s and 1970s were as close to the water as possible for the view, and regulatory agencies and environmental groups have since begun emphasizing a larger setback from the water that gives lakefront property owners a more "filtered" view of the water. Stormwater management techniques have also been increasingly horticultural, Tony DeFranco said.

DeFranco brings his engineering background and the ability to decipher regulations, which combine with his father's scientific and landscaping background, to create a "one-stop design and build process," DeFranco said.

Some of the DeFrancos' clients ask for landscaping features like rain gardens on their own, while others are required to have the features on their property for stormwater management, Tony DeFranco said.

DeFranco sees resistance among some clients to planting shoreline vegetation meant to act as a buffer between a structure and

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the lake, because they're often concerned it will grow too tall and block their "million-dollar view," he said.

One of the challenges of working with so many seasonal clients is that DeFranco has some downtime in the winter when he could be doing project designs to install in the spring, but the seasonal residents are on a different schedule — getting to the area in May and wanting to start the process then. DeFranco does a lot of design work at night to accommodate that, he said.

Many of the clients he encounters on Lake George's north end are interested in educating themselves about sustainable landscaping for their properties that can help reduce runoff, DeFranco said.

"I think people up here realize the value of their home and how they enjoy the lake is tied to what they do to protect it," DeFranco said.

Editor's note: This is a regular series focusing on interesting local businesses and the ways they survive, thrive and innovate. Local business owners with stories to tell about their new or established businesses are invited to contact The Post-Star.