

## Landscape company branches out into retail

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WATERLOO — A company that has won numerous awards for creating outdoor living spaces is now moving indoors as well.

Monarch Landscape Design recently opened the Monarch Home & Garden Studio at its facility on Parkside Drive.

The studio features sofas, coffee tables, end tables, dining room tables and other furniture and objects clustered into “vignettes” to give customers a sense of what a new living area could look like with furnishings, be it outdoor or indoor.

Although Monarch mainly does outdoor features, such as patios, decks, gazebos, interlocking stone pathways, stone work and water features, it also gets contracts to build indoor features, such as bookshelves, counters or day beds, for customers doing interior renovations.

After investing in a redesign, they also want new furniture to go along with it, says Chris MacKinnon, who manages the retail sales in the new studio. “They don’t want to go back to their old furniture, which was tired and worn.”

The company’s offices and the facility where custom-made pieces are built were already located on Parkside Drive, so when two more units in that same building opened up, it made sense to expand into that space and turn it into a showroom, MacKinnon says.

His father, Bill MacKinnon, and Dave Van Dam bought Monarch Landscape in 1996 from a previous owner who was doing lawn and garden maintenance. They took the company in a new direction, away from maintenance and into design and construction of outdoor living spaces.

Bill MacKinnon also runs MacKinnon & Associates, a company that does urban, landscape and environmental planning. All three of his sons — Michael, Chris and Matt — are involved in the Monarch businesses.

Home interiors are adding a new dimension to the business, as well as providing year-round work to complement the landscape construction that mostly takes place in the spring and summer, Chris says.

“It completes the circle so that we can now do everything from the design and the build to accessorizing the space,” he says.

Branching out into retail does take the company in a new and more competitive direction. Although the landscape business has an established word-of-mouth reputation, retail is different and “definitely much more subject to the whims of the public,” Chris says.

Given all the competition from big-box furniture retailers, he tries to set the home and garden studio apart by not jamming in a lot of furniture. The store is laid out in well-spaced “vignettes” that give people an overall sense of how a space will look and feel when it is done.

“When you go into a furniture store, there are sometimes so many different layers of things in every square foot that you sometimes can’t see the forest for the trees,” Chris says. “With this space, our idea is to show off more of the design elements as opposed to having lots of layers.”

The studio carries brands such as Rowe Furniture and Summer Classics. “We are still bringing in other suppliers and companies,” Chris says.

The company recently hired a professional interior designer to help customers with their design decisions.

Monarch Landscape, which won four awards at this year’s Landscape Ontario competition, including best construction for a residential project valued at \$100,000 to \$250,000, employs about a dozen people throughout the year and about 18 people in peak seasons.

Chris is the main person in the studio, but several staff members from other parts of the business also are involved.

Chris spent a number of years working in the investment field in Toronto before coming back into the family business. He enjoys talking with customers about making their dream spaces come true. The showroom is a way of “starting a conversation” about what customers want, he says.

“This is much more rewarding,” he says of his decision to rejoin the family business. “It has been a fantastic move for me.”



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Employees: 12