



Happy 20th Birthday
ELA 20th Birthday

Welcome to ELA's 20th birthday party!

My name is Sue Storer. I'm a current board member of ELA as well as a founding member of the organization. I've been asked to say a few words about how ELA came to be and how we've grown over the past two decades into the organization we are today.

The brief account I've put together comes from my own unique perspective and memory.

My best way of understanding how and why ELA came to be is this.....

Back in the eighties, in the last great decade when we all communicated via landlines and snail mail, traveled enormous distances to meet face to face regularly, got our information from books and periodicals, and typed up our documents on memory typewriters – many of us involved in creating and caring for landscapes were feeling isolated. We were educating ourselves about environmental issues, and we were starting to experiment with different practices and products, but we didn't have a good way to share the information and experience we were gaining. And we had so many questions.

Many of us started to meet at the NOFA Organic Farmers Conferences (the organic farmers were definitely out in front of us landscapers, were organized, and had done a lot of work on defining environmentally sound practices and products), and we began to work in ad hoc groups on various issues and projects.

The people who came together to work on our first major project – drafting standards for ecological lawn care – came from all over to contribute to an effort they felt was exciting and groundbreaking. We had a diverse group that included lawn and landscape practitioners, educators, consumer activists, a commercial composter, and research scientists. A few traveled from as far away as Minnesota and Canada to meet and contribute to the effort. It was an exciting time. It became clear that we needed some sort of organization – a vehicle for our work together.

So 20 years ago, we jumped in and formed an organization – jumped in way over our heads I might say.

First great revelation – It is an enormous, mind-bending amount of work to start and run an organization. (We had been duly warned, specifically by the organic farming group that had organized to pioneer a national set of standards administered by the federal government.) They had looked us in the eyes and said, “Believe me – you do NOT want to start an organization.”

Second great revelation - When you put together any group of people passionately focused on a specific mission, you are guaranteed to have conflict with a capital C. We were no exception as we tried to sort out exactly what our vision was and how exactly to accomplish it.

Well, needless to say, we have worked tremendously hard for 20 years, found our way through countless challenges, and have done our best to resolve and learn from conflicts as they arose.

There are a few decisions we have made along the way regarding our philosophy and scope that have guided our development over these years.

- We have chosen to be a big tent, an organization open to all with an interest in furthering their knowledge of an ecological approach to landscaping.
- We are about choices – educated, informed choices and awareness of the impact of those choices.
- We are not afraid of the grey areas – challenges that arise in between our ideals and our realities. We encourage lively and respectful debate.
- We offer information that is both research-based and experiential, take care in how we put that information out, and expect people to decide for themselves what is useful in their work.
- In choosing to be a non-profit organization open to all, we have become a unique gathering place for cross disciplinary exchange.
- And lastly, we have chosen to be a national organization, fostering connections and the possibility of chapters across the country.

Now to boast a little about some of our main accomplishments over the years.

- In 1994, we published the first ever set of standards for ecological lawn care.
- We've accumulated 20 years of in-depth articles on all facets of ecological landscaping in our newsletter, *The Ecological Landscaper*.
- This is our 18th winter conference and 10th eco-marketplace.
- We've hosted many different types of educational and networking events over the years – including roundtables, year end summits, and our hot new Eco-tours and Eco-workshops.
- For many years we've co-hosted at New England Grows as well as co-hosted and tabled at many other organizations' events.
- This year will be our third to be invited to give out an Environmental Vision Award at the Boston Flower Show.
- ELA has published two widely disseminated publications – Guide to Healthy Landscapes and Discover Ecological Landscapes.

- Last but not least – our website – phew, it was no small task bringing ELA into the electronic age – but we are now harnessing one of our most powerful tools ever for educating and networking – with so many great features and growing!

Fast forward to February 2012 and that brings me to my...

Third great revelation (actually a well known quote from Margaret Mead) – never underestimate the power of a small group of committed people to change the world. In fact, it is the only thing that ever has.

In forming ELA, we set out to educate ourselves so that we could bring positive and effective changes to our own businesses and communities. When we first began to produce educational programs and publications, we were told by many: “You better dot your i’s and cross your t’s because the whole industry is watching.”

We collectively (and by we, I mean everyone that has participated and contributed to ELA over the years) have taken great care in how we have gone about our work. We have gained the respect of many individuals and institutions. As a result, we have been able to play a role in helping our society at large in making the transition from viewing the ecological approach as a fringe choice to recognizing it as a positive, intelligent, commonsense, and transformative approach to the many challenges we face in our world today.

It is this sense of accomplishment we are here to celebrate tonight.

When we leave the conference halls tomorrow, the work for the next 20 years will begin. But tonight is our time to pat ourselves on the back, eat some cake, relax, and enjoy each other.

I’d like to finish up with a birthday song for ELA. It is the Swedish happy birthday song that I grew up singing, and I like it because it’s not just about wishing a happy birthday but also about wishing for a long and vital life.

Ja ma hon leva (Yes , may she live and prosper)

Ja ma hon leva (Yes, may she live and prosper)

Ja ma hon leva uti hundrade ar (Yes may she live and prosper for a hundred years)

Ja visst ska hon leva (Of course, she shall live and prosper)

Ja visst ska hon leva (Of course, she shall live and prosper)

Ja visst ska hon leva uti hundrade ar (Of course, she shall live and prosper for a hundred years }

Hon leva – hurrah, hurrah, hurrah! (She lives - hurrah, hurrah, hurrah!)