

Figurehead Henrik Bos, President of ELCA

“Green has no borders”



Figureheads green sector

VHG collects ‘figureheads’: people who have a special significance for the green sector. Because of their profession, experience, expertise, vision or special activities they contribute significantly to the value of green in our society. We would like to share their insights and ideas with VHG members. We hope their stories will be able to inspire and add to our theme ‘green makes for happiness’. In the first issue of this year, we speak with Henrik Bos, president of ELCA, the European umbrella organization of which VHG is a member.

Meeting online

Thankfully, online meetings are the norm these days. It makes it easier to talk with Finnish landscaper and ELCA figurehead Henrik Bos in faraway Finland. “It’s so great we are all meeting virtually now. Video-calling has changed our professional lives forever. On the other hand, I am unhappy that I haven’t visited any European colleagues last year. It is my personal philosophy that if you want to have interaction on the deepest level, you need to sit down with someone and have a drink. That is impossible now.” Because of his Dutch roots, Bos has visited our country on a regular basis, both privately and for business. “If I need to explain the future of the green sector in Finland to a colleague here, I tell them: ‘Let’s go to holland and I will show you.’ Five years ago, we knew little about green roofs here. Then I brought a group of Finnish landscapers to Rotterdam and showed them the Dakpark, Peperklip and Erasmus MC projects in Rotterdam. At this moment the green roof sector is one of the fastest growing industries in the green sector in Finland.”

What is ELCA?

Henrik Bos has been the president of European Landscape Contractors Association (ELCA) since 2019. ELCA is the umbrella organization for all landscapers’ associations in 24 countries in Europe and beyond. Since 2016 the office of ELCA is located in the capital of the European Union. “With ELCA we are focussing on what the challenges of European entrepreneurs will be: how will they respond to the changes in European Union and in the environment? Every country has its own problems, of course, but some are found everywhere, like the lack of skilled workers. ELCA has collaborated on a number of policies, these past years, like fighting plant disease, regulating plant transport and the negotiations on VAT tariffs. Recently, we had the discussion about whether the British Association of Landscaping Industries (BALI) should they be part of ELCA, following Brexit. Yet we quickly realized that we needed a stronger relationship with BALI and the interaction between countries is even more important with closed borders. At the same time, we know that all these changes can create opportunities for green entrepreneurs. We can grab these opportunities with the entire industry, with ELCA. Because here we can share everything and learn from each other.”

ELCA goes beyond Europe

The president and the board want to extend ELCA’s influence beyond Europe, for example with relationships with Canada, China and Australia. “I haven’t seen that in other professional umbrella organization. Yet the perspective of other countries can be so important for us. We recently started an exchange programme for trainees with Japan. This is truly unique. At first Japanese landscapers didn’t understand the concept of a traineeship. They said: ‘An exchange for three months? That is nothing, stay here for 30 years and you will get a tiny glimpse of what we do.’ But cultural exchange really works we learn from each other. I think these learning exchanges will be the future for landscapers’ education.”

VHG is unique

How does Bos see the role of VHG in all these international relations? “Did you know that the idea from ELCA comes from Holland? Like none other, your country knows it can’t survive on its own. Looking at Holland I see so many green organizations. For traders, for growers, for florists, for the ‘veiling’, et cetera. This is unique. And your VHG is one of the most developed associations for landscapers in the world. VHG celebrates its 100th anniversary for a good reason. What VHG does for its members and the way it affects national politics as well as the environment is an example for similar associations in the world. VHG offers templates to better understand everything that can happen in the green sector. Look at your wonderful handbooks like the *Living Garden*! ELCA wants to make such handbooks available to every landscaper in Europe.”

SoGreen

Just like ELCA started as a way to lobby for landscapers in Europe, the association has begun a global movement for green entrepreneurs and public green. This is SoGreen, a platform for green stakeholders: garden architects and landscapers, growers and interior planters, green roofs and walls, public parks and natural swimming pools. “We got the idea in Brussels,” explains Henrik Bos. “Policymakers asked us, ‘You look after the interests of landscapers. What about the other green professionals?’ That gave us the idea to bring together everybody working in the green sector. Not just from Europe, but from all over the world. Green has no boundaries, as you know. Nobody had thought of this before. SoGreen can bring the entire green sector, the entire world even, to the next level. Together we can tackle the challenges that climate change brings. Think of a village, for example, where they need to renovate the city centre in a sustainable way. If we would work together with architects, landscapers, plantmen, soil producers and even plumbers, our message would be so much stronger than just one entrepreneur wishing to get a job. Too many entrepreneurs are forgetting that many solutions can be found beyond their own trade. Taking an interest in other people not only makes you a stronger person, you know, but also a stronger entrepreneur.”

Favourite green spot

“In spite of my Dutch roots, my favourite spot in the world is in Finnish nature. At the moment it isn’t green but white. I’m glad it has been snowing. Last winter there was no snow, and 2020 was the warmest year in recorded history. The changing climate is affecting our forests and lakes. We Fins live from our forests, you know. We cannot have diseases.”

Finnish-Dutch family business

The parents of Henrik Bos started the landscaping firm in Finland that he still runs. From 1985 to 1987 he went to the Tuinbouwschool in Boskoop. Besides being a Fin, Bos also feels Dutch. “yet our family business has always been focussed on international collaboration. As long as I can remember, exchange students from all over the world came to work with our company. For 40 years we have been a member of VYRA, the Finnish national landscaper’s association. And Finland is a member of ELCA for over 30 years. Our company became a member of the ELCA *Committee of Firms*. An ELCA excursion to Zurich in 1990 really opened my eyes for working together on a global scale, not only as an entrepreneur but also as a landscaper.”

“Only together can we face the challenges and opportunities of climate change”

“VHG is unique. It is one of the most developed landscapers’ associations in the world”