

ARBORWELL PROFESSIONAL TREE MANAGEMENT

Arborwell Professional Tree Management has been recognized by publications such as *Inc.* magazine and the *San Francisco Business Times* as one of the fastest growing companies in the Bay Area while its president and founder Peter Sortwell was recently awarded the Service Entrepreneur of the Year Award by the *East Bay Business Times*. These accolades are impressive, but not surprising, given the company's gold star management and top-tier services, which include pruning, tree preservation and tree removals. Yet the company may never have come to be had it not been for a very inauspicious event.

After leading the tree division of one of the largest horticulture companies in the nation for over fifteen years, Sortwell was let go after a new company president restructured operations. This left Sortwell in a quandary; in the small horticulture industry, there were very few companies that his specialized skills would mesh with. "I began to soul search to try to decide what I wanted to do," Sortwell remembers. When he broached the subject of possibly relocating to another state with his wife, she kindly made known her intention to remain in the Bay Area, telling him: "The kids and I will come and visit you often."

Arborwell safety training



Certified arborist

Still weighing his options, Sortwell attended a seminar in Walnut Creek put together by an executive recruiting firm. The all-day event focused on whether or not attendees had entrepreneurial aptitude. It was the perfect opportunity for Sortwell to explore the idea he had been dwelling on for months: opening his own company. At day's end, attendees were given one hour to compose a business plan, which they then pitched. Sortwell's presentation received a standing ovation and a resounding response. "Everyone in the class said they would hire me, and said 'Why haven't you started?'" says Sortwell.

So he went home and laid out his proposal for his wife, Anne. Despite the gravity of the personal and financial risk involved, Sortwell recalls her response well: "She said, 'Let's

do it.'" With no small-business financing options, mortgaging their home was the only way to turn the idea into a reality. "It was a big risk," Sortwell acknowledges. "The house was 75 percent paid for, so it was a step back."

With this in mind, Sortwell put his business plan on a fast track. Knowing that starting a business from scratch would take valuable time and money, he located a small mom-and-pop tree service in the East Bay and worked out a deal to purchase the company. Though the company was very small with only a short roster of residential clients, the infrastructure was invaluable. With a contractor license in place, office space, phone number, computers, two trucks and six employees, Sortwell had the perfect springboard to hit the ground running.

He utilized his contacts in the industry to build an impressive and productive sales team. Paired with a crew of top-notch arborists, the formula was a success. By the first year, after the purchase of the business, Sortwell had taken Arborwell from a \$.5 million-a-year operation to a \$2 million-a-year venture.

In six years the company has continued its exponential growth with a staff more than ten times as large as its initial workforce of just six. The company now employs seventy-eight people, from front-line laborers who man thirty-two service vehicles in the field, to a sizable middle management force, two full-time mechanics, account managers that see projects through from beginning to end, as well as administrative staff. Major projects include the posh and polished Stanford Shopping Center as well as pristine tech headquarters for Apple Computer, Oracle, and Google.

However, even with the company's success, Sortwell keeps Arborwell meticulously focused on quality service and safety, starting from the top, down. Sortwell himself holds a degree from the University of Maine in plants and soil sciences and is a certified arborist. This

certification, which is held by nine other employees, is administered by the International Society of Arboriculture and involves a rigorous, seven-step process that includes tree biology, tree species identification, safety, care and maintenance, among other technical topics. “It is a pretty intensive study program and test to prove your knowledge to earn the certification,” Sortwell notes.

To maintain excellence, Arborwell sticks to a smaller spectrum of specialized services. “Our services will be strictly related to trees,” Sortwell says emphatically. “If it’s not related to trees, we’re not doing it.” This helps keep the business focused and also avoids competition with some of Arborwell’s own clients—landscape contractors.

Safety is also of the utmost importance. “This is a very high-risk industry,” Sortwell explains. “These guys are working in trees 100 feet in the air, hanging from ropes and handling chainsaws. You just don’t go out there without training, knowledge and professionalism.” To that end, Sortwell institutes a “culture of safety” at Arborwell. Four Arborwell employees are now certified by the Tree Care Industry Association (TCIA) in



Arborwell headquarters, Hayward. In addition, the company has three other locations: San Jose, Redwood City and Sacramento.

Peter Sortwell

professional tree care safety, far beyond the one or two certified employees at many other national companies.

While Sortwell’s leadership has propelled the company to success, he is quick to give credit to his staff. He points to the enthusiasm and buzz around the business as helping attract the best talent for his team. A collaborative environment is always cultivated; its successes are celebrated with events like the company’s end-of-summer picnic, an annual party with soccer, food, entertainment, and plenty of camaraderie and fun for employees and their families.

Looking back, Sortwell has no regrets about losing his job and risking everything to launch Arborwell. “I don’t know what I would have been doing if I hadn’t done this, but I know I would have been miserable.” Not that the process was simple: “The first two years I didn’t sleep,” he says. “It was very, very stressful.” But with Arborwell’s growth and continued ascent as one of the Bay Area’s leading service companies, Sortwell knows it was well worth the sacrifices to build the team he has today, noting, “It was the best thing I’ve ever done.”

