

## Excursions abroad sound nice, but can they help business?

**Some 200 landscapers from 22 countries are members of the Committee of Firms that is part of the European umbrella organization ELCA. The firms, ranging from small family businesses to large internationals, make excursions and meet at green conferences all over the world. Making such trips sounds rather nice, but do they have a positive impact on your business? We asked three members of Dutch landscapers' association VHG.**

Text: Frances van Gool, images: ELCA

### **Broaden your horizon**

Jan Pouwelse still remembers when he first got acquainted with ELCA. "During a trip to Calgary back in the 1990s, my wife and I met a group of ELCA members and their partners." Pouwelse had a great time with them in Canada and, back home, he immediately became a member of the Committee of Firms. He still keeps in touch with some travel companions, one of whom is ELCA president Henrik Bos. Pouwelse thinks going on international excursions "is not just a fun experience but also broadens your horizon." Wim van Ginkel, who is the fourth-generation director of a sizeable family business, experienced that visiting other countries can give you new insights. "Roof gardens were already being developed in Germany when we hadn't even considered greening roofs. Natural swimming ponds were also invented abroad. We could never have worked on these concepts in our country if we hadn't seen some examples abroad."

### **Increase your professionalism**

For Nicole Slagmolen, self-education wasn't a decisive factor to join the Committee of Firms. "I always felt the committee was elitist and didn't suit our needs as a smaller company." Yet Slagmolen felt a new wind blowing through the European lobby organization since the new ELCA board was installed, presided by Henrik Bos. "A new course was set to increase the professionalism of our profession. It resulted in the opening up of ELCA. This finally made the committee interesting for me and I became a member two years ago." Nicole Slagmolen was looking forward to an interesting programme in the Netherlands, last year, when the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of VHG would be celebrated, but the programme was cancelled because of Covid-19. Although Nicole was able to attend some interesting webinars instead, she expresses the firm hope "that we will be able to meet in Valencia this autumn."

### **Exchange programme**

Another interesting aspect for companies to join the Committee of Firms is the possibility to exchange interns and employees with other members. Wim van Ginkel's company, ELCA member for almost forty years, has a lot of experience with these exchanges: "For years we have had international interns. These exchanges have always been worthwhile for us, just because of the relationships they gained from all over the world." Jan Pouwelse has also had positive experiences with international internships. His company hosted many Finnish interns over the years, ever since he met colleagues in Finland via ELCA. "In exchange, some 20 Finnish landscapers visited my company for inspiration during the Floriade in 2012." Nicole Slagmolen is looking forward to inviting an intern from abroad or sending one of her

employees. “I can’t wait until travel restrictions are lifted. Did you know that company owners can also apply for an exchange? What an exciting thought!”

### **Global greening**

Slagmolen will continue to look beyond Dutch borders. “If you become a member of a professional organization in your own country because you think you can learn from colleagues, why not join one in Europe?” In this spirit, a large number of Turkish and Swiss landscapers have also joined the Committee of Firms and recently even some Canadian firms and a Japanese company became members. Jan Pouwelse therefore calls on other European colleagues to extend their view toward Europe. “We should realize that certain things are only possible because of the EU and ELCA is the go-to association for entering the European arena. Don’t forget that landscapers can offer many solutions for global greening; but only if we grasp the opportunities.” Becoming a member of the Committee of Firms can be a first step for landscapers to get more involved internationally.

Would you like to know more about the Committee of Firms? Please contact Marie Mertens by e-mail: [contact@elca.info](mailto:contact@elca.info) or visit [www.elca.info](http://www.elca.info)

**Nicole Slagmolen** Van Senten Groenprojecten,

“It’s interesting to see how things like urban greening are approached in other countries. I would really welcome working with international interns! It would make our work even more interesting.”

**Jan Pouwelse**, Jan Pouwelse Groendoeners,

“I used to wonder, ‘What does a landscaper from Flushing, the Netherlands, need Europe for?’ But through the Committee of Firms I have gotten to know so many people. I cannot sufficiently emphasize the value of business relations outside your own country.”

**Wim van Ginkel**, Koninklijke Ginkel Groep,

“Now that we are working together with Wellant College on the urban greening project in six countries, I can really appreciate the positive sides of international collaboration.”