

# Women in Landscaping: Sherry Koontz

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In 1986, when stationed in Hawaii, Koontz took up mechanic work simply to escape the indoors. She soon elbowed her way up to overseeing motor pools, supervising a group of mechanics who maintained the unit's vehicles.

More than 20 years later, the joke between Koontz and her husband, Alan, co-owners of Carolina Pondscapes in Thomasville, North Carolina, is that not only can she operate the heavy power equipment they use to build and maintain water features—she can also disassemble it, repair it and put it back together in better working order!

Today, the company primarily services the Piedmont/Triad area. Both husband and wife work five days a week year round, running two small three-person crews. Koontz handles maintenance, repairs and estimating, while Alan is primarily in charge of design and construction, although Koontz calls it a “joint process.” With nine years of creating water features, building hardscapes and installing lighting under its belt, Carolina Pondscapes' client list—and reputation—have grown.

Part of what has buoyed Carolina Pondscapes is Koontz's enormous energy. After her active duty ended, she spent another eight years in the National Guard with the 505 Engineer Battalion. When she wasn't traveling the world, Koontz attended Central Piedmont Community College full-time, worked for both a water garden company and a dental supply company and ran a consignment store with a friend. To top it all off, she and Alan were preparing to welcome their first child into the world. It's no surprise that Koontz is nicknamed “The Energizer Bunny.”

Once she graduated with her horticultural degree in 1999, the couple moved back to Thomasville to be closer to their families. Soon after, she started Carolina Pondscapes. On the strength of her previous experience with water gardening, she launched and ran the business single-handedly for a year before she recruited her husband. In addition to her degree in horticulture, Koontz became a master gardener through the Davidson County cooperative extension office.

One of the things Carolina Pondscapes is noted for is its artful mimicry of nature. For the couple, Tennessee and North Carolina waterfalls serve as a hotbed of inspiration. The Koontz family makes several trips to the mountains each year to study nature's water features.

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Each project is discussed thoroughly with the client before construction begins to discover how the feature will be used. Will it be a centerpiece for entertaining or merely a quiet place to drink coffee in the morning? Knowing the answers to these questions helps Koontz and Alan sculpt unique features.

Once the client has been consulted, they loosely craft a design in their heads, but all design ideas are soft until they're literally set in stone. "We're not artists on paper," she maintains. But as they "sketch" on land, they might move 500 lb. boulders three or four times, trying to match up stones in a natural arrangement so that the grooves between the rocks appear as if carved over thousands of years. Koontz says, "I rarely say something can't be done. Challenges make me think harder. I always say that if we just think about something long enough, we'll be able to find a solution."

Redoing the work of fly-by-night contractors who didn't think hard enough is about 20% of the business. Koontz has cleaned up her fair share of messes created by "certified" contractors. From ponds that leaked to water features that never ran at all, Koontz has seen just about everything. She and the other two women on her crew spend a lot of time replacing faulty preformed liners and skimmers and doctoring water features back to life. Often the ponds must be completely rebuilt. A proud member of the National Association of Pond Professionals (NAPP), Koontz feels that greater professionalism would benefit the industry.

Business is now nonstop, but Koontz isn't looking to loosen the tight reign she and Alan keep on production. She explains, "Our standards are always higher than our clients' standards, and we pride ourselves on our attention to detail. If we expanded, we would lose some of the quality that comes only through hands-on involvement. We'd rather stay small."

However, Koontz does plan to open a retail store in a few months and sell pond products, aquatic plants and stone. Between their three children—Zach, 11, Olivia, 8, and Isabelle, 3—there's not much downtime for this couple of 21 years, but they thrive on the challenge.

"I like fixing things, making them right," Koontz says. "I'm always going, but I wouldn't be able to do this if I didn't love it. This is what I intend to do for the rest of my life."