

March 1, 2007

Landscaping That Sells



Just as a beautiful frame can turn a photograph into a work of art, the right landscaping can turn a home into a showplace.

Attractive landscaping is one of the best ways to make a good first impression on prospective buyers and show that a home is loved.

Though a well-designed landscape can be simple, it also can move far beyond a velvety lawn and colorful flower beds to encompass trees, shrubs, irrigation, hardscaping, and lighting. By making informed choices, home owners can transform their properties, whether they're selling or just moved in and plan to stay for years.

Before jumping into a landscaping-improvement project, it helps to have a general knowledge of what kind of plants would thrive on the property, says Steve Jones, (a.k.a. "The Plant Man") owner of Greenwood Nursery in McMinnville, Tenn. Home owners should do some research to learn about their yard's various components:

- **Soil condition.** To analyze soil, home owners should contact a local college extension service or buy a kit from a garden center. An analysis determines the pH balance. Most plants thrive in near-neutral pH conditions but some like slightly acidic soil, says Jones.
- **Drainage.** The type of soil — sandy, silty, clay, or loam — will affect drainage. For example, clay soil may drain poorly, which can prevent nutrients and oxygen from reaching plant roots, but soil can be modified, Jones says.
- **Sunlight.** Home owners should stand outside at different times of the day to see when, where, and how much sun strikes their yard, Jones says.
- **Hardiness zone.** Also referred to as climate zones, hardiness zones are a guide to help you know which plants will grow where you live, so you don't plant materials that will soon die just because they can't survive the region's temperatures, according to BackyardGardener.com, which provides a [hardiness zone map](#) on its Web site.

Next Steps: Make a Budget, Hire Help

A budget will largely determine the scope of a project. If home owners want to replicate the cover photo from a recent *Fine Gardening* magazine, they should be prepared to pay dearly. Plants, soil, and all the extras that make a garden picture-perfect, can really add up, Jones says. For example, a single 8-foot-tall, 1-inch-caliper, shade-loving red maple may cost \$60 to \$70, he says.

But buyers should remember to factor in the cost of hiring a gardener, landscaper, or arborist. A gardener may be sufficient for home owners seeking to tidy up to improve curb appeal, while a landscape designer or architect is usually best for those who want to do more extensive work. Either professional can develop a master plan to enhance the exterior, make the site look attractive from the inside out, and keep materials safe from weather, insects, and animals. Many charge between \$75 and \$150 an hour — or more, depending on the area of the country and complexity of the project, says landscape designer Tim Thoelecke of American Academy of Landscape Design in Glenview, Ill.

For those planning long-term improvements to the property, rather than simple pre-sale enhancements, an arborist also can be brought on board to inspect the condition of trees, the lawn, and the drainage system, says Jones.

When budgeting for a landscaping overhaul, home owners should plan to spend about 10 percent of the value of the home, says Clett. To achieve a grander look, a bigger budget of 15 percent may be necessary, says Thoelecke. But if you're going far grander — perhaps duplicating the closely clipped lawn at the Augusta National Golf Club, site of the Masters Tournament — even more may be in order.

6 Practical Project Ideas

Here are some simple projects that experts say will make a big impact on the property's appearance — and possibly boost resale value.

- **Plant trees.** Trees look nice, cut down on heating and cooling costs, and can even help a home sell for more money, the USDA Forest Service says. Properly placing just three trees can save an average household between \$100 and \$250 in annual energy bills, according to the U.S. Department of Energy. And a report from Arbor National Mortgage found that 84 percent of practitioners believe that a house on a treed lot would fetch at least 20 more than one on a lot without trees.
- **Go for year-round color.** Rather than make do with empty beds and a brown lawn in winter, home owners can pick materials that remain green all year. Examples: evergreen arborvitae, junipers, and boxwood, says Jones.
- **Help the environment.** There are dozens of ways to be a good environmental steward. A rain garden can retain water rather than send it into the nearest storm sewer. In drought-prone areas, xeriscape plants require less water. Large shade trees can screen a roof and windows from sun and block cold wind and air, says Russell Clett, senior landscape architect for Valley Crest Estate Gardens in Calabasas, Calif.
- **Make your yard livable.** A yard can be transformed into livable outdoor “rooms.” High on the wish list are well-equipped kitchens, sometimes with pizza ovens and fire pits, and the newest star — media rooms. Clett installed a projection screen so one client could float in his pool and watch movies.
- **Just add water.** Everyone loves water's soothing sound, whether it cascades into a pond, fills a fountain, or churns in a hot tub.

- **Build a pergola.** A pergola — a set of columns supporting a roof of trelliswork on which climbing plants can grow — add architectural interest, vertical growing space, and shade.

For Home Owners on a Budget

Landscaping doesn't have to cost as much as your house. To cut costs, a plan can be installed in stages, says Thoelecke Jr.

There also are many affordable improvements home owners can make to enhance curb appeal. Start by trimming bushes and pruning dead limbs in front of windows to avoid blocking views, says Brian Huggler, ABR®, CRS®, associate broker with Huggler & Bashore in Lansing, Mich.

"If buyers can't see a home, you can't sell it," adds Sandra Holmes, owner of Home Staging Concepts in Ft. Lauderdale, Fla. Other ideas from the experts:

- Clear away lawn art, toys and other "clutter."
- Edge beds and add fresh mulch.
- Paint or seal terraces and replace rotted wood.
- Add a touch of color. A few pots of tulips in March work magic; red and white colors add the most punch, says Jones.
- Use container gardens. Pots are an affordable, portable way to line a path, embellish an entry, grow herbs, and decorate indoor rooms when weather changes.

Encourage home owners to avoid planting materials too close, making beds too small, or overwatering, Jones says. They — and you — can learn more about landscaping by reading books, visiting botanic gardens, participating in local garden walks, and even by chatting with neighbors who have impressive gardens.

But most of all, remind clients to have fun, Jones says. "Plants are resilient. Home owners really can't make a mistake."