

From Inside Out: Homes with Appeal

Beautiful landscapes and outdoor amenities not only make a residence a great place to live, they help homes sell quickly and increase their value.

By Pamela N. Valenzuela

When landscaping is discussed among real estate agents, the focus often is on the sale of a property and how to spruce it up inexpensively and quickly for a quick sale. What about the landscaping criteria of your clients who are purchasing a home? It should be a consideration, since landscaping the property may increase value from 15 to 20 percent. So, do your clients want to purchase a home where they can increase the value of their property after purchase by improving the landscaping? Or, do they want to purchase a property where everything is already in place, looks beautiful, has all the outdoor amenities, such as lighting and an outdoor kitchen, and nothing has to be done, other than maintenance, to the landscape design?

Obviously, these as well as many other qualification questions should be asked during your first meetings with the home buyer so you can determine if potential homes for sale have the curb appeal desired by your client.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Cheryl Corson is owner of Cheryl Corson Design, Upper Marlboro, MD (www.cherylcorsondesign.com); she has many Capitol Hill clients and also teaches a seminar series on “Landscape Design for Homeowners” for the U.S. Botanic Garden in Washington, DC. Corson recommends you consider the following when purchasing a new home—good knowledge

On flat terrain, water features can still be a dynamic part of a landscape design, as shown here where the fountain provides continuous water movement.



PHOTO COURTESY FALLING WATER DESIGNS

and advice for both the home buyer and the realty agent who specializes in working with home buyers:

- Evaluate the entire property, including trees, shrubs, hardscapes and fences. A licensed arborist can assist in identifying the trees, plants and shrubs, and their state of health and length of life. “Approach landscaping in an orderly manner,” says Corson. “The smaller stuff is less of a concern. But consider the big things, like whether a neighbor’s tree is a liability for your property, or if a jointly owned fence needs replacing. Landscaping issues with neighbors can require finesse.”
- Observe the property during a heavy rain, unless of course the property is in an arid or desert climate. “If the water is draining toward the house or is sitting in large puddles, you will want to identify the causes and improve the drainage,” she says.
- Understand how property and landscaping codes and guidelines may affect the homeowners’ landscaping plans, including local government ordinances that disallow removal of large trees, and historic district or homeowners’ association guidelines that may specify a plant palette or govern changes to fences or decks. And check out zoning regulations that may address lot coverage, such as a deck’s dimensions being limited to a percentage of the property’s unbuild area.
- Look at the property in context of the neighbors’ lots and also the overall street appearance. “This is where you might be able to take advantage of a great view of a neighbor’s beautiful tree,” says Corson. “This is called borrowed landscape.”
- Also consider the changes of seasons and how that affects the appearance of the property. Some clients want color throughout the year, while others prefer color only in the summer and autumn, for instance.

Donna Sylvanovich, landscape architect with DLD Landworks, Inc. (www.landwork.com), a design and installation company in San Jose, CA, adds that water availability and cost should also be a factor. For

Tips to Prepare a House Quickly for Sale

- ✓ Power wash deck, fence and possibly sides of the house (depending on the material).
- ✓ Remove any bushes, trees, etc., that block the views of all doorway entries.
- ✓ Trim shrubs and trees—you don’t want anything to look overgrown.
- ✓ Grounds should be clear so potential buyers can freely walk around.
- ✓ Add color with perennials or annuals.



Concrete pavers have been found to be especially functional in California due to their ability to move with earthquake movements, rather than traditional concrete, which would crack and have to be replaced. Pavers come in all color hues, to help emphasize the color of the house or yard.

already exists and is in good shape, or they want to have enough money left after the purchase of the house to have a contractor install one. So if they fall in love with a \$375,000 home, but it does not have an outdoor kitchen, they will still have the additional \$25,000 to make it a reality after they move in.

“Since interest rates have been so low, many people are buying as big a home as their mortgage company will allow, leaving no money for landscaping changes,” says Sylvanovich. “It really should be part of the home buyer’s financial consideration, since improved landscaping can add to the value of their home. But just as importantly, making their outdoor environment an extension of their interior home space allows them to enjoy and use a greater percentage of their property.” She adds, “In California, the cost of real estate and landscaping is just considered a part of your cost of living.”

The red bridge serves as a focal point to this corner of the yard, with a pond and fish below.



instance, in more arid regions or where water is expensive, look for dwarfed tall fescue grass, which requires half the amount of water and grows slower than Kentucky bluegrass.

In understanding your clients’ budget, as well as desires and preferences for the look and feel of their home—both inside and outside—you can guide them more appropriately. For instance, the home buyers may be qualified to purchase a \$400,000 house, and an outdoor kitchen is one of their criteria—either that it

WE LOVE OUR HOME TIME

Americans are spending more time at home and want to enjoy their homes and property for themselves, as well as entertaining family and friends. The economy and terrorism threats have pulled Americans back from travel to a degree. So they have turned to investing in their homes and making them more comfortable and enjoyable—from special entertainment rooms inside to extending their personal lifestyle to enjoy their yards and gardens. However, the popularity of home shows on television, as well as local home shows where people can meet landscape architects, designers and contractors, are helping to drive this trend as well, says designer Cheryl Corson.

While homeowners with children may tend toward large grassy areas for the children to play, older Americans are changing their yards by reducing their turf grass areas and turning to more new hardscape materials that require little or no maintenance. While some homeowners will always turn to wood for their decks, for instance, there is a trend toward manmade materials that look like wood. “There are wonderful new outdoor products that are helping homeowners and designers create very interesting and varied landscapes,” Corson says.

This also extends to outdoor furniture. New materials are making the furniture safe from environmental elements and are easier to maintain. “I want my clients to get out into their garden and enjoy it,” says Rick Perry, owner of Falling Water Designs (www.fallingwaterdesigns.com), Seattle, WA. “I encourage them to purchase the most comfortable outdoor furniture they can afford. Even some of the big retailers, like Target, are offering some nice quality furniture at reasonable prices.”

Perry also recommends the use of dry laid concrete pavers or flagstone. “These materials are semi-permeable, allowing water to get through them to the soil,” Perry says, “not only allowing for better drainage, but also helping the microorganisms that live in the soil.”

To reduce maintenance time, Sylvanovich recommends the use of lots of shrubbery and drip irrigation, which helps reduce the amount of weeds. “If you plan and plant shrubbery correctly, they are low maintenance.”

And, if you want to enjoy the view of your home and its environment, or have a place of solitude or a place to watch your children play, Sylvanovich suggests creating a special garden or arbor away from the backside of the house. It might be an arbor with a table for entertaining, a bench area for quiet contemplation or to read, or for a place to go out in the yard and enjoy views of the garden from another perspective.”

WATER FEATURES GROW IN POPULARITY

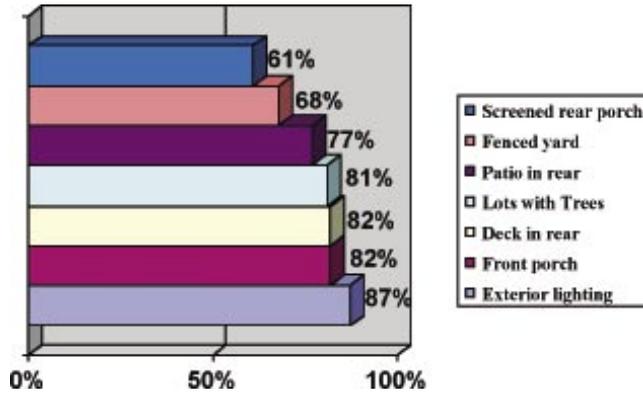
A big trend in landscaping is toward water features. Part of the reason is simply the luxury a water feature provides, but also new products and designs offer much easier maintenance than in the past, says Rick Perry, who says that 75 percent of his business is made up of the design and installation of water features, with the other 25 percent being garden design and installation. Upflow filters, skimmers and new butyl rubber liners that have 20- to 50-year warranties are reasons that maintenance has been dramatically decreased for water features.

“There is less maintenance with a water feature than a piece of sod or garden of the same size,” Perry attests. “For lawns, not only does it take time to mow the yard, but also the use of gasoline adds pollution. And, for gardens, you have to spend time weeding the bed, cutting back perennials, etc. Whereas with a water feature, you only have to add fertilizer tablets—and cut back plants once a year—if a skimmer is installed.” Perry estimates water features take about one hour a month to maintain. “While some landscape designers say the water never has to be changed, we recommend it be changed in the early spring,” he adds.

Perry recommends that real estate agents, as well as their home buyers,

Buyers' Desired Outdoor Features

According to results of a recent survey of home buyers, conducted by the National Association of Home Builders, exterior lighting topped the list of the landscaping feature most desired by home buyers.



Source: National Association of Home Builders Consumer Preference Survey 2003



Spots of color and a view of the front entry way can make a simple white house more inviting. Quarry stone also adds a touch of contemporary design.

look for elevation if they want a natural waterfall. “And, you want it to slope toward the house if you believe in the Feng Shui principles, as it will bring wealth and prosperity to your home,” he says. “But also you want to be able to enjoy the view of your waterfall even when you are inside your home.” However, if the property is flat, Perry says there are numerous ways to incorporate water into the garden, including the use of big ceramic urns, and pieces of bamboo that allow water to fall.

Sylvanovich pointed to a new product, the Aquascape Pondless Waterfall, which provides a stream and waterfall, but no pond. This can be especially important to families with children, as ponds can create a safety hazard. The product is maintenance free, as it only requires the refilling of the 150-gallon reservoir built under the ground. It is also ecologically friendly as it circulates the water for reuse.

Lighting in the garden and throughout residential landscape design increases the aesthetic pleasure of the home, but more importantly it allows the homeowners to extend the hours they can enjoy their outdoor amenities. Another big consideration of investing in outdoor landscape design and lighting is to extend the homeowners’ living space.

Hilly terrain is a great showcase for a natural-looking waterfall. Sometimes recirculating water helps to cut down on overall costs.



PHOTO COURTESY FALLING WATER DESIGNS

PROFESSIONAL HELP GOES A LONG WAY

If your clients need help from a professional, there are a variety of options to consider. Some landscape designers are willing to provide consultation only, others are not. For consultation only, a designer can inspect and assess the property and give verbal advice, or can design a landscape plan that the homeowner may choose to install themselves if not complicated, or contract with the landscape designer, architect or contractor for installation.

Landscape architect Sylvanovich recommends that if the homeowners only want a planting design, then they would need only a landscape designer. If their project includes retaining walls, irrigation design, arbors, etc., then they would need the expertise of a landscape architect, she says. Also, Sylvanovich suggests getting the entire landscaping project done at the same time, for cost-effectiveness in the long term and ease of getting to your final design so you can enjoy it. If landscaping designs are divided into smaller projects and stretched out over time, some work that was done in the first phase may be disturbed when the next phase is put in.

While some homeowners will choose to do the landscaping themselves, there are some downsides. “People who are not versed in design are guided by what they know, and they can miss the larger conceptual design,” says Corson. “Also, after deciding and buying their own plants, they may end hitting and missing on what works, putting in and taking out plantings several times, which results in wasting time and money. Another common mistake is the homeowner who goes to the garden center and buys one of everything, without taking into consideration the design aspects of volume, rhythm and repetition, which lead to a more restful and visually appealing landscape.

Rick Perry has been installing water features since age 14 so he is speaking from experience when he says that installing a water feature for the first time will result in design and installation mistakes for the average person, who may find it necessary to redo the project several times before getting it right. However, a contractor will install it correctly the first time and back it up with a guarantee so the homeowner doesn’t have to deal with a repetitive problem.

Armed with this knowledge from the landscaping experts we interviewed, you now have the knowledge to help homeowners spruce up their curb appeal for a sale, as well as to deliver to your home-buying clients a home that is delightful outside as well as inside. ■

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