

## **Reinvented Landscapes Reap Rewards**

Builders don't always have much influence over the area surrounding the lots they build on. But they do have control over the project, whether it's a one-lot single-family residence, a subdivision, a multifamily complex or a commercial development. And regardless of how much land you have to work with, landscaping is a profitable asset you may want to give special attention to.

Creative landscapes can be overwhelming to construct. Like Seattle-based custom homebuilder Don Bender, owner, Bender Chaffey Corp., many builders don't wish to tackle the task alone. He hires the professional resources up front, early in the game. His team includes an architect, landscape architect, the owner and himself. They work together to achieve an oasis space. But builders can go at it alone, or at least with a few new tricks. So, we've gathered a few experts to explain how to use what you've got, create amenities and do the basics from site prep to smart water usage and how to add a key ingredient: buyer-preferred landscape lighting.

### **Defining the Context of Land**

A creative landscape takes the context of the space into account. A successful design considers the scale of the space, the appropriate proportions of hard space to soft space, and where opportunities exist to create a microclimate for people in the outdoors. Where can the builder create a space for people to share and gather? Depending on the scale of the project, it could be a barbeque or a plunge pool, says Bill Crump, a regional director of planning and landscape architecture for BSB Design's Sacramento, Calif., office. He says landscaping should be considered from the beginning of a project. His colleague, Tim Newell, who is a senior landscape architect with BSB Design, agrees. Planning is key to having a water-wise oasis space. Each site is unique, so builders looking for a mandate won't find it here when it comes to creative landscaping.

Sarah Mortensen, project designer, Semillia Home and Garden in Albuquerque, N.M., suggests that builders analyze hardscape. It's a major part of a landscape, and one that builders can't ignore. Soft materials include flowers, shrubbery, trees and plantings, while hard materials include decorative rock, pond material, boulders, flagstone and mulch. However, she notes the garage is a dominant hardscape feature that is a visual detriment in the typical subdivision lot. LandDesign/Southwest in Santa Fe, N.M., determines its designs after considering hardscape elements such as overall site layout, structure orientation for views, driveway alignment, arrival area, guest parking, service areas and recreational facilities. With landscaping, builders have the opportunity to set the foundation for an environmentally sustainable space. Mortensen asks her clients questions to develop a workable plan within the context of the space. Answering questions sets the framework of a creative landscape. Planning both saves money and makes money.

### **Rating and Creating Amenities**

Planning ahead for landscaping requires a lot of effort up front, Newell says. He suggests builders make an analysis before the land is ever purchased. "Trees can be an amenity that have taken 100 years to build," he says, adding, "poor planning means you lose those amenities." And, Crump says, "These are the things that allow builders to get a higher price per square foot."

"It's a balancing act that builders have to look at in terms of the existing landscape from the beginning," Crump says. "But if builders do landscaping right, it can become the selling point of the community." They sell more homes because they are able to market their sensitivity to the environment, he says. Creative landscaping can provide a huge marketing advantage. "From a marketing standpoint, communities that are able to emphasize the beautiful open space have an advantage," Crump says. "They can photograph the space. It allows them to be able to market a mature landscape that can be complemented with a more xeriscaped concept [by definition, landscaping designed specifically for areas that are susceptible to drought, or for properties where water conservation is practiced]. It allows the marketing angle to be living in harmony with nature. It's like getting free advertising when you can show a 50 ft. tree that you are going to preserve in a grove, as opposed to marketing the home itself. On the radio you can play sounds of the wild birds buyers can still see out their back window. It creates an opportunity to take advantage of the natural environment as a sort of oasis. It's about the harmony of

living with nature.”

When it comes to marketing, "first impressions are the most important thing," Crump says. A sense of arrival is more than just a pass-through gate. "One of the things that creates curb appeal is to have a focal park or focal green space. Save a small growth of existing trees. Design your community around that space, a place that acts like the heart of the community." He suggests development builders put in large enough street trees, like a 15-foot tree instead of a 6-foot tree. They should revisit their land plan and identify key site features. Then make sure the arrival ends up there and it's not that back lot where they saved a couple of trees, so far removed that it's not celebrated. Make it an intimate green place so that people will say, "There's a place for my kids to play."

### **Site Prep Basics**

Grading, electrical/water stub-ins and erosion control should be considered in the planning stage. These aspects need to be put in place before the typical "landscaping phase." Erosion control and grading can be handled at the same time. Keeping grading to a minimum and matching the existing water drainage pattern as much as possible can limit water erosion. In some instances, additional erosion control is necessary. A landscape architect is recommended for challenging scenarios, Mortensen says.

Sometimes losing two or three lots in order to gain a key landscape can be wise, Crump says. When in the planning stage, grading and the number of lots needs to be balanced with the opportunity to market the community by saving an area. "It pays for itself," he says.

Lighting is one landscaping feature that is becoming more and more sophisticated. Builders should anticipate lighting effects by stubbing in electrical. Instead of making landscaping its own phase, builders can save money by incorporating it into every phase. When the electrician comes, have them wire the yard. When the dirt work is done for the foundation, have the backhoe position dirt for the beds. Rocks discovered during excavation are easily stacked in place, if a place has been established ahead of time.

One site prep step Mortensen says almost everyone can skip is landscaping fabric. "It's a waste of money," she says. She stopped using it on her projects two years ago after a landscaping friend shared the secret. While she admits fabric may still be appropriate for some projects, mostly it's unnecessary. The fabric actually prevents the compost from mixing back into the soil in planting areas. Mortensen shies away from traditional rock xeriscaping, but even when she does install rock, she leaves out the fabric. In windy New Mexico, dirt blows and settles on top of the fabric, where seeds and weeds can still sprout up. While fabric may be needed for a particular project, she suggests avoiding it whenever possible.

### **Put Water, or the Lack of it, to Work**

Each project is unique. What works for one may not work for another. It's true for weed blanket and also for water. On some projects, builders will need to preserve every drop of water they can. For others, the abundance of water is a major concern.

Landscapes cannot be discussed without addressing water. Darwin Webb of Darwin Webb Landscape Architects, P.S., Issaquah, Wash., takes advantage of Seattle's soaking weather in creative ways. He combines the beauty of a water feature with Green goals. By prioritizing Green outcomes, he can use roof runoff in creative ways. He's done this through landscaping that creates a water feature when it's raining.

### **Water Features**

The easiest way to do this, Webb says, is to channel the roof runoff through a gutter. Then instead of using a downspout, the water can pour onto various objects. He's used rain chains, a Japanese stone basin, natural dish rock and a natural dry riverbed feature. "It really depends on the style of garden," he says.

When it comes to creative water usage, Crump says even an old product can transform a space. A mister, for example, used in conjunction with shade structures, "cools the environment directly adjacent to the home and invites people to the space." Misters can be particularly effective in hot areas of the Southwest and California's Central Valley. It can cool the ambient temperature by as much as 10 to 15 degrees.

Ryan Steffens, owner, Creative Stone Concepts, Albuquerque, N.M., has taken creative water features to an awe-inspiring level. His projects typically result in original water features that look like a natural spring is drizzling from the top of a sculpted stone. He says fountains add to a home's curb appeal and help it sell because they are unusual.

Another company pushing water conservation is Jardinier, located in Fountain Valley, Calif., which reduces water usage by 25 to 40 percent with its SurfaceFlow turf irrigation systems. Its innovative technology is an alternative to pop-up spray heads; it floods the turf area, Jeanne Nalbandian says. This technique cuts down on evaporation and virtually eliminates water runoff. Subsurface distribution is also a popular method of graywater irrigation.

Jardinier's innovative rooftop containers create an urban oasis. Its list of products can enhance the landscaping aspects of almost any type of project. One such product is its sub-irrigation container system. Plants grown in these containers are generally healthier and require less maintenance. Builders may be surprised that these containers can hold two to three weeks' worth of water. While this product is designed for covered areas, Jardinier also has fiberglass containers that are ideal for an outdoor oasis. Its fiberglass containers are lighter than concrete and won't rust like galvanized steel. When this product is combined with the Jardinier irrigation system, builders "not only get the benefits of water runoff elimination, efficiency and beauty, they also enhance any indoor or outdoor setting."

Priding itself on leading emerging environmental solutions, Jardinier demonstrates its creative landscaping abilities with its rooftop gardens. "Jardinier's patented design-build planter boxes and reservoir systems automatically irrigate the rooftop gardens. During the rainy season, the reservoirs capture water by means of a water harvesting system. Rooftop gardens save energy and water, reduce stormwater runoff, and decrease inner-city temperatures. In the last 15 years of building in Seattle, Bender has found that rooftop gardens offer a panoramic view and are ideal for entertaining.

Jardinier's products really put water to work for the builder and the consumer. They also meet the goals of graywater reuse in water conservation, which is the first of Denver Water's "Fundamental Principles of Xeriscape." Xeriscaping reduces water and maintenance costs by up to 60 percent, according to Xeriscape Colorado. It can also increase the property value by as much as 15 percent, which is great news for builders.

Xeriscapes don't have to be drab brown rocks. Sarah Mortensen, project designer, Semillia Home and Garden in Albuquerque, N.M., likes to make xeriscape gardens with bright Southwest colors to combat the common browns and grays of most xeriscaping. Many of her designs include xeriscape-friendly chili peppers that bloom in orange, yellow, red and purple. Regional agencies and authorities are the best source for information on choosing native plants for a xeriscape.

Mortensen, like Newell, approaches small spaces with the intent of creating an outdoor room. They both like to include concrete pavers in their designs to add interesting texture and color. Mortensen loves to include products that kids want to touch. One xeriscape product she favors is glass mulch. Denver Water's fifth principle of xeriscaping is to use mulches in order to reduce evaporation and keep the soil cool. American Specialty Glass Inc., in North Salt Lake, Utah, is one company that provides glass mulch for commercial and residential uses, including landscaping. This glass product is post-industrial or post-consumer recycled, then tumbled to remove the sharpest edges. EnviroGlas Products Inc., Plano, Texas, manufactures landscape mulch in 18 varieties, including glow-in-the-dark, crushed mirrors, recycled aluminum, porcelain and mother-of-pearl. Glass mulch is desired for its coloration. It's decorative but still provides water retention, says Brent Flabiano, managing partner and CEO of EnviroGlas. It acts like a filter and it's good for the ground, he says.

Although an atypical product, typical applications of glass mulch include flowerbeds, decorative

walkways, accents and dry riverbeds. Patty Bates-Ballard, director of communications and training, says there has been a lot of interest in using the blue glass mix for dry streambeds. Glass mulch is most commonly used on flowerbeds to coordinate with the plants. It can also be used in fountains.

### **To Light or Not**

Light complements water to create a statement. So in addition to his water features, Steffens has also crafted lighted stone, using both LEDs and fire. Newell says lighting creates a sense of security and provides a warm facade. "It's a wonderful creative tool in the drama it provides," he says, adding, "it almost makes the landscape into a stage set, very dramatic, very warm."

The lack of lighting can also add to a creative landscape. "Depending on the context, in many of the rural areas in the West, there is a trend toward Dark Sky communities. The area is designed to be dark. The lights are lower to the ground. The emphasis is that you want to be able to see the stars at night, rather than ambient light pollution that clouds the night sky."

"In the past," Crump says, "a master-planned community was more of a cookie cutter. But now it's about connecting the humans back to the environment." Dark Sky communities allow their residents to connect to nature with an amenity that is completely free. Not only is it light-free, it's also free.

With assessment and preplanning, a creative landscape looks distinctive—drawing buyers—and saves water, resources and homebuyers' money. So why wouldn't a builder want to try a new spin on the old lot?