

A professional landscape designer offers advice for every phase of the process, from grading to lighting

The Groundwork of Landscape Design

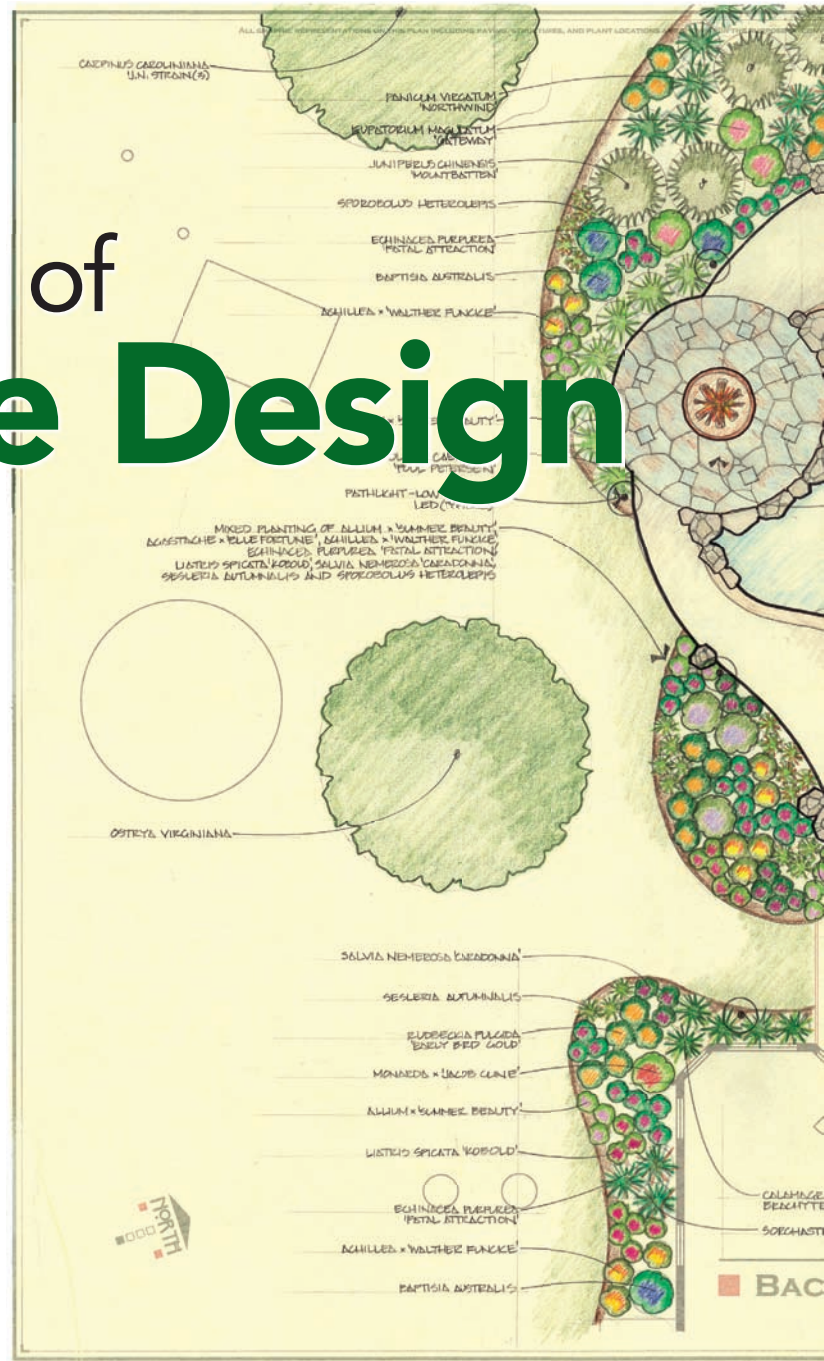
BY JAMES DRZEWIECKI

Gardening and landscaping have become popular hobbies for many homeowners—and for good reason. Not only do outdoor projects give us an opportunity to connect with the earth as we literally get our hands dirty, but outdoor spaces are a great way to extend the living area of our houses. So-called “outdoor rooms” have been a trend in home design for some time, and that’s a smart way to think of the landscape, because when we give it such purpose and design it with such intent, it truly becomes a functional extension of our homes. Having more living space and being able to vacation in our own backyards is an attractive idea and a sensible investment for both our properties and our lives.

While do-it-yourself TV programs, magazine articles, and any number of blogs tout the money you will save if you landscape your yard yourself—and there are certainly some aspects that you can tackle—many of these projects are more daunting than they seem. I may be biased, but I often tell my clients that it can cost more *not* to hire professional landscape designers and contractors.

Before attempting a “weekend project” in your yard, you should ask yourself a few questions to gauge your ability to pull it off: Have you done adequate research and planning? Do you have the right tools and equipment to do the work? How much time do you have to do the work, and what is your time worth? Will it take you double or triple the time it would take a professional? Mistakes can be costly, so consider hiring a professional for any landscape project that is realistically beyond your skill level. For those of you considering tackling this job for your home, I offer the following insight into the various elements of a landscape project. □

James Drzewiecki, associate AIA, is founder and design principal of Ginkgo Leaf Studio in Cedarburg, Wis. Photos by Westhauser Photography, courtesy of the author, except where noted. Drawings by the author.



IT'S NEVER TOO SOON TO

THE FIRST STEP in any landscape project is to create a thorough plan. Even if you can only afford to install certain aspects of the design at this point, it's a good idea to plan everything that you would like to eventually include right from the beginning.

If you're building a new home and plan to work with a landscape designer, don't wait until the house is built to bring one on board. If you're trying to coordinate the installation of the landscape so that it follows shortly after the completion of the home, keep in mind that designers and contractors often fill their schedules months in advance. The window of



4 REASONS TO CREATE A MASTER PLAN

Taking the time to develop a complete plan is worthwhile no matter how small your scope of work.

1 Drawing the details of gardens, walks, patios, walls, and other structures will help you visualize the complete landscape.

2 Drawing to scale will help to ensure that you have enough space for your intended project, including room for a grill and furniture on your patio and for plants and trees to mature in your gardens.

3 A comprehensive plan will help you consider and work out all the details, including specifics like grade changes and lighting.

4 Finally, the plan will give you an idea of what you'll need for materials so you can request or create an estimate.

START PLANNING

opportunity becomes even narrower in colder climates where the construction calendar may only be eight months long.

If you really want to be ahead of the curve, consider involving a landscape designer before any design work has even begun. The designer can work with your architect and builder to help site the home, taking into account views, sun angles, and even prevailing winds. The designer may also have input on how the home can be placed to work with existing grades.

Whether you're building a new home or starting a landscape project on an existing home, before beginning

your plan, let the architecture of the home and its setting steer your landscape design toward a certain style. This, in turn, influences material choices. If a certain material is used on your house, you might repeat or compliment it in the landscape. Also, keep in mind how you will use the landscape. Will the front entrance be used regularly or is it worth putting more of your time and money into the backyard? Will you be regularly entertaining outside or is your yard more of a private retreat? And how much do you like to work in the yard? Depending on the design, a landscape can require a lot of upkeep or very little.



Rain, rain, go away. Rain gardens can be used to collect and direct water away from the house. Here, a rain chain acts as a gutter downspout and the pervious rock bed is pitched away from the home's foundation.

GET THE GRADE RIGHT

TAKING ON MAJOR GRADING ISSUES is not typically wise for the amateur. Not only is heavy equipment often needed to do the work quickly, but special tools, and the skill to use them correctly, are necessary. Even landscape professionals may bring in a civil engineer if major grading of a property is needed.

No matter the extent of grading needed for a specific project, moving water away from a home's foundation is the number one goal. This is sometimes accomplished by just raising and pitching the soil around the foundation. However, such work might also mean adding window wells around basement windows, adding extensions to gutter downspouts, or connecting downspouts to underground drainage. Keep in mind that this is true where patios and walks meet the house, too. Improper grading can lead to costly home repairs.

Once you have directed water away from your home, remember it still needs to go somewhere on the site. For a new home, a grading plan should be created to ensure water will drain where the local municipality requires and won't create problems for neighboring properties. In any case, you can consider using rain gardens and dry streams to collect water from your downspouts and help prevent runoff and flooding in your neighborhood.



When to build a wall. A retaining wall creates a level area for the patio overlooking this steeply pitched lakeside landscape. Stairs wrap around the wall for access to the beach. Gardens surround the wall where the grade rolls away from the home.



CREATE PATHS AND PLACES

BY DEFINITION, HARDSCAPES INCLUDE paved patios and walks, but even if you are using a pervious material like compacted gravel for a patio or walk, you would design those aspects of the landscape now.

Walks and patios create both the circulation routes around the landscape and purposeful spaces within it. Consider the function of each space, and then choose the most appropriate location. As an example, a dining and grilling space should be near the home's closest entry to the kitchen. It will likely have a grill and dining furniture, at a minimum. Allowing room for circulation will eliminate space where furniture can be placed, so the patio needs an ample footprint of at least 400 sq. ft.

A patio may seem larger than you think it needs to be until you map out all the entry and exit points of the space. This includes circulation in and out of the house through doorways, plus access to the yard, usually at multiple locations. Sometimes as much as 25% to 35% of the square footage of a patio may be lost to circulation. Also, allow extra room for chairs to be pulled out from a table or away from a fire pit.

One common hardscaping mistake happens when sidewalks are made too narrow. The ideal width for a walk is 5 ft. to allow two people to walk comfortably side by side.

The materials you choose will set the aesthetic tone for your landscape. Square-patterned stone may have a formal or contemporary flavor, while irregular flagstone imparts a more casual or rustic feel. Sometimes, budget is the determining factor in material selection. Here in the Midwest, concrete is



A concrete connection. With simple shapes and straight lines, this patio has a modern style. Runnels filled with decorative rocks add color to the taupe concrete. Adirondack chairs add a modern flair and have plenty of space to fit comfortably around the fire pit. Inset bluestone offers a path to the yard beyond.

WITH WALKS AND PATIOS

often chosen to stretch the budget. At about 15% of the cost of natural stone or brick, it's an attractive option, and it can be dressed up with a brick edge or stone inlays. Subdividing a space using contrasting materials can give a large patio the feeling of having separate rooms. An area-rug effect can be created, or borders of brick or stone can define spaces used for separate purposes within a large patio.



A walk of reflection. Like the home's rooflines and trim details, this walk's brick border creates interest with geometric shapes and also reflects the house's siding. Rectangular natural stone and flagstone in the circle add textures and connect to the home's natural stone piers.



Style and shade. This cedar pergola defines a restful space within the patio. With an additional layer of purlins, this pergola blocks more sun than a common pergola. Trellises will direct vines to the top of the structure to eventually shade the patio even more.

AN ADDITIONAL DIMENSION

OUTDOOR STRUCTURES CAN INCLUDE a wide range of built items including pergolas, arbors, fences, and seat walls. These structures can be functional or decorative and all of them bring an additional dimension that is often only created with plants and trees.

Pergolas are useful for creating an outdoor room. Often placed to define a dining area, they can provide shade and a sense of enclosure overhead. Arbors are good for definitively marking an entrance into a patio or garden.

Fences, of course, help to mark outer boundaries of a property or space and can be used to create privacy. Though homeowners sometimes ask for fences to contain their pets, more and more often the municipalities in our area are limiting or simply not allowing fences around property lines. So, most of the work that we do with fences is to use small, decorative sections to add privacy where needed. Extensive fencing will quickly eat up the budget, so we use it sparingly.

Shorter than fences, seat walls—as their name implies—are meant to be built at a comfortable sitting height, usually between 18 in. and 22 in. high. While great for subdividing a patio into smaller rooms and providing the benefit of extra seating, seat walls can be expensive if built out of wet-set masonry. In cold climates, best practice is a full frost-depth footing, making the seat wall very expensive per linear foot. There are many dry-set options that may not require a footing, and material choices can range from natural, dry-stacked stone to decorative concrete block.



Privacy at the entry. This arbor and fence are used to create a private courtyard garden. The gate marks your arrival and the arbor brings an Asian-influenced style to the home and its landscape.



A sweet fire pit. A 100-year-old sugarcane melting kettle serves as the wood-burning fire pit in this landscape. Uplights with yellow lenses illuminate the bowl even when a fire isn't lit.

ADD A FEATURE

FIRE PITS AND OUTDOOR FIREPLACES are great ways to create a gathering place and focal point. In colder climates, they offer an excellent return on investment by extending the seasons so you can use your outdoor spaces for more of the year. Fire pits and fireplaces can be permanent and made of brick or stone, or they can be portable (as in a metal bowl).

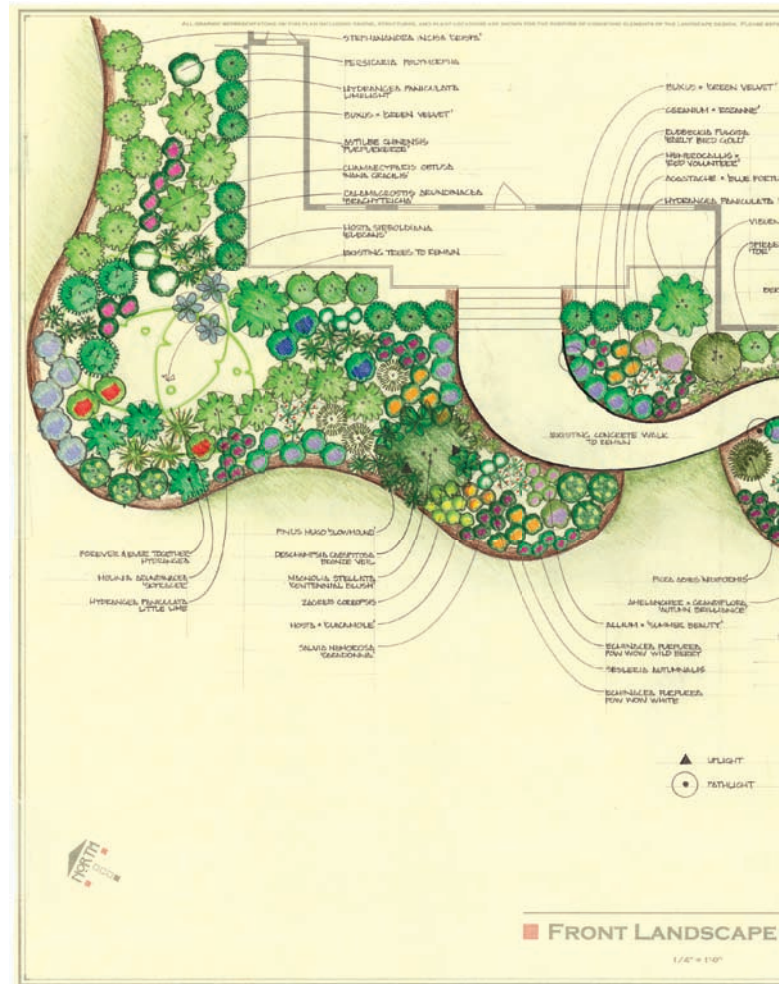
Be careful not to place a fire feature too close to your home. Most municipalities require a fire pit to be 15 ft. or 20 ft. from a flammable structure. Check with your local building inspector before incorporating fire in your landscape.

Another element that can add interest is a water feature. Many people imagine a pond or stream with waterfalls, but the scale, cost, and maintenance of such a feature is often prohibitive. For this reason, pondless water features have become extremely popular. *Pondless* means there is no open water visible—just the water flowing over a fountain, for example. The water disappears into a hidden basin and recirculates via a pump within. Many homeowners appreciate the soothing sound of a water feature, even on a small scale.

Outdoor kitchens were once a hot trend, but many clients now back away from them. One common reason is cost, but another is the realization that they will have two kitchens to clean and maintain. For clients who still want their grilling area to look attractive, we suggest adding a simple island or “grill garage” of stone or brick, designed to enclose a standalone grill or accommodate a drop-in grill. It's important that these elements be considered during the design phase—you likely won't have enough space to comfortably add them to an existing patio.

Evoking an Asian tradition.

This recirculating water feature is reminiscent of Japanese homes, which traditionally offer a place for guests to wash.



RIGHT PLANT, RIGHT PLACE

MANY FACTORS GO INTO CHOOSING the plants for a garden. We strive for multiseason interest and continuous color and bloom. Because there is no such thing as no maintenance—unless you want silk or plastic plants—consider native plants whenever possible as they are acclimated to your weather and soil conditions and will therefore require less upkeep. Stay away from exotic plants and the local honeybees and hummingbirds will thank you.

We live by the mantra, “right plant, right place.” When designing a garden, we consider flower and foliage color, foliage texture, bloom period, mature height and width of the plant, and whether it will grow in sun or shade. Planning combinations based on all of these characteristics can be a fun art form to practice and experiment with. Always start by locating trees and shrubs first, because they are the bones of the garden. When placing these plants, consider views you may want to block or highlight and potentially place a specimen plant like a flowering tree or evergreen as a focal point. The latter option can also keep cold-climate landscapes from looking dead and barren during the long winter months.

Once you've determined the location of the woody plant material, perennials and ornamental grasses can be used to fill in and accent the garden. Homeowners will sometimes shop



Plan for the future. Space perennials according to their mature size, which they will reach in a few seasons. Space trees and shrubs based on 50% to 75% of their mature size, since many of them will take several years to reach full height and width.

for plants without a plan, just buying what catches their eye. Then they get home and have to figure out where everything goes. Or, they'll buy only the plants that are blooming. Placing all those plants together looks great for a few weeks, but they will become a sea of green for the rest of the season. Plan your garden on paper before heading to the nursery.



Casual and continuous. This cottage garden is designed with perennial flowers that will bloom all summer long. Native grasses bring the state's natural prairies to this residential landscape.

FINISHING TOUCHES

CONSIDER ADDING one of the following as a finishing touch to your landscape.

Low-voltage landscape lighting can transform your garden, making it attractive even after the sun goes down. While halogen bulbs are still strong sellers, the current trend is toward LED systems. The benefits of LEDs are many, including extremely long bulb life and less electricity use. We steer our clients away from the lighting sold in big box stores and specify professional-grade lighting. It costs more up front, but the investment is well worth it.

Furniture should not be an afterthought. In fact, patio spaces should be designed with specific furniture arrangements in mind. This can even impact the size of a dining pergola, for example, if it's meant to cover a table that seats six or eight. At the end of a project, we often help our clients choose the style and brand of furniture that will fit the overall theme of their landscape. Although traditional, sustainably grown teak furniture remains popular, the all-weather wicker options are almost endless and seem to be a trend in patio furniture today.

Lastly, garden art is a great way to personalize your landscape. Again, the possibilities are almost endless, from whimsical to formal styles, cast-stone to metal materials, and everything in between. Because of the personal nature of garden art, we often only design a space for it to occupy, rather than choosing it for our clients.



Fitting furniture. The clean lines of this modern version of a picnic table mimic the style of the patio itself. The right furniture not only adds function, it ties together the landscape's style.



THREE WAYS TO ILLUMINATE THE LANDSCAPE

Using more than one type of lighting will add depth and dimension to your yard at night.

- 1 Path and patio lighting creates ambiance and safe passage to the house.
- 2 Lighting walls emphasizes their texture. You can also shine lighting on the house in this way.
- 3 Uplighting brings the vertical elements, including structures and trees, into the evening landscape.