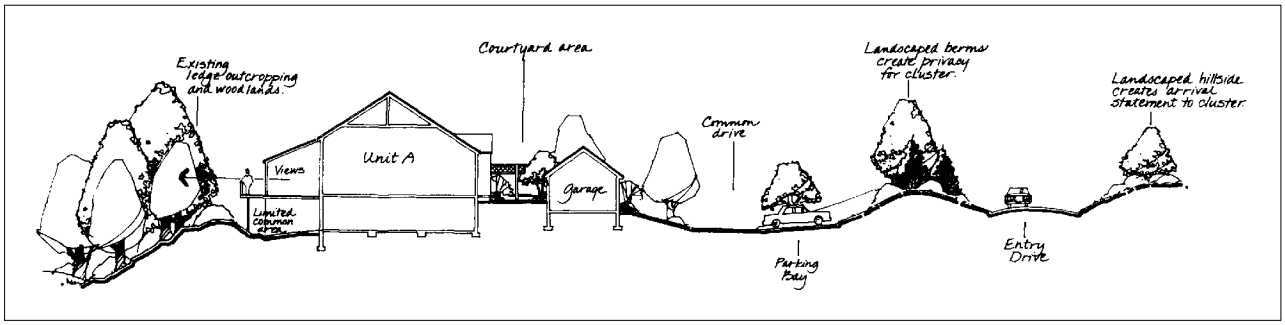
by Cleve Kapala

Using LANDSCAPING to Market Homes

Don't make landscaping an afterthought. Start with the proper siting of the house.



Landscaping adds value to homes in the same way as good architectural design or a master-bath suite.

Landscaping costs will vary depending on the architecture, site characteristics, and market-segment. One Massachusetts builder, The Green Company, spends anywhere from $2,000 to $6,000 per home (1 to 2 percent) for the installed landscaping, not including design fees. The company's vice-president of marketing, Tony Green, attributes the company's success, in part, to the marketing advantage gained from good landscape design.

Start with Siting

The most immediate payback from landscaping comes from siting the home correctly on the lot. Important elements include: maximizing the views, working with existing grades and contours, providing privacy, using solar gain and natural lighting, and creating an attractive and functional entry. These all precede the placement of trees and shrubs. If the home is poorly sited, even the best landscape designer has few options left to correct the damage. Siting is the most important decision of the landscaping plan.

The Boatyard, a Green Company project in Falmouth, Mass., is a good example of careful siting and land planning (see photo). Although the development has 32 homes on only four acres, 28 units have a harbor view, with no loss of privacy. This adds tremendous value to the residences. (The landscape design for The Boatyard and many other Green Company projects was done by Matarazzo Design, of Concord, N.H.)

The landscape plan for the Hills, built by the Green Company, guides the occupant's views from the entry drive through to the rear balcony. The fencing (right) conveys traditional themes and creates private space.

Using good land planning, 28 of the 32 homes in this four-acre community—the Boatyard—all have views to the harbor.

A creative land planner can sometimes see opportunities where others see only obstacles. For example, an engineer or builder may look at a ledge-tilled site and see only the cost of blasting and hauling the rock off-site. A landscape designer, however, sees blasted rock as another indigenous material to work with in landscaping a site. Berms for privacy may be one use of the material. An innovative surface drainage system with blasted spoil as rip-rap may be another.

Also, don't overlook the value of mature vegetation existing on the site. In New England, it's not unusual to find mature trees on a site, which can be protected during construction and used in the final landscape plan. Clear cutting, bulldozing, and grading the site prior to a landscape analysis often results in the destruction of vegetation that could have added thousands of dollars to the homes' value had it been saved.

Typically, the builder imagines landscape architecture as something that "happens at the end" after everything else is done. In fact, landscape architecture should be brought to a job early on. It should begin with selection of the property, continue through siting of the residences, and end with the filling of the woodbox or placement of fresh flowers to greet the first home shopper. The landscape, says Green, "is everything but the home."

Tie the Building to the Land

Good landscaping, like good architecture, reflects traditional values, regional preferences, and classical visual themes. The landscaping should seem familiar to the homebuyer and "fit" the area and market. For example, the

plants selected should be indigenous species without an over-reliance on exotics. Not only do the native species fit in better with the natural elements retained on the site, but they are usually hardier and better suited to local soil and moisture conditions than are introduced species.

Regional site designs are important as well. For example, a beautifully-reproduced split-rail fence might look right at home in Lexington, Ky., but it will look out of place next to a reproduction Colonial saltbox in New Hampshire. A landscape theme needs to be coherent. Mismatched elements can detract from a key goal of landscaping, which is to tie the architecture to the land. This is done by the choice and layout of vegetation, walkways, drive, signage, fencing, lighting, mailboxes, and natural elements such as large boulders or exposed ledge. The tightness and coherence of the theme is what the buyer will respond to.

The two other goals of landscape architecture, according to David Hawk, director of Mattarazzo Design's Boston office, are to create a sense of permanence and community, and a feeling of privacy, which is particularly important for attached homes and larger homes on small lots.

Mature Plants and Impact

Avoid what David Hawk calls the "mausoleum look"—a couple of small shrubs flanking the doorway. This is the wrong sense of permanence.

Small and immature plants give the message "new," when the impression the homebuyer wants is "established" or "permanent." People may want their cars to look new, but not their homes. In home shopping, a buyer responds to more complex and long-term marketing signals, which good landscaping can address. Big plants give homes scale and a feeling of permanence and solidity.

When mature trees and shrubs need to be moved, one option is to replant them elsewhere on the site. Because healthy trees on the site are already adapted to local soil and moisture conditions, they have a survivability rate of about 95 percent following replanting. At this rate, hiring a tree spade at $200 an hour can be very cost-effective when compared with the cost to buy and install comparable species and sizes (up to 14-inch caliper) from a nursery.

To make a strong impression, the Green Company and Matarazzo design both believe in planting the largest and most mature trees possible for each job—so-called "impact" landscaping. "I'd rather see a single nice large tree doing its thing than 25 small shrubs," says George Matarazzo, principle of Matarazzo Design. "Breaking the roofline with trees is a goal of our planting plans," he says.

Another technique with impact is what David Hawk calls "natural neon," using plant density and color to catch the attention of home shoppers. An example is using a cluster of bright yellow marigolds near the entry of a community or home to make a strong eye-catching statement. If you're trying to sell homes in a competitive environment, says Hawk, "your first goal is to make sure someone sees it, and you must ensure that the first impression is overwhelmingly positive."

Add Outdoor Rooms

Landscaping can increase the living space. Every residence and community should have three functional outdoor rooms, says George Matarrazo: an entry, a patio (or deck) area, and a garden environment. These outdoor rooms become additional residential space which can be marketed, just like a kitchen or master bath suite.

Fencing defines outdoor space, and skillful design and layout of fencing can achieve immediate results in establishing patterns of use and ownership. More subtle, however, is the importance of an initial land plan that looks ahead and uses vegetation, rock outcrops, grade changes, and drainage in defining use and ownership boundaries for each residence.

The landscaping must be varied and must respond to seasonal change. Whether to use evergreen or deciduous trees and shrubs is an important planning decision. According to Matarazzo, "Landscaping that quits after Labor Day means that you have 75 percent of the year when your landscaping dollar doesn't really work. There is a red-stemmed dogwood, for instance, that looks wonderful against the snow, produces flowers in the spring, and lush green leaves through the summer and into the fall." It's important to choose species and locate them in such a way that you get full value from the landscaping throughout the year.

The empty-nester buyer is not looking for an undefined expanse of lawn to mow or ambiguous boundaries to his or her ownership. More immediately, the buyer wants to visualize during the first walk-through that this could be a really nice spot to put a hammock and read the Sunday paper. To create this sense of "home" and "privacy" the landscape architect should put himself in the shoes of the homeowner and "imagine the impression from every room in every season," says Hawk.

From a marketing standpoint, the visual experience of the entry is particularly important. It should "impress with clear visual signals, attention to detail, and defined edges and spaces that the buyer is entering a very special environment," says Green. Good landscaping can help potential buyers picture themselves living in a home before they've walked in the front door. With good landscape architecture, the home and its setting fit together perfectly.

Building and selling homes is an art and a science that requires teamwork. Only recently have some builders begun to recognize the advantage that good landscape architecture can afford them. ■

The all-important front entrance to a home should reflect a sense of privacy, permanence, and visual interest. The Boatyard (top) achieves this with terraced gardens and porches. The Hills (bottom) makes use of stone pavers and a variety of plantings.

Cleve Kapala is an environmental planning and communications consultant from Canterbury, N. H. This article is based on a three-way interview with Tony Green, vice-president of marketing for The Green Company, George Matarazzo, principle of Matarazzo Design, and David Hawk, director of Matarazzo's Boston office. The Green Company, of Newton and Falmouth, Mass., builds attached condominium homes aimed primarily at the "empty nester" market, and ranging in price from $150,000 to $900,000. Matarazzo Design, based in Concord, N. H. and Boston, provide land planning, landscape architecture, and architectural design. The Green Company has worked with Matarazzo Design for 15 years.

By Andrea Morgante & Kathleen Ryan

HANDLE WITH CARE:
Making Life Easier for Existing & Future Plants

Planting is often thought of as "the icing on the cake"—the last and most superficial phase of construction. But it is best to consider landscaping from the start of a project. What happens during the initial phases of construction significantly affects the survival of plants, both existing and new. Plants, and topsoil especially, are expensive to replace And large trees—over 7 inches in caliber—add considerably to the selling price of a home. Every effort should be made to save them, and to keep the site healthy for future plantings.

Plant and Soil Basics

Plant roots have to "breathe." A plant's ability to take in oxygen and give off carbon dioxide, as well as absorb nutrients and water, depends on the quality of the soil and how much there is of it. Soil can vary in depth from a few inches to several feet. And good soil is a living, breathing mixture of minerals, organic matter, and living organisms. Air spaces naturally found in good soil allow water and nutrients to pass freely.

Once compacted, however, the soil is destroyed, because it does not have the capacity by itself to reopen these air spaces. Drainage and nutrient absorption is reduced.

Compaction is caused by foot traffic as well as vehicles and the stockpiling of materials. Soil compaction is often the "invisible" reason that both existing and newly planted trees do not thrive on a site.

Start with a Plan

In order to prevent compaction and other forms of damage to the site and existing plants, it is imporrant to begin with a site plan that identifies existing conditions—significant trees, steep grades, wet spots—and proposed use areas, such as driveways, gardens, tree locations, terraces and paths. This will guide use of the site during construction. Traffic flow, debris piles, utility locations can be planned with attention to the site's future use.

Selecting Trees to Save

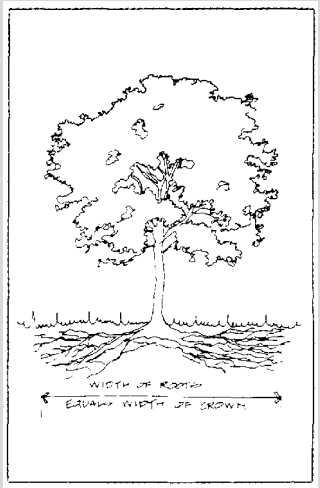
Large trees add to the aesthetic appeal of a site, control erosion, and create privacy screens between properties. And since they have grown up on the site, they have a better chance for survival and vigorous growth than transplanted nursery-grown stock.

But not all trees are worth saving. Trees that are relatively short-lived, susceptible to disease, or weak-wooded should probably be selected out. An inventory should be made of existing trees, their size, genus, species, and condition. A forester, arborist, landscape architect or nurseryman may be consulted to assist in creating this inventory.

Designing with Trees in Mind

With the trees located on the topographic survey, their preservation then becomes part of the basic site design.

Buildings may be located to take advantage of the shade of mature deciduous trees; evergreen masses may provide wind screening. Driveways may be aligned to feature a specimen tree. But most importantly, buildings, driveways, underground utilities, and grade changes should be located far enough away from existing trees or tree groups that root systems are not disturbed. You can generally assume that the root system of a tree extends to the drip line (outer boundary) of the tree branches. But with older trees, roots can often extend further, and care should be taken. Root systems can extend in depth from a few inches to three or more feet below the surface.



Construction Site Perils

The root system of a tree is its lifeblood—its only means of acquiring moisture, nutrients, and air. The beauty and vigor of its crown is directly dependent on the health of its root system. Many construction activities put the root system and tree itself in peril. Some of these include:

Equipment damage. Operating heavy equipment too near a tree breaks branches and scars tree trunks. These scars are not fatal, but if left unattended, become susceptible to disease and insect damage. Compaction of soil over the roots can destroy feeder roots and cut off water and air to roots deeper below.

Storage and stockpiling. Areas at the edge of the site (and next to existing trees) are often used for storing building materials, stockpiling soil or gravel, and parking the crew's vehicles. All these activities can scar trunks and smother roots.

Earthwork. Excavation near a tree can destroy the root system. if one-third or more of a root system is removed, the tree is very likely to suffer slow decline and eventually die. Filling over the roots of a tree will cut off oxygen and moisture to those portions covered, resulting in the decline of the tree.

Changes to runoff patterns. Changes to the grades or excavation for a foundation can alter the pattern of stormwater runoff or even groundwater flow. Nearby trees may not be able to adapt to the sudden change. Wetland species that have been thriving in a damp spot may not tolerate dry soils. Conversely, grade changes that create even temporary ponding around a tree may drown roots by cutting off oxygen. Liquid wastes from the construction site are often toxic to vegetation and are carelessly dumped near trees or in the drainage path eventually washing into the root systems. The combination of grading and tree removal on steep sites often causes erosion. The soil surrounding the remaining trees is undercut, leaving roots exposed and the trees unstable.

Preservation Techniques

The consequences of these events are usually not immediate. Trees will often survive for several years after construction has ended. Rut eventually the accumulation of these transgressions will spell death. Fortunately all of these threats to existing trees can he prevented. Awareness and concern on the part of the trades working on the site is the first step. The second step is to construct harriers at the drip line around trees to he saved. These should be installed before heavy equipment is brought on to the site. The barriers can be stakes and ribbons to act as "off-limit" reminders, of—when traffic is more difficult to control—sturdy 2x4 temporary fences. If grade changes are significant and a tree is to be featured, a retaining wall or well should be built at the drip edge of the tree with adequate provision for drainage.

Despite good intentions, trees and roots are sometimes damaged. If trunks and branches are scarred by equipment, cut the area cleanly so water does not collect and cause rotting. If a few limbs or roots are damaged, the tree can still be saved if the bulk of the root system is protected through a few protective measures: (1) cut damaged roots and branches cleanly at the nearest node; (2) cover the exposed roots with peat moss and keep moist until backfilled; (3) backfill with a good topsoil and be sure that no air pockets are trapped in backfilling.

If roots are removed, an equal portion or more of the tree's branches; should he pruned also. This will lessen the stress an the tree and give it a better chance of recovery. As a general rule, if more than a third of the tree branches or root system has been destroyed, it is better to remove the tree and plant a new one. The chances of its survival are poor and it may prove to he a liability in two to five years.

New Plantings

Planting near the house is most often the first priority of the new homeowner. The area extending about 10 feet beyond the building is most often home to new plantings. This is also the area most abused during construction. The constant flow of trucks and tradespeople over the soil and through the mud is damaging. The attempt to provide good drainage through the use of crushed stone and gravel in perimeter drains has the added result of reducing the soil environment for plants. Building debris and coffee break leftovers used as backfill further hinders the plants' survival. To ensure the survival of plants in this area, precautions need to be established early on in the project.

Precautions for New Plants

Before any equipment or materials arrive on site, the alignment of the driveway should be clearly marked. If you can't use the final driveway during construction, establish a good alternate route. When driveways, temporary parking areas, stockpile sites, and heavy-use areas are identified, these areas should he rototilled and then stripped of the topsoil. Even small amounts of topsoil are worth preserving. The initial rototilling breaks up the sod later and allows the organic matter to begin breaking down while piled on the site during construction. Whenever grading a site, keep topsoil and subsoil separate. If you are adding fill, rototill and strip existing topsoil first. If the subsoil is heavily compacted before fill or topsoil is spread, it should be plowed or rotoтilled to ensure that the soil structure will allow air and water between particles. While grass only needs about 4 inches of topsoil to survive, trees and shrubs require a deeper soil environment.

While backfilling the foundation and installing drainage material, keep the trench area to a minimum, and don't leave excess fill in the area. Use a soil separation fabric to keep drainage material and topsoil separate. The fabric should be placed both horizontally and vertically if the possibility of soil migration is present. This fabric usually inhibits root growth, so it is important to keep it away from the root zone of plants. Plants grown near this fabric often become root bound and do not flourish. Ideally backfill should only come to within 2 feet of finish grade. This final 2 feet should then be tilled with topsoil or a loose well-draining soil with some organic matter. The landscape contractor and excavator should communicate and establish the location of planting beds and large trees.

Finally

Landscaping can enhance a building, and sometimes can cover mistakes or oversights. But the landscaper or homeowner can only deal with the site as it is left by the contractor. To help them make the most of it, treat the site and its vegetation with care. ■

Andrea Margante is co-owner of Siteworks, a landscape design-build business located in Hinesburg, Vt. Kathleen Ryan is a landscape artist with the architectural firm of Alexander Truex de Groot in Burlington, Vt.