

Blending Hardscaping With Deck Building

You're missing out on profits if you don't include pavers and landscaping in your projects



by Greg DiBernardo

Increasing my deck business's profitability is always at the front of my mind. Extras like shade structures, benches, and planter boxes are great examples of upsells, but why stop at the edge of the deck? Most likely also lurking in your prospective clients' minds are visions of hardscaping — pavers, fire pits, and retaining walls — and of land-

scape plantings. These profitable items unify the deck with the backyard, making the whole outdoor space work and look far better; and bundling them in with a deck often makes an easy upsell, particularly when you show the prospect a rendering of what the finished product will look like.

When I began designing whole back-

yards, not just decks, I stopped calling myself a deck builder and started using the term "outdoor construction contractor." Though 99 percent of my clients initially come to me looking for a deck, more than half of them end up buying hardscaping and landscaping too. As a result, my company's gross sales have increased substan-

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tially, and profitability has gone up commensurately.

A selling point of hardscaping is that it costs a quarter to a third of what premium deck construction does. Rates for paver installations vary regionally, but most subcontractors I deal with install basic 6x9 non-tumbled pavers for \$7 to \$10 per square foot (**Figure 1**). By adding a patio to the project, I can provide my clients with a significant amount of additional entertaining area for a fraction of the cost of the deck. Hardscape features that are appropriately tied into the deck design also give the backyard a natural flow, from the height of the doors all the way down to the level of the grass. And it's nice to be able to spread a crowd out on multiple levels.

Sell Using 3D Software

When I meet new prospects, even on seemingly deck-only projects, I let them know that I offer additional services. For example, I may suggest putting in a patio or a walkway to guide guests from the driveway to the deck. Often the clients will say something like, "You know, we never thought of that. What a great idea." When I tell them I can include it in my scope of work and they won't have to deal with other contractors, the clients are usually thrilled. Other advantages to keeping the job under one umbrella that you may want to point out include unified project management, design cohesiveness, and efficient scheduling.

Successfully selling additional features is much easier when you can show the client what those features will look like in context. Most times, if clients can't see it, they won't buy it. No one needs a fire pit, but everyone wants one, and providing realistic visualization helps trigger an emotional buying response from clients. When you show them a complete backyard design with



Figure 1. Patios made from concrete pavers can add space to a backyard project at a fraction of the cost of a deck.



LARRY COHEN

Figure 2. Using 3D design software provides customers with an image of the finished project, greatly helping the sale.

all the bells and whistles, it's like letting them test-drive a new car with all the options. Suddenly, the stripped-down model with cloth seats and an AM radio isn't so desirable, even though that's what they came in to buy.

While a sketch may be adequate for basic features like walkways or patios, the best way to present your design is

with 3D renderings (**Figure 2**). I use Realtime Landscaping Architect (Idea Spectrum; ideaspectrum.com), which costs \$350. Run on a laptop, it's a great in-home sales tool, although it's not a comprehensive deck-design software.

Fit the Design to the Site

The best backyard designs start with

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OUTDOOR STRUCTURE COMPANY



Figure 3. Some clients are better served with the bare minimum of a deck to provide access to a larger patio.



Figure 4. Homes with back doors at several elevations lend themselves to hybrid deck and patio designs.

Enhancing a Deck

If you're starting out as a deck builder, as I did, the range of potential hardscape or landscape features might not be obvious. To give you an idea of the possibilities, here's a list of those I've done.

- Concrete-paver and natural-stone patios
- Walkways
- Stepping stones
- Manufactured- and natural-stone retaining walls
- Outdoor kitchens (on the deck and on the patio)
- Fire pits, fireplaces, cooking areas
- Fencing
- Landscaping, flower beds, plantings
- Low-voltage landscape lighting

attentive listening, to understand the client's needs (**Figure 3**). Generally, clients come to me looking for a deck, so usually I make the deck the focal point of the backyard design. But sometimes clients only think they want a deck when what they really want is an outdoor living space. A deck-style landing and a large patio, for example, might better fit their needs. Since I'm not locked into building just decks or just patios, I can offer a client nearly anything imaginable in a design.

The design you present should be suited to the client's lifestyle. I consider where the entrances from the house to the deck are, where the natural flow of traffic wants to be, and where guests will enter the yard, along with topography and drainage. I also take into account whether the clients have children, as they will need room to play.

Try not to be prejudiced by how the backyard is already set up. On more than one occasion, I have taken a figurative eraser to a home's existing backyard. Broad changes like moving fences and creating retaining walls to completely reshape the backyard can make a space better accommodate the clients' lifestyle. Showing the concept with 3D design software and getting the clients' participation in design revisions makes them part of the process and attaches them emotionally to the overall project.

When I design decks into a project, I prefer that the house have exit doors more than 8 inches above grade. Otherwise, framing can become cumbersome and decking ventilation issues arise (many decking products require 12 inches or more of clearance to the ground or the warranty is void). Thankfully, most homes in my area are built with sill heights at least 24 inches above grade.

On bi-level homes, it's common to find a mix of door-sill heights, anywhere from 2 inches to more than 8 feet above grade on the same structure

Why Work With a Landscape Architect?

by Andy Merz

It makes sense that as a hands-on deck and porch builder I would want to take on as large a part as possible of any job, so integrating hardscapes with decks is a natural fit. And as a designer, I know that integrating a deck with hardscaping and landscaping can lead to spectacular results. But the wide range of these additional components can easily freeze a contractor and the client into inaction.

It is often best to decide which part of the job is the main focus, and choose the material for that part first. For instance, you know the client wants a bluestone patio, like the one in this photo. From there, you can decide between natural cleft, irregular, or thermal bluestone; whether it should be installed tight or with mortar joints; and what additional features, such as sitting walls, planters, or fire pits, you might want with it. Then, after all that, you can work on what style of roof the client wants, and what materials match best.

If, on the other hand, the deck and porch are the main focus and you want to enhance them with hardscaping, you must determine what elements work best in that setting, as well as how they fit the budget. Do you want a connected patio? Stone planters? Brick or stone columns supporting the deck? The subjective component is very important, but you also want to make sure that what-



ever the client chooses matches the scale and style of the home and the surrounding landscape.

Pulling all of these decisions together can be a difficult task, especially as many of the materials and design techniques aren't in most deck builders' repertoires. This is where a good landscape architect can be most helpful. I've developed relationships with several. Not only do they help with design, but they can provide access to high-end clients, both of which work to enhance my company's reputation and bottom line.

Andy Merz is a deck builder from Carroll County, Md. He works in the Baltimore metro area.

(**Figure 4**). That is an ideal situation for blending a deck with hardscaping; a raised deck can use level changes to flow down to a larger patio at grade. Or if the deck is to be built off a second story, including a deck drainage system and putting a patio under the deck gives the homeowner a dry space for entertaining (**Figure 5, page 5**).

Last, working landscaping and plant-

ings in around the hardscaping and the deck softens the edges and blends the design features together (**Figure 6, page 56**). Because I'm not formally trained to specify the right plants for a given yard's unique planting characteristics, I show the same 10 plants in every 3D design to make the rendering look pretty for the initial sale. I'll assign an agreeable planting budget for the

project and let my subcontractor spec the actual plantings when the time comes. My design software also lets me include low-voltage landscape lighting, and I add that to the design as well.

Develop Relationships With Subcontractors

Because I have a carpentry background, I have no desire to invest in the equipment

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BOBBY PARKS



Figure 5. Building a patio below an upper deck that incorporates a drainage system gives the customer outdoor entertainment options in inclement weather.

ROBERT VIVIANO



Figure 6. Plantings ease hard edges and blend decks and hardscaping into the yard.



Figure 7. Some parts of the job, such as building stairs, require close coordination between the deck builder and the hardscape contractor.

or staffing required to install hardscape or landscape features. That investment can mushroom. It usually begins with a piece of equipment like a backhoe or skidsteer, as well as a compactor. That in turn means a trailer for hauling the excavation equipment and a truck to haul the trailer. And if you're buying a truck big enough to haul machinery, you might as well make it a small dump truck, and now you might need a commercial driver license to get to the job, or you might have to hire a crew member with a CDL. Instead, I've chosen to subcontract the actual construction work to several like-minded hardscape contractors. By teaming up with very capable installers, there is nothing that I can design into a job that we can't execute.

The subcontractors I use appreciate that I have a design on paper that they can install quickly without worrying about permits or dealing with homeowners. I provide a clear scope of work, spray out the installation areas with marking paint, and try to make their lives as easy as possible during the build. Directing the hardscape contractors is the easiest money I make on a project.

Working with known contractors is a big plus. If the deck has staircases that are going to land on a patio or walkway, the hardscaping needs to be completed while the deck is being built (**Figure 7**). If, for example, the client brings in his own contractors to do the work, you can bet they won't show up when you need them, which will delay your part of the project.

While several other contractors I know have built hybrid deck businesses by developing relationships with landscape architects, my approach leaves me in charge of — and able to profit from — the entire process. ❖

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