

Grow Your Business With Landscaping

by Jennifer Benner

The deck is built, the tools are back in the truck, and the job is done. But wait, not so fast. What about the landscaping? A new deck can look pretty stark surrounded by nothing but exposed soil. This is probably not what your clients had in mind when they signed on. You may say “That’s not my problem,” but you could be leaving money on the table, as well as leaving your customers not quite as happy as they could be. Why not put in a little extra effort? Landscaping your decks is a way to enhance your offerings and set yourself apart from other deck builders.

There are two ways to integrate landscaping into your business. The first is to develop relationships with landscaping contractors and offer to include their services with your bids. You can make a few dollars by marking up their bill, and you don’t need to learn the trade yourself. Or, you can do some research and learn enough about landscape design and installation to offer your own package, tailored to your climate.

Selling Landscaping

Landscaping can be an easy sell. Besides just outright making the yard look better, plantings can create privacy, windbreaks, and shade — all key ingredients for thorough enjoyment of a deck. And once established, plantings require minimal maintenance — occasional pruning, weeding, and feeding.

You can sell the environmental benefits too. Plants help rain soak into the soil; without them, the water will wash the dirt away (or splash it onto the deck). Plantings also create a natural



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insulating buffer around a home, keeping it cooler in the summer and warmer in the winter, thus cutting energy costs.

Finally, landscaping improves curb appeal and resale value. According to several sources, including the Gallup Organization and the International Society of Arboriculture, a quality landscape increases a property’s value by 7 percent to 20 percent. Homeowners can expect a 100 percent to 200 percent return on their landscape investment when selling their home, while a poor landscape will decrease the value of their property by up to 10 percent. So, it literally pays your client to landscape.

Pick the Right Plants

Even if you were born with a brown thumb, it’s important at least to understand the basic considerations for deck landscaping so that you can communicate with a landscape professional. These start with using attractive plants that are the right size for the space. If

Calling in the Experts

Consider hiring an individual with a landscape-construction education the next time you need to add to your crew. You can also team up with a landscape contractor, which incidentally is a great way to gain more business. Whenever her clients need deck work, they’ll come to you, and whenever your clients need landscaping you can go to her.

the main objective is to create privacy, a windbreak, or shade, consider purchasing plants in the largest sizes you can find. While more costly, larger plants will achieve your goal more quickly.

Deck plantings should be sustainable. Pay attention to the plant’s needs; don’t put sun lovers in the shade, or moisture-loving plants in the full sun next to reflective hardscaping such

as a concrete surface. You can't count on your client to maintain the plantings, but you can bet if the plantings fail, you'll get the blame. To meet this challenge, look for plants that require minimal maintenance and don't need a lot of fertilizers and insecticides. Avoid problem plants that are heavily browsed by deer, like arborvitae, or troubled by other pests or diseases. Plants native to your region often are the hardiest. No matter what plants you and your customer choose, be sure their mature sizes will not overwhelm the space.

Plants that provide year-round interest are best. Dwarf conifers are great for permanent greenery. Small deciduous trees and shrubs such as serviceberry and dogwood offer interesting bark, spring blooms, fruit, and colorful fall leaves. Perennial ground plantings — that is, plants that come back year after year — are great, but stick with those that look interesting for more than one season and do not require a lot of primping and pruning. Sedums, ornamental grasses, and foamflowers are all excellent choices.

When selecting plants, imagine sitting on the deck and consider what is needed from that perspective. For instance, think about the height plants need to be to block the view of the neighbor's driveway or to provide optimum shade.

Keep in mind that the plants must be people-friendly. While roses might be beautiful, they are not the best choice if people will have to brush by their thorny stems to reach a seating area. Likewise, many people are alarmed by bees, so avoid plants that are bee magnets, such as bee balm or catnip. Those

that attract butterflies and hummingbirds, such as coneflowers and salvias, are big hits.

Tricks of the Trade

For the most impact, limit plant choices to 10 or fewer species and plant them in masses. Planting one of this and one of that ends up looking chaotic. Avoid the common error of placing plants too close together or too close to the deck or house. Be sure to space plants according to their mature size and figure in another foot away from the house and deck to minimize maintenance problems down the road. No one enjoys an ongoing pruning battle to keep misplaced plants in check.

Spring and fall are the best times to plant, especially trees and shrubs. Many respectable nurseries will not even dig a tree or shrub for resale in the heat of summer. When summer planting is unavoidable, the motto should be “water, water, water.”

Improper watering is the most common cause of plant failure. Tell your client that at least for the first year while the plants become established, they'll need a good soaking every seven to 14 days; a good way to water plants effectively and efficiently is to wind soaker hoses through the plantings and then at each watering, leave the hoses turned on until the root zone (top 12 inches to 18 inches of soil) is moist. Soaker hoses shouldn't exceed 100 feet in length and should be spaced 12 inches to 18 inches apart on sandy soil and 18 inches to 24 inches apart on loam or clay.

Adding a 2-inch to 3-inch layer of mulch will help keep the soil moist and suppress weeds. Place the mulch a few inches away from plant stems or

Landscaping Books

If you want to learn more about landscaping decks, here are four books to steer you right.

Gardens Are for People: How to Plan for Outdoor Living, 3rd ed., by Thomas Dolliver Church

The Nonstop Garden: A Step-by-Step Guide to Smart Plant Choices and Four-Season Designs by Stephanie Cohen and Jennifer Benner

Outside the Not So Big House: Creating the Landscape of Home by Julie Moir Messervy and Sarah Susanka

Residential Landscape Architecture: Design Process for the Private Residence, 6th ed., by Norman K. Booth and James E. Hiss

crowns to avoid rot and disease. Trees should have a visible flare at their base. If they look like telephone poles sticking out of the ground, they are planted too deeply or the mulch is piled too high. Soil amendments or fertilizers are usually not necessary at planting time, as nurseries generally feed plants very well. After the first year, however, an annual topdressing of compost or organic fertilizer is not a bad idea.

Although working with plants does have a learning curve, adding complementary landscaping to your deck projects will pay off with increased income and customer satisfaction. ❖

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