

CREATIVE LANDSCAPING SOLUTIONS CAN BOOST A PROPERTY'S APPEAL WITHOUT BREAKING THE BANK *by Diana Mirel*



PHOTO © GANNON MANAGEMENT

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veryone knows that you shouldn't judge a book by its cover. However, property managers know first impressions are important: A property's physical appearance—its "cover"—is what initially draws tenants to a property and patrons to those tenants. Yes, curb appeal matters—and in today's turbulent economic times, it matters more than ever.

But curb appeal is much more than planting a few flowers. Investing in and focusing on curb appeal through sophisticated landscaping is simply smart business.

"In a competitive market where you are fighting to maintain your existing tenant base and hopefully secure some other tenants, you want to have every advantage possible, and an attractive and inviting environment helps," said William McCarthy, CPM®, president and owner of WPJ McCarthy & Company Ltd. in Burnaby, British Columbia.

However, with the U.S. economy in the midst of the worst recession since the 1980s, all aspects of operating budgets, including landscaping, are being hit hard.

Add to that, when gas prices went through the roof last summer, fertilizer prices followed suit—and unlike gasoline, fertilizer costs have remained high. As a result, the landscaping industry has struggled with operating costs, which ultimately impact property managers' landscaping budgets.

Despite the economic crunch property managers and owners are feeling today, landscaping needs should not be dismissed. Instead, unique solutions and a renewed understanding of landscaping options can help maintain curb appeal without breaking the bank.

GETTING CREATIVE

Although budgets are tighter, abandoning landscaping completely is counterproductive. When a property appears run-down and neglected on the outside, tenants will not be attracted to the property, and vacan-

cies will remain, regardless of what is inside.

“In challenging economic times, properties that maintain attractive landscapes are stating that they have stability,” said McCarthy. “Those properties that see their landscaping declining are sending a negative message to prospective tenants, and existing tenants and their patrons.”

With labor and maintenance creating some of the highest landscaping costs, many companies are exploring low-maintenance solutions. Gannon Management Companies in St. Louis, Mo., for example, has cut its maintenance time by about 50 percent by doing mass plantings.

“We use larger numbers of fewer varieties,” said Jerry Pence, vice president of design management and horticulture at Gannon Management. “If we have five to six [plants] blooming, it would be okay, but if we have 25 to 30 of them, it has a much bigger impact. We do the same thing with our annuals. We use a couple of different types of annuals, but we use a lot of them. That way our beds are big and full.”

Another way to lower maintenance costs is by allowing hedges to grow more naturally, rather than sheering them into more formalized shapes.

“Sheering hedges takes a lot of fuel and time,” said Barry Troutman, vice president of technical services at ValleyCrest Landscape Companies. “But if you can allow plants to grow to their natural shape and prune selectively with hand-pruners, you will prune them less often. It takes fewer hours to prune and you create less debris.”

Sheering hedges also makes sense from a horticulture standpoint.

“Whenever you cut the tip off a plant, the buds right below that cut sprout,”

VALLEYCREST INCORPORATED NATIVE PLANTS INTO THIS PROPERTY IN FLORIDA TO ENSURE HARMONY WITH THE ENVIRONMENT AND TO PROVIDE LONG-LASTING BEAUTY FOR TENANTS, EMPLOYEES AND VISITORS. PHOTO COURTESY OF VALLEYCREST, INC. © JAY GRAHAM, GRAHAM PHOTOGRAPHY



explained Troutman. “When you cut one stem off, you will have two sprouts. Every time you shear a hedge, you create a bunch of new growth that will grow out quickly. But once you have established the shape you want, if there is a branch sticking above that shape, you can reach down in the plant and remove that single branch below the level of the canopy. That way the new growth won’t shoot out through that canopy and you don’t produce this huge burst of bud. If you do that, it takes less time to prune, you create less debris and you still have a very attractive form. That can be huge dollar savings on a property.”

PLANT & TREE MAKEOVERS

In the past, many properties utilized four-season color beds, but today’s managers are switching from annuals to perennials to help boost a property’s landscaping budget without skimping on aesthetics. Perennials offer plenty of pop at a fraction of the effort.

“On our properties we had a significant number of annuals, so we’re replacing those with perennials because they require less water and maintenance,” said Mike McConnell, CPM and property manager with Colonial Properties. “You have to change annuals four times a year and even though perennials are not always completely perennial, you don’t have to change them out every three or four months, so that cuts down on maintenance costs.”

Other properties are incorporating native plants with color beds or simply replacing seasonal color beds entirely with native plantings.

“In the long run, I think native plants are more cost effective,” said Sandi Scott, CPM, CSM, vice president/director of training at Cencor Realty Services in Dallas. “It’s about taking a look at the overall long-term maintenance and care of the plants. We still want our contractors out at the [shopping] centers cleaning up, trimming plants, cleaning trash out of the landscape beds and doing irrigation checks on a regular basis. But, hopefully through the use of native plant materials, the maintenance can be scaled back so it won’t take them as long on the property.”

Trees can also make a big impact on any property. Lush evergreens and deciduous trees will provide color and softness to a landscape with minimal effort.

“You can get decades out of a tree,” McCarthy said. “They are cost effective and if you do it right the first time, you’ll be saving money yearly on your upkeep.”

IT’S GOOD TO BE GREEN

Sustainable landscaping solutions continue to gain popularity both for their economic and environmental benefits. As their popularity and availability grows, native plants, organic soils, fertilizers and xeriscaping have become more affordable and are competitively priced with conventional plantings and materials. An added bonus is that sustainable plants and materials often require significantly less maintenance and water, which translates into savings for property managers.

Gannon Management, for example, has saved about 20 to 25 percent in landscaping and maintenance costs since installing native plants, ornamental

grasses and heartier perennials at their properties.

“Sustainable options require [fewer] man-hours, less water and less fertilizer,” Pence said. “And we’re not putting nearly the amount of chemicals in the ground.”

Additionally, using organic materials may result in needing less landscaping materials overall.

“If you use good materials upfront, you don’t have to keep amending the landscaping with costly fertilizers because the soil itself is a nutrient,” McCarthy said. “It is when you start with weak or lower grade materials that you have to pump in costly fertilizers.”

Furthermore, in today’s environmentally conscious society, sustainable solutions can attract tenants.

“Sustainable landscaping is used as a selling point,” said McCarthy. “A lot of people started doing it just for good business practice and to be cost effective. But, now it is a selling point because putting ‘green’ or ‘environmentally sustainable’ on anything is a good selling point for any product, including buildings.”

REDUCE, REUSE, RECYCLE

Going green via landscaping extends beyond plantings and materials. In fact, Gatski Commercial Real Estate Services in Las Vegas recently switched from using plastic refuse bags for landscaping debris to reusable fabric burlap sacks. This move was not only more environmentally friendly, but it also saved the company \$12,000 a year in landscaping costs.

Many companies utilize chippers and the like to transform landscaping debris into nutrient-rich mulch. ValleyCrest, for instance, used to pull



AT HEATHER RIDGE IN CREVE COEUR, MO., MASS PLANTINGS OF ANNUALS—SUN COLEUS AND PURPLE HEART—WERE PLANTED AT THE ENTRANCE AND MIXED WITH JUNIPERS AND LOCUST. PHOTO COURTESY OF GANNON MANAGEMENT

out weeds, trim branches, remove leaves, edge and mow its landscapes and then haul the debris off the property. But recently they have been recycling the debris instead.

“We’ve found that if we do that detailing first we can toss it all onto the lawn and then mow a lot of that would-be landscape waste back into the turf,” said Troutman. “That way we capture the nutrients in [the debris] and we save the expense and time of pulling that stuff out, and paying someone to haul it to a landfill.”

GOOD-BYE GRASS

Turf maintenance often drives up landscaping costs due to the water use, fuel costs for mowers and the labor associated with constant mowing. To miti-

gate these costs, many companies are launching turf-conversion programs that cut costs and maintenance by incorporating more sustainable and low-maintenance landscaping solutions.

Gannon Management has a goal to reduce turf areas on all of its properties as a way to decrease maintenance and save water. The company is replacing turf with ground covers that maintain the look but lower the maintenance. The program has cut turf applications by 20 percent, and has cut maintenance by pruning ground covers only two or three times a year versus mowing turf a minimum of 28 times per year, according to Pence.

Gatski Commercial’s turf-conversion program is also designed to save time and water, a valuable resource in the Nevada desert. The company is removing much of the grass at its property, and replacing it with drought-tolerant plants and trees native to the Las Vegas soil. Rather than simply tearing out the grass and throwing in a few drought-tolerant shrubs, the landscaping team maps out a design to ensure an aesthetically impressive landscape.

“We still have that beautiful curb appeal,” said Robert Strehlow, vice president of landscaping and building maintenance at Gatski. “We’ll often use two or three different sizes of rock to accent different areas; we leave in some grass, and we place plants, trees, shrubs and boulders throughout the area. We also may create dry riverbeds that we hollow out and fill with river rocks, and then we have plants running down the side of each river bed.”

Not only do these turf conversions

recreate the feel of a property, they significantly decrease maintenance.

“The only maintenance we have now is trimming the shrubs and raking the rocks that have poured onto the sidewalk,” said Strehlow. “Now, we’re just trimming about four times a year, picking up the trash and cutting the small area of grass we’ve kept. What once took us four hours a week, now takes an hour-and-a-half to two hours a week.”

WATER WORKS

One of the driving trends in landscaping today is water management. While areas like California, Nevada and parts of the Southeast are facing water shortages and increasing water costs, other areas like Texas, much of the Midwest and Northeast are not. Despite these differences, water management is quickly become a rising landscaping concern across the country.

“You have to think about designing your landscape to use less water,” said Troutman. “There is going to be more pressure to improve water efficiencies than ever before.”

While many properties have rain sensors that will turn off irrigation when it is raining, today’s irrigation systems are growing significantly more advanced, like having sensors in the ground to indicate whether turf needs watering.

Today’s turbulent economic environment, however, has stymied some property managers’ ability to invest in sophisticated irrigation systems. But, it is something that will likely take off as the economy turns around.

A MASS PLANTING OF DROUGHT-TOLERANT RUDBECKIA AND VERBENA AT SUSON PINES IN ST. LOUIS REQUIRES NO IRRIGATION IN THIS BED. PHOTO COURTESY OF GANNON MANAGEMENT



“I think it will be the standard soon to have software to control your irrigation that creates optimal time and optimal delivery schedule,” said McConnell, whose company is considering investing in these solutions down the road.

For now, Gannon Management utilizes a drip system at 85 percent of its properties to save a minimum of 50 percent in water usage. Drip system lines run under the mulch and water drips out of the system. According to Pence, drip efficiency is 90 percent compared to overhead spraying efficiency at 75 percent.

“It is an easier type of system to install and it is a much more efficient way to water, especially when paired with the [native-type] plants we use,” said Pence. “There are times when we only need to run the system once a week compared to three or four times a week with a more conventional irrigation system that waters from the top. With a drip system, we’re under the mulch so we get the water right to the roots and the mulch on top keeps the moisture in.”

KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

Current economic conditions have created plenty of uncertainty in all aspects of the business world. However, property managers can still take control of their properties by spending the time and energy needed to understand landscaping needs. Maintaining good relations with landscape contractors and/or in-house landscaping managers can help keep landscape budgets under control.

“Landscaping and ground maintenance are part of the operating costs of properties,” said McCarthy. “A property manager should have an understanding of every line item budget within those operating costs. The more information you have, the more control you will have of the process.” ■

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