



COURTESY OF CIPRIANO LANDSCAPE DESIGN

## WELL-DESIGNED LANDSCAPES MAXIMIZE THE ENJOYMENT, VALUE AND MARKETABILITY OF YOUR HOME

BY MARY VINNEDGE

PSSSSST. Here's an insider tip on a sure-fire investment: Improve your landscape.

Homeowners often hear that kitchen upgrades yield the best return on home improvements. But Ranka Vucetic, an agent with Critelli & Kilbride Realtors in Holmdel, thinks a front landscape is more important. "If there's no curb appeal, who cares what's inside? Even if the homeowners have gone to considerable expense on a kitchen or other improvements like bathrooms, buyers will never see

it. Having everything looking really great outside is an inducement for buyers to come inside."

Chris Cipriano of Cipriano Landscape Design in Mahwah agrees. "Economists always rank landscaping among the top five home improvements for return on investment" as much as 258 percent, Cipriano says.

Bill Dear of Dear Garden Associates in Pipersville, Pennsylvania, chimes in with a case in point. "A few years ago we installed a garden in a neighborhood where all the

**Above:** Plants in various colors and textures overflow onto the driveway, bringing this Cresskill home into scale with its small front yard. The Cipriano Landscape Design team used a Kwanzan cherry, blue spruce and hornbeam to elevate the landscape on both sides of the entryway. Coleus provides a splash of red near the front entrance, while salvia stands out with light-green foliage on the left. The asphalt paver driveway accommodates the children's love of hockey.



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In this design by Dear Garden Associates, a plain-Jane patch of lawn became a well-appointed outdoor room with a stone fountain and patio interspersed with plantings. If desired, seasonal annuals would add a flourish of color to the planting beds.

scaping and hardscaping, such as decks, patios, walkways, trellises and fountains. "An outdoor kitchen and grill and a dining patio surrounded by a full landscape can host year-round grilling and entertainment in a picturesque setting that will make your guests want to stay outdoors."

And plan for privacy in those outdoor rooms. "You'll not likely want to spend time in a garden that looks great from the road but doesn't afford privacy," Dear cautions.

### Begin the Process

When envisioning a garden, you should set priorities that are doable based on the conditions of your property. Don't force a design that will break the bank or not fit your property, Cipriano says. If you want a waterfall and have a flat back yard, for example, you will have the added expense of building up the site.

Opt for plants suited to growing conditions first; aesthetics come second. Dear says inappropriate choices can make gardens look unhealthy, kill plants and require extra effort and expense such as irrigation, fencing or spraying to deter deer, and special drainage.

Another important consideration is year-round interest, Dear says. In winter, that means berries, snow on ornamental grass and its seed heads, and attractive hardscaping. In other seasons, Vucetic encourages investing in plants that bloom several months, such as certain hydrangeas (the Endless Summer Collection, for example) and roses (Knock-Outs and Oso Easy varieties are easy-care options).

Avoid headaches by choosing plants that mature to the right scale for your property and are disease-resistant and nonaggressive. "Planting bamboo to screen an unwanted view may temporarily increase property value," Dear says, "but will likely be very costly to keep from spreading."

### On a Budget?

Cipriano suggests that financially strapped homeowners phase projects and begin by investing in infrastructure such as proper grading, drainage and masonry (stone veneer is a top value, he says).

Buy quality materials regardless of your budget, Dear

houses were very similar and had sterile landscapes. There was an immediate bidding war for the house where we installed the garden. "It sold in three days for the highest amount of any house in the neighborhood, including those of the same model. The amount over the asking price that the house sold for was 2½ times what the garden cost."

### Beyond the Bottom Line

Cipriano and Dear say landscaping also pays off with enjoyment. "A great garden can provide spaces to relax and unwind or to share with friends and family," Dear says. "It can be therapeutic and relaxing to spend time cutting flowers and tending a garden."

Landscaping also can improve the quality of life for your children, Cipriano says. "A well-thought-out design will provide a safe place to play for the kids and a comfortable place to supervise for the parents."

For great entertaining, Cipriano says to balance land-



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**Above left:** Cipriano Landscape Design simulated a lakeside retreat in this Mahwah backyard by adding a 7-foot boulder waterfall. The company transplanted some material from the front yard and supplemented with new trees, including a 12-inch caliper zelkova, a European hornbeam and a birch near the spa. Siberian irises and annual verbena line the rocks and spa in the foreground. Amenities include a cabana and a fire pit embedded in the natural stone patio.

**Above right:** Cipriano ratcheted up interest in the formerly flat yard by changing elevations and adding textural diversity with plants near the pool and patio. An Oriental spruce and *Styrax japonicus* frame the scene with greenery at right in the photo; bamboo provides privacy. A European hornbeam abuts the outdoor fireplace; a Japanese maple brings a pop of red to the left of the waterfall. Lilacs, hydrangea, rhododendron, spiraea, sedum, phlox, astilbe, Russian sage, Shasta daisy, woolly thyme and hosta inject an array of colors and textures from spring through late fall. **Right:** Cipriano was challenged to change the uninspired backyard into a vacation-like destination for the owners' kids and for entertaining while improving drainage and meeting Mahwah's stringent lot coverage rules.



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every time you pull up to the mailbox and see an under-achieving landscape ... Perennials add the biggest bang for your buck" because they can be divided every third year for new or expanded beds. "They bring color and texture that are always interesting."

And color is a major consideration. "Use colors that complement the house, and make sure the lawn is green," Vucetic says. "One of the best tips I ever got ... was don't cut the grass too short, because that makes it look brown. Let the grass be taller."

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It's a pleasure to be led down this garden path after a landscaping makeover by Dear Garden Associates. Plants of various textures and trailing to upright habits — including glossy, deep-purple heuchera — soften the stonework in this inviting backyard.



BEFORE

## For Landscapes You'll Love

- ✓ Start with a plan. "Think down the road and don't plant a tree or install a walkway where you may eventually want a pool," landscape specialist Bill Dear says.
- ✓ Do it right the first time. "A beautiful high-quality plant installed improperly or in the wrong spot will die, and beautiful stonework on a poor foundation will inevitably fail," Dear says. Choose durable materials.
- ✓ Scale landscape elements correctly. Plants that scrape eaves or encroach on walkways at maturity will require constant attention. "A patio built too small will always feel awkward and difficult to use, while a patio built too big may make you feel like you're sitting in a parking lot," Dear says.
- ✓ Research indicates potential buyers decide whether they like a house within five seconds of arrival before they're inside, Holmdel real estate agent Ranka Vucetic says. To enhance your home, she says to scrupulously clean everything and hire professionals to prune plants to proper scale. An attractive front door is essential; a new one brings a 105 percent return on investment, according to Realtor association research.
- ✓ Consider an overall landscape theme, landscape specialist Chris Cipriano says: rugged and natural to polished and formal; modern to antique. He also recommends considering a color theme.
- ✓ Mix color and evergreens in your landscape, all three experts say.
- ✓ "Lighting will prevent your landscape from going to waste after dark," Cipriano says. And Vucetic reminds homeowners that houses for sale are often shown at night, after people get off work, so your pretty landscape won't win any points if it sits in the dark.
- ✓ A wood deck offers payback of about 70 percent, according to Realtor association research.
- ✓ Dear and Cipriano suggest that homeowners try vegetable or herb gardens for personal consumption and sharing.
- ✓ Consider children, Cipriano says. Bluestone and dark can pavers get extremely hot in high temperatures in southern exposures. "Children will not want to play on a 115-degree patio."
- ✓ Avoid fads. For example, when selecting pavers, shop for traditional sizes and shapes, Cipriano says.