

# BUILDING A LANDSCAPE

## The Trials and Tribulations of Installing a Landscape Project



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Photo Courtesy: Outdoor Environments

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The design is set. After several drawings, discussions, and re-dos, the client is happy with the plan...and the budget.

Now comes the easy part, installing the landscape. From here on it's simply a matter of following the plan step by step to create a dream landscape for your customer in a time frame that fits everyone's schedule and budget. Right?

Wrong. We all know that the pieces never fall into place quite as expected. In fact, when building a landscape the only thing you can expect is the unexpected. In a field where there are so many different interdependent elements to consider and so many different sources of potential trouble, Murphy's Law tends to prevail.

Sometimes it's hard for clients to understand this. Because most homeowners typically build a new landscape only once or twice in their lifetime, they don't have the experience to realize that the world of real-life landscaping is not "as seen on TV."

"Home & Garden Television is one of the best things that ever happened for our business," says Steve Hill, president of Turftenders, a design build firm located in Raleigh, North Carolina. "It's also one of the worst things that ever happened for our business," he laughs. "In the span of about twenty minutes, customers see a beautiful landscape take shape before their eyes. They don't realize that this landscape took thousands of hours to create and was probably riddled with problems along the way."



Still, whether it's on TV or in your client's backyard, the end result is real: it almost always includes a breathtaking landscape that anyone would be proud of. How does a final product that's nearly perfect result from a process that's usually anything but?

It isn't simply a matter of having the right equipment and a large and speedy crew. It's much more fundamental than that. Overcoming the obstacles that come with any landscape project requires attention to the basics: communication, excellent critical thinking skills, and good business sense.

Communication: priority one

One of the biggest sources of frustration in landscape installation is when, halfway into the project, the owners point out that it isn't

Photo Courtesy: Outdoor Environments

turning out the way they asked. More often than not, this isn't an error in workmanship or quality but rather an error in communication.

"Communication is paramount," says Hill. "Communications within our own staff and with the customer."

Bobby Jensen, senior vice president of Outdoor Environments in Savage, Minnesota agrees. He points out that a successful installation starts with crystal clear communication during the design process. "We make sure the customer is part of the design process every step of the way." The process starts with asking and listening, and the emphasis is on visualization.

"When a client first inquires we provide a packet that includes a lot of visuals and an extensive questionnaire that gives the client a chance to tell us what they like and don't like. We also have them come to our design center. This includes a large reference room filled with pictures, books, and a flat screen TV. Here they can browse through images and videos of all of the elements in the landscape: walkways, patios, gazebos, etc. This helps us make sure our vision for the project connects with theirs before we ever put pen to paper."

This kind of crystal clear communication is just as important internally as it is between company and client. "Whether you're talking to your customer or your staff," say Klaus Hertzner, owner of Modern Landscaping, Inc. in Campbell, California, "always, always make notes that go along with your discussions. Always check and re-check."

Hertzner points out that disaster can result when there are several layers of communication between the designer and the people doing the work in the field, especially when people don't take the time to make sure they're being understood. Many problems can be avoided in the installation process if, from the top all the way on down, you are very clear that the person you are talking to understands and interprets what you are saying.



Hertzner has had years of experience dealing with landscaping challenges. Originally from Germany, he studied horticulture there and then relocated to the U.S. He worked for several years for other contractors in California before starting his own business in 1972. "I had very long and good training in the field before I went into business on my own. I became known as a good contractor who would tackle things that other people wouldn't. People would joke that I got all the cliff jobs."

According to Hertzner, the biggest source of headaches on the work site comes when he discovers existing conditions that just don't work with the plan. For example, the crew starts digging and finds several inches of rock just below the topsoil. "It's sometimes difficult to convince the owner that there are additional costs. If they don't have a clear understanding of the budgeting process up front, they may think that as a contractor you should have foreseen all possible circumstances, but this is simply impossible." Hertzner points out that good communication right from the start helps manage client expectations and prepare them for these unforeseen circumstances.

"Managing client expectations is key," agrees Hill. "It's a huge part of any project, especially when it comes to the budget. Some parts of the budget really can't be finalized until the project is started. You never know the full scope of the work until you're into it." Much of Hill's work is done in an older section of town with houses dating to the early 1900s. "You just don't know what you'll find down there," he says.

Hill gives his customers a standard prep talk before finalizing the contract. "I tell them that this is our best estimate of the budget but that things could change depending on what we discover. We could find the rock that goes all the way to China. I don't have X-ray vision. If I did, I'd quit the landscaping business and go into gold mining."



Another installation challenge that isn't always obvious to clients is a project that calls for work in tight spaces. "Many people think that a small area translates into a simple project," says Hill. "In fact, the opposite is true. In smaller areas you have to work with smaller crews. Productivity is slower. There's less space to maneuver and to bring in equipment and supplies. For example, we recently worked on a project where we had a 36-inch access through the gate and had to bring in 41-inch pallets of stone. Our answer would have been to take down a



section of fence to allow for a much more efficient process, but the client didn't want that. In this case, he was willing to pay the extra labor, but it's very important to take the time to talk this kind of thing through with the client so that they understand how this will impact the project.

Problems sometimes surface when clients don't understand the installation process. "Prepping the client for what's going to happen to their yard is an extremely important aspect of communication," says Hill. "We have to explain to the customer that in many cases, we're going to completely tear up their existing landscape and it's going to be a mess for a long time. There will be mud throughout the landscape; it will be on the driveway; their kids and their dog will track it into the house. Some customers are very uncomfortable with

that, but if they know all about it up front, it helps."

Handling clients who are over-involved is another important aspect of communication. "We've had clients who bring the crew coffee and donuts every morning and want to start the day with a good chat," says Hill. "They don't realize how important staff time is, not only to their project but to other projects that we have scheduled." Diplomatic communication with clients is essential in situations like this.

#### The power of critical thinking

Building a landscape can be like putting together a jigsaw puzzle with each piece having its own rules and idiosyncrasies. The contractor needs to know the rules for all of the pieces -- not only those for horticulture and plant ecology but also those for electricity, construction, water biology, geology, and more. Few other fields require knowledge of so many diverse systems.

With this kind of complexity, the potential for problems is infinite. In a successful landscape business, the potential to solve problems must be equally so. Hill, Hertzler, and Jensen all stress the importance of having staff with good problem-solving and decision-making skills at every level. "I invest in staff training and then trust them to get the job done," says Hertzler. "I have to give my people enough leeway that they can solve problems as they come up."

Project delays are one of the most common challenges for those in the field. A project may begin as a neatly scheduled series of steps. But any number of uncontrollable events can set a project up for serious scheduling conflicts. "Projects can be seriously delayed by anything from the weather to undependable suppliers or sub-contractors to customers who change their minds," says Hill.

Hertzler, who builds a lot of landscapes for new construction, says that a common source of delay for him is when a new construction project is supposed to be finished but isn't. "We may come to the work site expecting to find a finished house and instead find piles and piles of building materials, contractors, and equipment blocking our access. Working around this can be extremely challenging."

Delays and schedule conflicts like this are part of everyday business on a landscaping project and they can have a domino effect if staff is not able to juggle and re-schedule effectively. "The project manager has to be able to think on his feet to figure out how to keep things moving despite equipment breakdowns and weather that doesn't cooperate," says Hill.

#### Building a landscape with a better bottom line

Installation problems don't always show up in the customer's landscape, according to Klaus Hertzler. Sometimes they show up in the company's books. He stresses the importance of making good business decisions on every project. "When I started out many years ago I knew I was great at what I did. But it took me about two years to figure out that I was actually losing money." Unfortunately this is not uncommon for contractors who don't have a business background. "They might feel that they're doing well if they have several big budget projects," says Hertzler. "But it may be difficult for them to calculate the actual overhead costs. Determining profit is one of the most difficult aspects of this business."



Photo Courtesy: Outdoor Enviroments



Hertzler suggests that contractors obtain some training in business. He's happy to see that more people going into the field today have some business education. Landscape contractors with a good business background know how and when to



Photo Courtesy: Turftenders

borrow money, how to attract good employees, and how to control the bottom line.

Every landscape installation has its headaches but successful contractors know that problems are a natural part of the process. "We don't see them as problems," says Hill. "We see them as bumps in the road."

Hertzer agrees. Now nearing retirement and in the process of turning his business over to his son, Mike, Hertzer says he still likes to take on the tough projects. "I like a job that presents a challenge," he says. "That's what makes it fun."



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