







# From Dreams TO REALITY...

## GETTING STARTED IN LANDSCAPE DESIGN

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**H**ave you ever jumped out of bed to jot down a really great idea floating through your head? I know I have. Most of the time, these visions occur during REM sleep, which I don't really understand, but I know it has something to do with that wondrous wake-up sequence when your brain is kicked into a super-conscious state in those moments before you open your eyes. I once actually sprung out of bed to scribble down sloppy notes for what I was *convinced* was a really great beer commercial. I won't bore you with why that idea didn't go anywhere.

Anyway, winter is nearly here, and that means some of our outdoor maintenance and construction activities are also on the verge of hibernation. Between cutting back perennials, mulching roses and clearing leaves, it's time to develop dream plans! That's right — it's time to think big and make steps toward creating the perfect landscapes your clients have always wanted. The following sequence may help you make sense of this creative challenge.





## INVENTORY

What do you have to work with — in other words, what plants are already growing on your client's site? This is the first question you must answer. Inventory the site by making a list or a base plan of all that currently exists in the area you want to design. If the property is pretty new, this is a piece of cake. If, however, there are many existing features and plants that are to remain, you must measure and be precise.

Triangulation is a quick but accurate method for locating key points or features on your base plan. Even though the term sounds NASA-like, triangulation simply means taking measurements from two known points (like the gazebo and walking path) to the third point (that big oak tree), thus

forming a triangle. Take out a compass and open it up according to your measurement next to the scale at which you are drawing. Swing two arcs from both of your known points. Where these arcs intersect will be the exact location of the big oak tree.

You must also show anything else on the site that can affect your design. Items often include potential drainage problems (such as low areas and downspouts exits), location of utility wires (both overhead and underground), soil conditions, water faucets, window locations and heights from ground level, HVAC units, etc. Don't forget to note popular traffic patterns. If your client goes from the kitchen to the compost pile frequently, the last thing you want to





do is triple this distance by planting too much vegetative screening directly in her path. But now I'm talking about the analysis stage that follows.

## ANALYZE

Now that you've identified and mapped every key element of the property, what's next? This is the step when the design process actually begins. At this point, you start to pay attention to that inventory you've created and make logical design decisions.

For instance, a hot south- or west-facing wall screams, "No azaleas or rhododendron here, pal!" The low spot in the yard with poor drainage says, "Fix me!" or "Plant only

those species that can tolerate occasional wet feet." If your client likes the view of the lake but can't stand the next-door neighbors' dog pen, plant to block the view of only the latter. If soil-test results suggest that the lawn sits on top of an old parking lot, it's time to add truckloads of soil amendment to the budget.

Analyzing the site should be fun. You should constantly ask yourself questions like "This is what I have, so what can I do with it?" Think in generalities at this point. Avoid thinking about specific plants until later. Otherwise, you may build your entire design around one species that, while in itself may be extraordinary, fails to relate to anything else in the garden.

## BRAINSTORM

Now the real fun begins. If your client fondly recalls dining on a small, crushed-stone terrace covered by a rustic arbor and adorned with fragrant wisteria when she vacationed in some exotic locale, write it down. If she says such things as "I've always wanted an enormous koi pond with a retractable dance floor over the top," write that down, too.

Brainstorming is the process of recording *everything* your clients desire for their garden. No limits, no budget, no "I can't do that because..." Those decisions will come next. Envision yourself being six years old again and slowly flipping through the Sears Christmas Catalog while putting together your very first "wish list." Have fun. Your client will be quickly transported back to reality during the next stage.

## PRIORITIZE

Okay. Let's be real. Maybe the backyard *isn't* big enough for a small putt-putt green complete with the plywood-cutout, bluetick-hound-with-a-moving-rear-leg obstacle. If you're working with a small backyard, but the "wish list" has 20 big-ticket, must-have items, it may be time to prioritize.

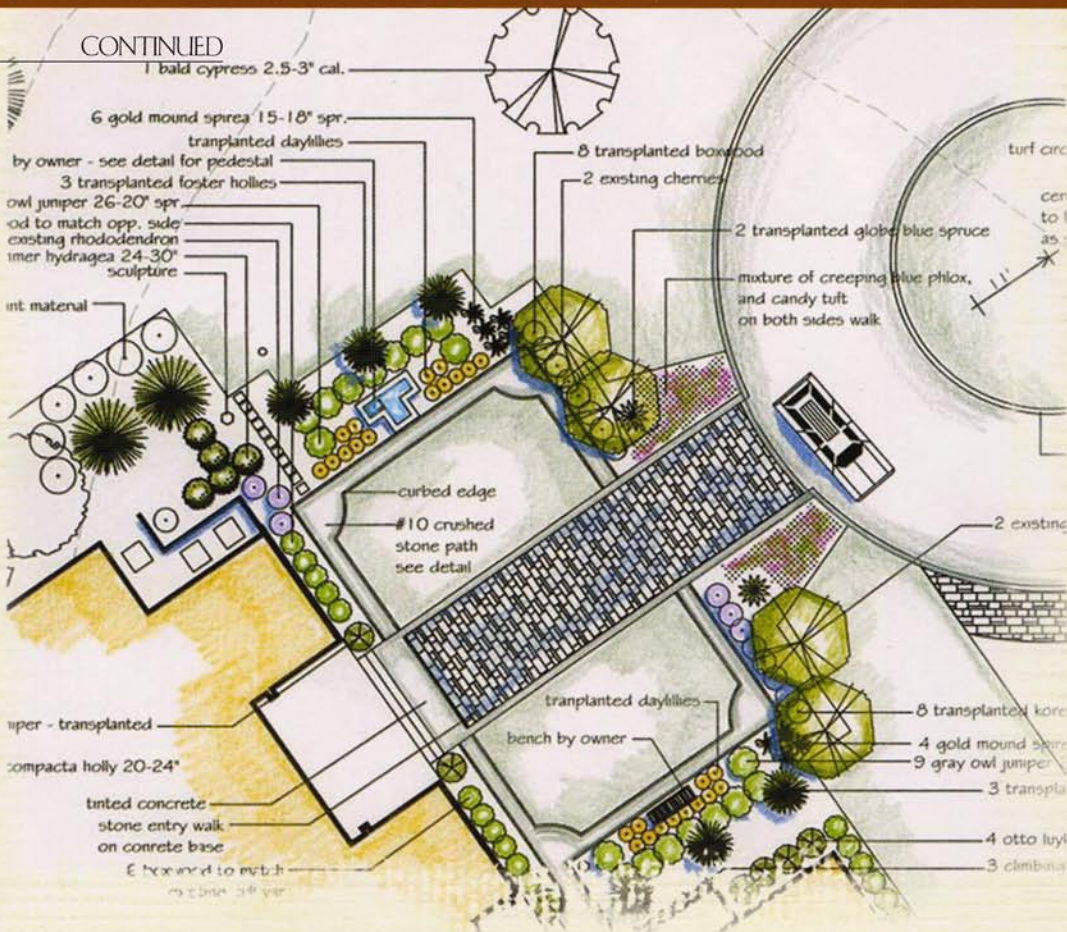
I use the analogy that garden designs are like puzzles, and there are times when all of the pieces just won't fit in the frame. Identify the "can't live without" elements — a brick patio, water feature, arbor and an heirloom specimen plant — and start to find homes for them on the site. You'll probably want to scoot them around on the site until they look comfortable and "feel right" in their respective locations. This is easily done with many computer design programs, or you may just want to draw their rough shape and dimension onto construction paper, cut them out and move them about on your base plan.

Prioritizing your desires horticulturally also makes sense. Landscape design is an art. It can and should be subjective. There will always be clients who want to plant one of everything they can get their green thumbs on, just as there will always be a few minimalists who go to the other extreme. Diversity in client tastes and preferences is what makes landscape design such a neat profession.

Even my own design-style pendulum constantly swings back and forth between "less is more" and "simple is best" to "let diversity rule — I *like* a plant buffet." The middle ground here is to have enough interesting specimen or focal



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plants in the garden (while maintaining a certain distance between them) while incorporating some “glue” or common thread (often groundcovers or low masses) to hold the design together.

I once read an interesting interview with a prominent landscape architect. When asked to name the one mistake most homeowners and designers make when selecting plants for gardens, he replied, “Lack of restraint.” Think about it.

## FINALIZE

This is a toughie. In my opinion, no landscape creation is ever “finalized.” That’s what makes this profession or hobby so much fun. Landscapes are constantly in the process of change and succession. With that being said, let’s say you’ve mapped out the yard, analyzed it, created preliminary diagrams and pared the wish list

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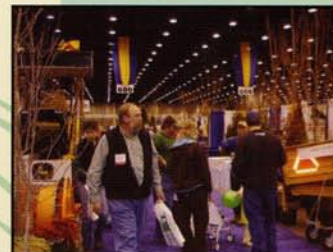
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down to a manageable and affordable size. Now it's time to take that rough diagram and walk the site, looking at what you've drawn so far.

Many clients have told me that they have a hard time visualizing, so I try to help them with photos, marking paint, garden hoses, etc. This is what you must do. Move outdoor furniture to the place where you envision a stone patio. Ask yourself if it is accessible, large enough and level enough or whether a wall will be needed. Place objects that may be roughly the same size as a particular landscape feature or have a bored-to-tears kid stand out in the yard and play "tree" for a while. It may help to take your plant books or magazines into the yard with you, holding them before the client's eyes, and then dropping them down to visualize that particular color, form and texture in that specific location. Whatever works for *the client* is my point.

After a while, the finalization process will become easier. If something doesn't seem to "fit," change your plan. Make sure visitors can get from point A to point B without walking on water.

### MAKE IT HAPPEN!

Don't be like the government. You will have spent way too much time and energy creating this beautiful landscape design only to have it sit on some dusty shelf for eternity. This plan has life! It *wants* to be implemented.

Even if your client can't afford to do it all at one time (few of us can), recommend installing the "bones" of the design. That is, first make any additions or changes to the hardscape (walkways, paths, fencing, water features, patios, etc.). Remember to plan for "sleeves" (open, underground PVC pipe) for irrigation and/or lighting, before you lay any stone or brick or pour concrete.

Next install any proposed shade or flowering trees. Larger shrubs should follow, and then (after your client has been approved for yet another home-equity loan) you may "finish" by installing groundcover, perennials, small accents, etc.

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To me, landscape and garden design is the most satisfying career I could ever imagine. I am convinced that all of the great gardens of the world began as dreams. No matter what the scale, I say, "Let your dreams flourish by acting on them and giving your clients their own private garden oases." Happy winter!

*Garry Menendez is a Registered Landscape Architect and an associate professor in the Department of Plant Sciences at The University of Tennessee where he teaches "Specialty Landscape Construction," "Advanced Landscape Design" and "Professional Practices in Landscape Design and Management." He also co-advises the Student Horticulture Club and undergraduate participation at annual meetings of the Associated Landscape Contractors of America (ALCA).* 🍀



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