

Want to get a big return on your home-improvement investment?

Look outside, not inside. While studies show that you'll only recoup 80 to 90 cents on every dollar you spend to upgrade your kitchen or bath, professional landscape designers estimate that improvements to your lawn and garden can boost your home's value by 7 percent to 15 percent. Those findings have been confirmed by survey results from the Gallup Organization and the National Gardening Association (NGA).

Homeowners are finding, however, that creating interest and harmony on the outside is far trickier than making upgrades to the inside. The sheer variety of trees (evergreen and deciduous), flowering plants (annual or perennial), and the walls, paths, benches, arbors, and pergolas that landscapers call "hardscape" can create a dizzying array of choices and potential missteps.

Yes, you can get some creative ideas from popular HGTV shows such as "Curb Appeal" and "Landscape Challenge," but flash and dash from someone else's plan won't necessarily work to your home's advantage.

Let's look at your home's landscaping with a designer's eye. There are trends out there that may help you paint your garden masterpiece.

Elements of style

Wherever you live, proper landscaping can enhance both your enjoyment of your home and its ultimate resale value. The first thing you probably noticed about your home was its curb appeal. Even though your home's appearance from the street is only part of creating the perfect outdoor environment, first impressions are often lasting ones for buyers.

People will drive by a home when the grass is uncut; it looks a little unkempt, and they don't even want to stop. But if it is a well-manicured, well-maintained yard, they'll say, "Oh, that's a well-kept home!" Automatically, we connect well-kept interior with well-kept exterior. If you see a home that is not well-maintained on the outside, visually then you're going to wonder how that owner has maintained its interior, and more importantly its systems. It may not be verbal, but you can't help but think it.

If you're about to sell and money is tight, your best investment is to hire a full-service maintenance company to trim, edge, prune and tidy up your yard and flower beds. Even humble landscaping, if well tended, will do more to sell your home than elaborate plantings that have run wild.

Now and into the future, your best design will be one that is functional, maintainable, and in scale with your house.

Trees add tranquility

Trees are another major aspect of landscaping that add instant character to any home. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, trees can actually muffle sound by up to 50 percent, thereby creating that quiet and relaxing home that many people want. There is another reason mature trees are popular: shade during the summer months can result in reduced energy bills.

Landscape designers vs. landscape architects

If you're all thumbs when it comes to landscaping, you may wish to consult a professional who does it for a living. For quality help in arriving at a landscaping plan that will make your home pop, you have two choices: a landscape designer or a landscape architect.

Landscape designers often come from other design disciplines and are unregulated; that is, they are not required to pass a certification test to work in the field. Designers tend to be a cost-effective option for most residential projects that don't require heavy engineering expertise. For this reason, they typically charge less; most are in the \$50-\$100 per hour range. Many professionals earn voluntary certification from the Association of Professional Landscape Designers.

Landscape architects, by contrast, have four-year degrees in their discipline; serve a lengthy apprenticeship; must pass the Landscape Architect Registration Exam; are licensed in 47 states; and typically work on commercial and public works projects as well as larger residential projects. They may be a good choice if your landscaping challenge involves unusual grade changes or extensive hardscaping, where some engineering expertise might come in handy. But be prepared for steep fees: Top landscape architects fetch anywhere from \$150-\$250 per hour or more.