Don’t let an aging landscape reduce the visual impact of a property. Use these smart renovation strategies to get maximum bang for the buck

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Nothing dates a property like old landscaping. Building styles have not changed significantly in the past few decades, so many of today’s corporate buildings still have a modern look to them. Yet many of these corporate buildings date themselves with their aging landscapes. Even buildings with classical lines can look tired with old or overgrown landscaping.

Many corporate landscapes can benefit from a landscape renovation that replaces or expands plantings that are mature and are no longer accomplishing their intended purpose:

► Some plantings are in decline and should be completely replaced. These decisions are easy.
► Some plantings are perfectly healthy and are simply not contributing positively to the landscape any more. Often, this is because the plants have grown larger than anticipated, so the planting has become a problem in some way.
► Sometimes styles have changed or better plants are available.

Out with the old

While it is difficult to remove and replace a perfectly healthy plant, it can be an important step in creating and maintaining a contemporary and high quality corporate image. Shade trees are an excellent example.

A properly chosen shade tree species grows in value as it matures, providing shade and offering a better scale to larger buildings. In the early years of a landscape, when the shade trees are small, they are often planted in long rows that give horizontal lines to the landscaping. These horizontal lines complement and balance the strong verticality of most multistory corporate buildings.

As the trees grow taller, they become vertical elements, so renovation is needed to bring horizontal lines back into the landscape. One way to do this is to join the individual mulch rings around the trees into one long bed, filling it with a linear planting of a short ornamental grass such as dwarf fountain grass (Pennisetum alopecuroides ‘Hameln’), prairie dropseed (Sporobulus heterolepis) or with a low-growing shrub such as Gro-Low sumac (Rhus aromatica ‘Gro-Low’).

Short shrub lifespan

Most shrub species need to be replaced every 10 to 15 years because, unlike trees
that appreciate in value, shrubs have a relatively short span of usefulness. They may need replacement or removal because they are in declining health. For example, if sun-loving shrubs are planted under a tree, its growth can create shade that stresses the shrubs, which then begin to decline. A simple mulched bed may suffice once the shrubs are removed, but if you need a replacement, the plants must be a shade-tolerant species (don’t forget to consider the impact of removing and replanting in the tree’s root system).

A group of plants may be in decline because some of the plants have died. In a hedgerow or continuous border, gaps usually cannot be filled with new plants in a way that will ever match satisfactorily. And a design meant to read as a continuous flowing line will be compromised seriously by mismatched fill-ins.

If you have grouped plantings or rows, the plant may no longer be commonly used. Finding a matching plant to fill the gaps can be difficult. For example, honeysuckles were once common, but are now known to seed themselves into natural areas to become environmental pests. It would be irresponsible to plant more of these shrubs, even if we could find them. **Screen for safety**

When a shrub row or grouping is at the perimeter of the property, it usually divides it from another property by defining the boundaries, or is used to screen an undesirable view. Often, the shrubs selected are large and end up growing too wide with age.

If the shrub row is within a property, such as in a parking lot or near walkways, they should be kept below eye-level so that pedestrians can see over them and feel safe. Shrubs near traffic can block sight lines, creating an inconvenience or hazard to drivers or pedestrians trying to cross traffic. **Update with dwarf plants**

Who hasn’t seen shrubs that have been repeatedly sheared into unattractive balls to maintain their size? They seriously date a property. Sometimes, shrubs can be renovated by drastic hand pruning, but often the labor involved is as costly as replacement (and the pruning can result in a period where the shrub looks worse before it looks better, which many commercial property owners will not allow). Here are some ideas for various landscape elements:

- **To rehabilitate areas where shrubs no longer perform as intended or cause a perceived or actual danger, remove all existing shrubs and replace them with appropriately sized species. In recent years, more dwarf cultivars have been selected and developed, so a renovation can be even more successful than the original planting, as the new shrubs naturally remain lower without shearing.**

- **For perimeter edging or screening, new compact versions of traditional species are available, such as compact burning bush (Euonymus alatus ‘Compactus’), Isanti compact redtwig dogwood (Cornus sericea ‘Isanti’) and compact highbush cranberry (Viburnum trilobum ‘Compactum’, ‘Bailey’ or ‘Hahs’). These stay around 5 to 6 feet tall. Dwarf lilacs such as dwarf Korean lilac (Syringa meyeri ‘Palibin’) and Miss Kim lilac (Syringa patula ‘Miss Kim’) and Mohican viburnum (Viburnum lantana ‘Mohican’)**

**Replacement plants suitable for use in Zone 5**

**Screening: Plants under 7 ft. tall**

- Compact burning bush (Euonymus alatus ‘Compactus’)
- Compact highbush cranberry (Viburnum trilobum ‘Compactum’ and V. opulus ‘Compactus’)
- Compact redtwig dogwood (Cornus sericea ‘Isanti’)
- Mohican viburnum (Viburnum lantana ‘Mohican’)
- Miss Kim lilac (Syringa patula ‘Miss Kim’)
- Dwarf Korean lilac (Syringa meyeri ‘Palibin’)

**Tall ornamental grasses**

- Porcupine grass (Miscanthus sinensis ‘Strictus’)
- Variegated maiden grass (Miscanthus sinensis ‘Variegatus’)
- Maiden grass (Miscanthus sinensis ‘Gracillimus’)
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(Syringa patula 'Miss Kim'), mature between 4 feet and 6 feet tall and stay more uniformly dense near the ground than old lilacs with their 'bare feet.'

* For areas where people need to see over the shrubs, several smaller species that stay around 4 feet tall are available, such as black chokeberry (Aronia melanocarpa) and Peking cotoneaster (Cotoneaster acutifolius). Several smaller cultivars also work: Sprite winterberry (Ilex verticillata 'Sprite' fruiting females with I. verticillata 'Jim Dandy' pollinating male planted at a ratio of 5:1) and Kelsey dwarf redtwig dogwood (Cornus sericea 'Kelsey') will grow to around 3 feet tall, while Gro-Low sumac (Rhus aromatica 'Gro-Low') and dwarf alpine currant (Ribes alpinum 'Green Mound') will stay at around 2 feet tall.

**Myths about evergreens**

Nothing dates a landscape like foundation plantings, especially those of evergreen shrubs. That concept was devised to hide the foundation on a building raised above grade to allow for a basement. Few commercial buildings are built with a foundation that needs hiding. In fact, many buildings are of an attractive enough architecture that a foundation planting hides some aspect of the architecture that is meant to be seen.

In the landscape's early years, the shrubs along the foundation may have been low enough to create a horizontal line near the ground, which may have complimented... cont. on page 62
The sheared junipers give this property a dated look, as well as hide the graceful architectural elements at the base of this building.

The architecture. Most soon outgrow the usefulness they had and need to be replaced. Sod may be the best replacement, but if the architecture demands a low line at the foundation, use dwarf cultivars. Over-sheared evergreen shrubs can be one of the worst offenders, making landscapes look old. Shearing results because few species are truly dwarf enough. The best option may be to replace outdated and overgrown evergreens. The idea that evergreen shrubs provide winter interest is a myth — the junipers turn a drab olive green and the yews turn a dark, almost black-green in winter. These unsightly evergreens add little value to a winter landscape.

One way to add genuine winter interest is with deciduous shrubs that have persistent berries, such as Sprite winterberry or compact highbush cranberry. Another idea is to use plants with colored branches, such as the redtwig dogwood cultivars or the bright green Japanese kerria (*Kerria japonica*).

Grasses do it all

With the advent of available ornamental grasses, we don't need evergreen shrubs for winter interest. Ornamental grasses...
Pedestrian visibility: Plants around 4 ft.

Shrub species
- Black chokeberry (Aronia melanocarpa)
- Alpine currant (Ribes alpinum)
- Peking cotoneaster (Cotoneaster acutifolia)
- Japanese kerria (Kerria japonica)

New dwarf shrub cultivars
- Sprite winterberry (Ilex verticillata 'Sprite', I. verticillata 'Jim Dandy')
- Kelsey dwarf redtwig dogwood (Cornus sericea 'Kelseyi')
- Anthony waterer spirea (Spirea x bumalda 'Anthony Waterer')

Ornamental grasses
- Northern sea oats (Chasmanthium latifolium)
- Switch grass (Panicum virgatum)
- Fountain grass (Pennisetum alopecuroides)
- Little bluestem (Andropogon scoparius)

Massing for horizontal lines or automobile visibility: Plants around 2 ft. tall

New dwarf shrub cultivars
- Gro-Low sumac (Rhus aromatica ‘Gro-Low’)
- Bronx forsythia (Forsythia viridissima ‘Bronxensis’)
- Dwarf alpine currant (Ribes alpinum ‘Green Mound’)

Ornamental grasses
- Dwarf fountain grass (Pennisetum alopecuroides ‘Hameln’)
- Prairie dropseed (Sporobolus heterolepis)

Most reliable perennials
- Happy returns and Stella d’Oro daylily (Hemerocallis ‘Happy Returns’ or H. ‘Stella d’Oro’)
- Siberian iris (Iris sibirica ‘Caesar’s Brother’)
- Autumn joy sedum (Sedum ‘Autumn Joy’)

Sometimes even a new planting is just wrong. These globe arborvitae will never grow together to form a contiguous flowing line and will never look right with this modern building. A planting of Gro-Low sumac would soften the angles and be an attractive complement to this building.

Get back the investment
Updating a property’s appearance is an investment that enhances the building’s modern look and increases the value of the entire property. Work with a designer trained in using contemporary plant materials. As the millennium approaches, a contemporary looking landscape to update corporate properties becomes increasingly important.

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