‘Outdoor living’ landscapes still a hot item with homeowners

BY RON HALL EDITOR-AT-LARGE

The good news for the landscape industry, despite the lack of new home construction, is homeowners are staying put and investing in their homes and properties. Many of them have money for improvements, and they want to use their properties for relaxation, intimate family gatherings and entertainment.

As a result, landscape companies that provided design/build services mostly for the new home market are shifting the focus of their construction activities to upgrades and renovations to existing residential landscapes.

Landscape professional David Schuster said property owners view their homes, including their yards, with an increased sense of appreciation and security ever since the terrorist attacks of 9/11. That trend is stronger yet because of the uncertainty in the current economy, said Schuster, speaking at the recent Green Industry Conference in Louisville.

Schuster and his wife, Heather, operate Terra-Firma Landscape, which they founded in Muskego, WI, 16 years ago. Their company specializes in residential design/build and commercial services-maintenance with annual sales approaching $2 million.

While the size of landscape upgrades and renovations are usually smaller in scale and generate less revenue than design/build projects for new homes, the demand for upgrades and renovations remains steady and offers contractors an opportunity to remain profitable and keep valuable employees busy, Schuster said.

“The most important thing is listening,” Schuster said.

The options are limited only by a contractor’s suggestions and a customer’s budget, he said. Among the features clients can consider are seat walls, fire pits, pond-less water features, spas, grills, refrigerators, built-in fireplaces, outdoor kitchens, LED lighting, mosquito misters, ceiling fans and radiant heaters, so property owners can enjoy their outdoor living even when conditions aren’t ideal.

“External living” landscapes still a hot item with homeowners

A grill is one outdoor living offering.

“I know what I want to say, but I don’t want it to be published! What I can say, on the record, is good will demonstrated in the past doesn’t necessarily translate into good will for the present … or for the future, for that matter. Everything changed this year. Good will and great work doesn’t seem to matter as much as it used to matter. Today, the bottom line is all that matters.”

— Joe Unger, President & CEO of The Lawn Ranger, Eden Prairie, MN
Briggs honored for saving energy

Briggs & Stratton continues its commitment to sustainability by being recognized by the state of Wisconsin and mobilizing a public-private partnership initiative.

At the Energy and Bottom Line Conference & Expo in Wisconsin Dells, WI, the company was presented with the prestigious Governor’s Award for Excellence in Energy Efficiency. With the help of Focus on Energy, Wisconsin’s energy efficiency and renewable energy initiative, Briggs & Stratton saved more than 5.5 million kWh of electricity annually; that’s enough energy to power 557 homes for one year. The company also was recognized for upgrading more than 5,000 light fixtures to high-efficiency models and installing more than 2,500 occupancy sensors, just to name a few.

“It was an honor to receive this award,” said Todd Teske, Briggs & Stratton President & COO. “Briggs & Stratton’s core value has always been to improve the lives of as many people as possible. We are committed to the principles of sustainability across the spectrum.”

At the Midwest Industrial Energy Efficiency Exchange in Detroit, Briggs & Stratton was one of eight Wisconsin companies to sign a pledge with the Department of Energy to reduce the energy intensity (energy use per unit of output) of their respective companies by 25 percent or more during the next 10 years. The Save Energy Now initiative aims to catalyze significant energy and carbon reductions in the industrial sector.

“Signing this pledge was a continuation of the way Briggs & Stratton has operated for the past century,” Teske said. “This pledge is just another example of our continued commitment.”

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BELIEVE IT OR NOT...

MUIs?

Operating a riding mower under the influence of alcohol is no joke. Nevertheless, some just don’t get it.

Waynesboro, VA, handyman Glenn Bowers has two riding mower-related driving under the influence (DUI) tickets. Bowers received his last DUI two years ago, heading home from a lawn job. Police pulled Bowers over after he ran through a stop on his Craftsman. Bowers failed a field sobriety test and blew a .024 (blood-alcohol content) in the breathalizer.

Danforth Ross, a Vassalboro, ME, resident was arrested this summer returning from a beer run — rather than a lawn job. Because his driver’s license was revoked already, Ross decided to ride his mower. Police pulled over the puttering dynamic duo shortly after they purchased two cases of clearly unneeded beer.
Texas A&M irrigation engineers test subsurface drip systems

By Robert Burns

“If we can make it work here, we can make it work everywhere,” said Dr. Guy Fipps, a Texas AgriLife Extension Service engineer in College Station.

Fipps wasn’t singing about show biz in New York. Instead, he was talking about subsurface drip irrigation for turf.

Initial tests of subsurface drip irrigation systems by Texas AgriLife Extension Service engineers show 12-inch spacing between the lines works best during a drought.

Fipps and Charles Swanson, AgriLife Extension associate–urban irrigation, have been testing subsurface drip systems near the Medical School on the Texas A&M University campus since July 2008.

Originally, the test was designed to test subsurface systems in the area’s heavy clay soils; but it turned out to be a test of the systems under drought conditions as well, Fipps said.

“We had 54 consecutive days without rain,” he said.

The drought made one thing clear: “During droughts, there’s no doubt you can’t go greater than 1-foot spacing,” Fipps said.

Subsurface drip irrigation is being promoted by irrigation companies as a potential water-saving alternative to conventional sprinkler systems.

“But the thing that’s not well understood is how durable the drip irrigation is,” Fipps said. “That is, how long it’ll last under a typical landscape installation.”

Several factors can affect the longevity of subsurface systems, including shrinkage and swelling of soils, and trash, particulates and minerals in the water.

Soil shrinkage and swelling can damage drip tape and fittings. Trash and other foreign matter in the lines can clog the small holes or emitters. Because the lines typically are buried 2 to 4 inches deep, repair can be expensive.

College Station was the ideal location for the test because the heavy clay soils shrink and expand as they dry out and become wet again, Fipps said. Also, the local water supply contains many particulates and minerals.

“In sandy soils, you won’t have shrinkage and expanding as you do with clay soils,” he said. “Also, many areas in Texas have better water quality. And we had a drought this summer, as everyone knows.”

Fipps and Swanson tested eight drip irrigation products at different spacings of the drip lines. They also compared four systems with and without an installed back-flush feature, which allows one end of the line to be open to purge any trash and particulates. Drip tape and drip tubing with varying spacing of the drip emitters are being evaluated.

As of late October, there have been no problems with emitters clogging or with tears in the tubing. However, it appears that during dry periods, if there’s inadequate irrigation, the soil will shrink and compact around the drip tubing, reducing and or preventing the free flow of water along the full length of the tubing, Fipps said.

“After installation, we had problems with the drip tubing being pulled out of the fittings connecting it to the supply pipelines, which could have been caused by any combination of soil shrinkage and swelling, fluctuations in pressure and improper installation,” he said.

Fipps and his associates hope to continue the study for at least five years.
Michael Garrett and Michael Knight joined Converted Organics Inc. as sales representatives for the U.S. Northeast and the U.S. Southeast. Before joining the company, Garrett was responsible for sales of organic fertilizers and soil conditioners to distributors and growers in California for Global Organics/Bioflora. Most recently, Knight was a district sales manager in the U.S. Southeast for The Toro Company and T-Systems International.

Schréder Lighting USA appointed Mark J. Domzalski to the newly created position of operations manager. Domzalski will direct the start-up and oversee the company’s manufacturing facility and product development department. The new manufacturing facility is scheduled to open in January 2010. Domzalski will oversee the daily operations of the manufacturing facility, which is designed to produce products for public, urban and industrial lighting applications domestically.

Mission Landscape Cos., promoted Paul Wong to vice president of Mission Landscape Architecture. Wong’s new responsibilities include managing the daily operations, developing business, creating alliances and assisting with the strategic direction of the company. Wong was one of the founders of Irvine, CA-based Landarcwest, an award-winning landscape architectural and land planning firm, which was acquired by the Mission Landscape Companies.

SipcamAdvan appointed Austin G. “Augie” Young to the specialty products sales team in the Northeast region of the country. In addition to handling the turf and ornamental product line for the company, Young also will handle the pest management line of the wholly owned subsidiary Sostram Corp.

Austin Outdoor recently added Business Development Manager JC Guillen to its Orlando district staff. Guillen’s responsibilities include working with clients and potential clients to realize their landscape needs and become a trusted partner as their landscape service provider. He will work closely with the company’s business development team to provide timely submissions of comprehensive landscape management proposals that are responsive to client and property needs.

Ruppert Landscape promoted Tommy Dimaio to project manager in the company’s North Carolina Landscape Construction Branch. Dimaio began with the company in 2006 in its Laytonsville office as a lead estimator. In his new position, for which he relocated to Charlotte, Dimaio is responsible for all aspects of the administration and installation of large or specialty landscape projects for a branch.

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