

LANDSCAPING DESIGN FOR EASE OF MAINTENANCE

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A. Define the problem

1. Considerations: 100 units or 2500 units, type of units-garden apartments, townhouses, condominium, or mid-rise, placement of units-in line or random, extensive planting areas or minimal space available, childrens play areas, swimming pools, tennis courts, trash containers, utility poles and stanchios, sprinkler systems, all must be taken into account. Planting-what to plant, where to plant, trees, shrubs, bedding areas, what not to plant. Sounds like a gigantic jigsaw puzzle? Not really.

2. The problem of landscaping for a 100 unit apartment complex and landscaping for a 2500 unit complex can be and should be approached with confidence and an easy mind, if the key words, "common sense" are utilized. If a little foresight is use, the word "problem" can be made to disappear. If the job is made too complicated and foresight is not used, the word "problem" will not only appear, but it will stay and stay and stay. It will remain long after you are gone and your memory will be cursed by countless grounds maintenance men who inherit your well meant, but ill-planned efforts.

B. Doing it the hard way

In a way, the factors needed to easily maintain a small 100 unit complex and a large 2500 unit complex are the same. For example, a resident might like you to plant a hedgerow from the building line to the sidewalk between his and the next door neighbor's entrance way. It would likely make him feel a little more private. To the man doing the mowing twice a week however, this would be a real nightmare to try to maneuver equipment around this obstacle. It would be a real nightmare to the company who has to budget for payment of this man's time, too. "Common sense" would dictate that no such planting be made either for a small or large project. Rather, such areas should be designed and planted so as to provide, where possible, sufficient space for wide-cutting equipment and for a minimum of turn requirement. Give your man the opportunity to get the most lawn cutting possible on a single pass. This gets your manager the most production for his maintenance dollar and just as important - it looks better.

C. Grading and irrigation

One of the primary requirements for landscaping for efficient, economical maintenance is to be lucky, lucky enough, that is, to be on hand during the building phase. It is the rare developer, indeed, who, in his hurry to turn over his project to management, will be sensitive to such niceties as grading and proper drainage.

Dips, slopes and pockets are all too frequently encountered and the landscaper must be ever alert to these perils. Standing water is great for kids to paddle in but a poor environment for growing anything but seaweed. Be lucky enough to make sure the grading contractor covers your planting area with soil that will grow grass, trees, shrubs and flowers. Layer upon layer of gravel and stones make for dull lawnmowers and sickly shrubs - neither of which is worth any special effort.

As for irrigation, your budget in a large complex will not stand up to a small army of hose carriers. An automatic sprinkler system has to be the answer and the results you get are in direct proportion to the money you spend for (1) the system, and (2) the expertise of the installer. To scimp on either will get you nothing but trouble. A good installer knows how to cover all the area - no brown spots. His "after-installation" service is important and vital. Don't hesitate to buy this service. In the long run you save lots of money and avoid a great many headaches.

D. Where to plant

Tree planting should be considered from the same "common sense" approach. Care should be taken to determine not only what type of tree is desired, keeping in mind growth characteristics (shape, flowering or non-flowering, rapid or slow growth, etc.), but also placement of the tree. A low-growing, flowering tree, planted too close to a fast-growing, heavily foliated, wide branching tree would be a mistake since the smaller tree would soon be overwhelmed. A cluster of flowering trees with similar growth characteristics would probably be wiser and much prettier.

Where there is limited space and turf is a requirement it would be a mistake to crowd a wide branching, fast growing tree into such an area. This would cause a problem in grass growing because of heavy shade and also tend to cover window areas in a short time. A preferred alternative might be a conical shaped evergreen or a planting of two or three of these strategically placed, in such an area.

Single or grouped flowering trees are usually preferred in relatively open areas for maximum effectiveness. They pose no problem to maintenance equipment. A tall-growing evergreen planted close by for contrast would meet ease of maintenance requirements and provide winter color and foliage.

E. What to plant

"What to plant" has as many answers as there are planting situations. A line of apartment buildings all facing the street and equally spaced would not lend itself to a rigid line of sameness in a single type tree. "Common sense" would require a variety of planting in order to break up the almost military appearance of the line; a clump of flowering trees tastefully located in front of one building; decorative hedge treatment of various heights, shapes and shades in front of the next; flower beds arranged at the corners and along the entry walks of another; a limited combination of all three in front of still another. All of these and an infinite variety of other treatments can be selected and placed so as to provide a minimum of hand work and a maximum of beauty.

F. What not to plant

The simple, uncomplicated approach is the "key". Garden-type apartment buildings are, in many instances, placed in a random pattern and not in severely disciplined lines. This calls for homey arrangements; walk bordering plantings; centrally located flower beds; a fountain, birch and evergreen combinations, and flowering shrubs.

It would be a mistake to place high growing trees and severely trimmed hedge-rows in such an area. Crowding too many plantings into this type of environment is a frequent mistake. This not only appears seriously overgrown in a few years but is extremely difficult and time consuming to maintain.

Planting thorny hedges at or near children's buildings will almost certainly lead to a serious confrontation between an injured child's parent and the management.

Avoid the temptation to introduce new and exotic plants. There are more than enough varieties in the standard, tried and true arrangements so that the "conversation piece" is unnecessary. Anyway, at best, the exotic is really an experiment and you know it. Care is usually not worth the expense of time and money so where is "common sense."

G. Communal areas, utilities equipment

Both of these usually have one thing in common - foot traffic - and special care must be given to these areas. Keeping in mind that recreation areas, such as swimming pools, tennis courts, etc., get heavy usage, plantings that are tough and withstand more than usual abuse are required. Placement of plantings must be done with such traffic in mind. Bordering use of wood chips and decorative stone should be extensive. Flower beds and shrubery are in no way a no-no. They are certainly just as useful in these areas as any other, but here again, placement is the key. Plantings away from the mainstream of foot traffic or behind low decorative fencing makes good sense. Lavish use of either beds or shrubs is discouraged since any abuse readily shows. A good lawn, protected from short cuts, is always attractive. A low growing tree or two will break the monotony.

Utilities gear: poles, meters and stanchions, are usually a nuisance for mowing equipment. Use of wood chips or stone around these necessary evils is recommended. This will minimize both banging the equipment into them as well as weed growth.

H. Conclusion

Remember that the key to success is keeping it simple. We must look ahead and plan to make sure that our irrigation is adequate and that grading is proper. When we plant we must remember to place materials so as to provide ease of operation for the maintenance crew. Minimum hand work then, should play a large part in determining where to plant and what to plant, and what not to plant. Frequently overlooked is the special planning required for communal areas and utilities equipment. If I can pack it all in one sentence I say, "use your common sense and, again, keep it simple".

In summary, we at Lake In The Woods, draw a great deal upon Michigan State University for assistance in our landscaping and maintenance program. They have always extended their know how in a most cooperative way and we have benefited greatly. I take this opportunity to say "thank you," and I recommend that all of you get to know them better.