



Planking designed to steer people from one area to another is the trademark of a Ridge Nurseries deck.

## DECK CONSTRUCTION LANDSCAPERS BUILD AS HOME PURCHASES



Piano-shaped deck is set on I-beams in a cement base. Doerler Landscaping used this method instead of the wooden joist arrangement due to insufficient depth.

High interest rates. Reaganomics. Tight money. While these terms often herald bad times for the new construction market, many landscape contractors have found their deck construction business on the upswing.

"About 70% of the deck jobs that we do are additions to previously built homes," said Bill Kourbage, Ridge Nurseries, Dix Hills, NY. Other contractors contacted by *Weeds Trees & Turf* agreed that the majority of their deck and wood structure work was in additions. High interest rates have dissuaded many home owners from new home purchases and steered them instead into improvement of their current home.

Landscape Architect Steve Ownby told *WTT*, "There is a lot of interest in decks. I find that people



Bracing of the bench to the deck is one of the many areas that lend itself to innovative and unique designs.

# MORE DECKS TUMBLE

By THOMAS PACIELLO

are doing a much better job of developing their residential environment." As in most construction jobs, communication between the design and contracting personnel is vital and many contractors are centralizing both tasks. Bill Doerler, Doerler Landscaping, Lawrenceville, NJ, employs four landscape architects who serve as salesmen, design consultants and on-the-job supervisors. "With much of our work, we try to design, build and maintain the entire entertainment area as opposed to simply building a deck," said Doerler.

One Doerler job that WTT visited illustrated this point. A greenhouse opened out onto a piano-shaped deck. The shallowness of the area in which the deck was built posed a problem. Doerler opted to set steel I-beams in a concrete base

to support the deck structure. Off of the deck is the pool and the rest of the entertainment area. Wood structures are present in many forms in this area. Railroad ties serve as hedge borders on two sides of the pool and on a third side are used as the base of two vegetable gardens. A wooden fence conceals the pool's pump and filter and a three-cell compost heap is constructed with removable wooden slats for easy usage as its volume changes. The pool was the only segment of the area that was subcontracted.

Indeed, many landscape contractors believe that the greater their capabilities, the greater their ability to suggest work that might be overlooked. "We design everything on the outside of the house, deck, pool, tennis courts, everything,"

said Kourbage. "Some of the work is subcontracted, but the key is for you to be the one person the homeowner deals with." Kourbage explained that the homeowner is much more comfortable with having one person to explain their ideas to and one person to be responsible for the work. "Being the key person enhances your reputation which in turn helps your business," added Kourbage, who does not advertise.

The majority of landscape contractors contacted by WTT did little or no advertising to promote their deck construction capabilities. "Advertising did not pay off for me," said William Beitz, William Beitz and Associates, Stillwater, OK. "My work basically comes from word-of-mouth." Many con-

*Continues on page 26*



**Bill Doerler**, Doerler Landscaping, Lawrenceville, NJ, employs four landscape architects who design "total entertainment areas."

tractors hold firm the belief that the best advertisement is an attractively-designed and well-constructed landscape. Professional contacts is one area that should not be overlooked. Professionals with different specialties are sometimes in the position to call on one another's services. Ownby (whose specialty is new construction design) has hooked up with Beitz (whose work is basically renovations) in the past when he needed remodel contracting. "Professionals need to consult each other on an ongoing basis to do the best possible job," said Beitz.

### Design details

On the subject of design details, landscape contractors varied widely. "Anyone can build a square deck," said Kourbage. "We never do the same job twice. Some of our designs are still in style ten years after they're built." The challenge of coming up with new and unique designs was one of the common threads among landscape contractors. The Kelly residence was a job designed by Ownby and contracted by Beitz. The home was a subdivision of a golf course and part of a semi-urban environment. "The back of the home opened out into a densely-wooded area," said Ownby. "You felt like you were walking out of a treehouse. There was also a very steep grade." Ownby said that the challenge was to preserve the naturalness of the

site. He also had to solve the problem of the grade. The "ground" floor of the front of the house was actually the second floor of the rear of the house. Ownby designed two levels of decks. The upper level wooden deck leads you down to the lower deck which is comprised of a pool bordered by redwood decking on one side and stone decking on the other. A curved, stone staircase leads into the pool and stone tree basins were constructed to integrate the wooded environment with the deck. Beitz subcontracted both the pool and masonry work.

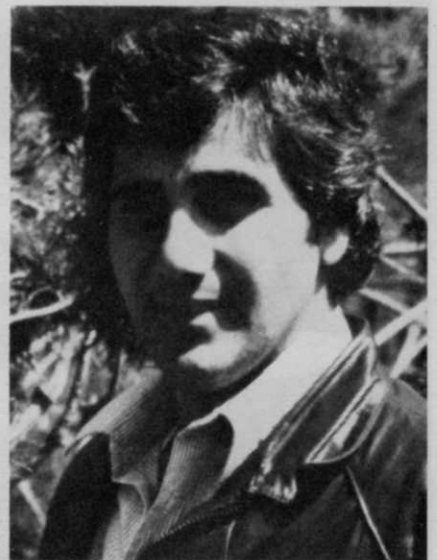
### Tiering

Ridge Nurseries tries to avoid stairs whenever possible and use tiering instead. "With tiers you can get different uses out of the same structure," said Kourbage. "What serves as a bench on one level can serve as a step to another and replace the need for stairs." Another Kourbage trademark is sophisticated planking. Kourbage explained that by angling planking you can steer people into various sections of the entertainment area. This is a subtle technique that is particularly effective when tiers (instead of stairs) are employed.

The types of materials used and how they are employed varied from region to region. Landscape contractors in some areas found redwood to be prohibitively expensive. Some contractors told WTT that, especially for visible areas, redwood was worth the expense. "It's practically maintenance-free and stands the test of time," said one northeastern contractor. More contractors are also opting for concrete footings instead of railroad ties. "With concrete footings we feel we give the structure a sense of permanence," said Kourbage. "With railroad ties you're never sure if they'll settle or erode."

### Building Codes

The majority of contractors told WTT that they do their work according to current building codes. "The only time we have to comply with building codes is when we're putting up an overhead structure or the work involves utility lines," said Beitz. Taking it one step further, one New York contractor said, "We do all our work according to code because oftentimes



**Bill Kourbage**, Ridge Nurseries, Dix Hills, NY, (whose business is concentrated in Long Island's "Gold Coast") averages close to 15 deck jobs a year.

homeowners will call us years after we have completed a job and say they want to sell the house and does the work that we performed meet the building permit standards."

While earth-moving equipment is occasionally used, particularly when steep grades are involved, deck construction typically requires few elaborate tools. Most contractors use standard carpentry tools, some power tools (saws, drills) and an auger. A few contractors commented on realizing how dependent they have become on power tools when they were forced to use standard tools on decks where there were no electrical hook-ups.

While the economy has hurt some construction, many landscape contractors are moving full speed ahead with their deck construction. The average contractor surveyed by WTT planned to build 10-15 decks per year costing \$20,000 per unit. That price tag is misleading though, taking into account \$40,000 jobs in suburban New York and \$5,000 jobs in rural Oklahoma.

"During the gasoline crisis in the early 1970's people stayed home, did less travelling and subsequently wanted a 'total environment' on their property," said Kourbage. "That is when our deck business started to pick up and I see the same thing happening again." A lot of landscape contractors who do deck construction hope he is right.

**WTT**