



INSTANT EFFECT

Today's landscapers know that clients can't afford to wait. The results are much more mature landscapes in much shorter time periods.

Traditionally, landscaping is used to decorate and direct.

It highlights your strengths, hides your weaknesses, and indicates where to look and walk.

But recently it has taken on a new role: helping lease space at new office complexes and industrial parks.

In the past, the star at a new development was the bright new building. The trees came later. Developers landscaped only minimally, planting small trees, hoping that in 20 years the trees would be bigger and fuller, thus hiding the aging building.

Today, that's not the case. "Trends in commercial landscaping have changed dramatically in the last 10 to 15 years," says Walter Flowers, president of Moon/Rickert Nurseries in Yardley, Pa.

"Until recently, the main consideration for landscaping was the zoning requirement, what you had to do to get site plan approval. Today, to put it in a nutshell, developers are spending more money on larger specimens to create an instant effect earlier in the construction of a project," he says.

An established look

Flowers says developers want potential tenants to "feel" that a new building has been there for a while.

"Going in up front with landscaping creates that impression. Then leasing agents don't have to rely only on renderings showing



Above and below left, the landscaping is showcased at The Prudential's Freedom Business Center in Valley Forge, Pa.

projected landscaping. It's an immediate amenity. And if the site is aesthetically pleasing, it's much easier to sell the package," he says.

Flowers cited Prudential's Freedom Business Center in Valley Forge, Pa., as an example of the new trends.

Long before the steel went up, the site was graded, topsoil was spread, grass was planted, and the parking lot, signage, and marketing trailer were landscaped.

"When a potential tenant came to the site, he saw attractive landscaping from the highway to the parking lot to the marketing center and back again," says Flowers.

"Hopefully his impression was that if Prudential is taking care of the outside, they probably will take care of the inside as well," he adds.

Ken Koldziej, Rickert vice-president of sales, says competition has caused the landscaping change. "The better developers are spending money because they're trying to attract better tenants in return," he says.

"Some clients are spending \$1.50 a square foot just for landscaping alone. Some will spend more than that on small projects," says Koldziej.

"Suppose you had \$10 million in buildings. Even with a 10 percent interest rate, that's \$85,000 a month it costs to have empty square footage sitting there. So if landscaping helps to rent the space, it's worth the investment," he says.

An expected amenity?

But there's a flip side to the investment issue. Some say quality landscaping is becoming such an expected amenity that it's difficult to know if you're getting a return.

"As far as working out the dollars and cents, it's very hard to pinpoint," said Kim Sermersheim, investment manager for The Prudential Realty Group and project manager for Freedom Business Center.

"You look at landscaping from a cost point of view but you also look at what the landscaping contributes to the quality of the site.

"As we come into work along the highways, we're bombarded with various forms of visual pollution," Sermersheim continues. "Road signs, parking lots, and electrical and mechanical equipment, for example, all detract from an attractive and comfortable office complex."

Sermersheim adds that landscaping can transform these unsightly areas and create a natural and pleasing environment.

Sermersheim has no qualms about calling Freedom Business Center "extensively landscaped."

"Most times it refers to quantity, not quality. When we use the term, it refers to both. The Prudential philosophy is to create quality work environments that people will appreciate on conscious and subconscious levels. That's where you get returns on your investments: by tenant satisfaction, lease longevity, and a positive image as a developer who cares," he says.

At Freedom Business Center, situated on 24 acres, the landscaping was purposely blended with the existing campus.

"The design goal was to introduce four new buildings to a site bordered by well-landscaped properties and Valley Forge National Park," says Koldziej.

"Prudential added 400 trees to the site and accented it by adding berming and mounding, which gives the site curves and angles and makes it appear softer visually and physically. Now the site gently rolls right into the park," he says.

A softer look

Koldziej notes several techniques that give a site texture and color to make the buildings appear to be more than steel and concrete.

Among them:

- Small, round trees or shrubs at corners to soften visual lines,
- Winding paths from the parking lots to the buildings to create a relaxing mood,
- A variety of trees to give visual relief.

Flowers tells an interesting story of how a different tree didn't work.

"We had a client who spent \$150,000 to landscape a fairly small site. We put some trees in the entrance that were outstanding specimens but had strange, twisting shapes.

"The chairman of the board had us remove them and put in evergreens. His rationale was that crooked trees projected a crooked image. Evergreens, on the other hand, were straight and trim, corporate and structured.

"That's how far it's gone. Even CEOs are concerned with how landscaping projects an image," says Flowers.

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