

Installing landscape timbers: a lucrative marketing opportunity

You can charge for 'pieces of art' rather than just landscape enhancements with this type of hardscaping.

by James E. Guyette
Contributing Editor

■ Each year an estimated one billion board feet of treated wood products are installed in American landscapes, and business owners nationwide are finding that splintering off into this type of service can build up the bottom line.

But no matter how tempting timber may be, you need to be in touch with the technical skills required before taking saw in hand. An improperly installed project can go against the grain of any local building inspector—and create ill will among clients, too.

Design developments by the makers of concrete block products has some consumers opting instead for stonework, but "wood still has that mystique about it; it's still popular," reports Dan Bywalec, president of D&B Landscaping Inc., Detroit, Mich.

D&B has been installing wooden landscape projects for about 18 years, and Bywalec believes that some property owners may balk at wood because of previous bouts with inferior products.

"People are apprehensive because they might have had timbers and they rotted," he explains. "People were disillusioned with the product, and it's not so much the wood but who was doing the treating." Improperly treated wood simply will not hold up.

Helpful hints—Other suggestions:

- **Get the right wood** for your region of the country.
- **Hang on to paperwork** when purchasing wood, "just in case something's rotten on down the road," says Bywalec. "You always have to keep the records on those timber jobs because some suppliers will say, 'Those aren't our timbers,'" if there's a quality control problem.
- **Know your supplier.**
- **Don't skimp on quality.**



There's no doubt about it: wood has a certain 'mystique' about it, but it takes design sense to build an appealing wood landscape structure.

• **Buy the proper product for the job at hand**, advises Fred Sydow of the Sydow Construction Co., based outside of Jacksonville, Fla. "Anything that goes into the ground needs a higher grade of treatment," says Sydow, whose company builds gazebos, fancy stairways, waterfalls, planters and retaining walls.

• **Call for help** at the slightest hint of any problem with a construction project, Sydow emphasizes. Good carpentry skills and design talents are a requirement, and it's simply not worth it to wing it, he notes.

• **Work with licensed landscape architects** at the design stage, and then follow the plans correctly in the building stage, Bywalec urges. "You have someone to stand next to you as long as you put it in the way he (or she) drew it."

When building a retaining wall, for example, water runoff patterns must be addressed and you need to guard against future erosion. "If you're building a timber retainer

wall, it's very important that you have the proper drainage." The wall should be backed with a suitable fabric material and it should have a T-shaped "deadman" going back at least four to six feet inside the area being retained. "If you don't have a 'deadman' in there the wall will fall over," Bywalec warns.

• **Be creative.** With the competition from concrete pavers and their spiffy design innovations, wooden projects need to have some bark to them, so-to-speak. "It's going to take some creativeness to build a (wood) wall and make it attractive in the 1990s," Bywalec observes.

"If you have to retain soil, why not make it something to look at?" challenges Kim Kocher, president of Stonewater Landscapes, Oakland, Calif. "It's an artistic outlet for me, but I also make it very functional," she explains, adding that she frequently consults with other professionals to ensure that everything is acceptable. "I get talked out of

continued on page 20

TIMBERS from page 18

a lot," she reveals. "We do everything to code and standard construction practices."

Kocher's work tends to be at the high end of the design spectrum, and among her specialties is constructing what she calls "landscape rooms." These are essentially walls in a yard that resemble the walls of a house. They may have French doors or glass window panes that reflect



the colors of plant materials. In drought-stricken California she'll also install irrigation heads that create the illusion of rain outside the "window" while watering the flowers and adding an element of sound to the piece. "Every water feature we do is water tight—there's not a wasted drop of water," she stresses.

The designs are considered works of art, rather than fences, Kocher explains. "The free-standing landscape rooms serve as an alternative to fence heights and allow homeowners to achieve as much privacy as they desire without limitations to city fence



Kim Kocher, here with her father, Joe, is president of Oakland, California's Stonewater Landscapes. The company offers customers a variety of wood structures for high-end landscapes, as shown in the work-in-progress at left.



to \$22 to \$28. "I give my customers the options from high end to low end—it's just like buying a car," says Bywalec, adding also that "you have to look at it from

an artistic point of view."

codes." The works are often set off by including objects of "urban ore," which is what Kocher calls old-fashioned cast-off items such as washtubs, old pots and the like.

Pricing—These landscape room projects can cost a homeowner \$5,000 to \$11,000. In Detroit, a wooden retaining wall project can be priced \$12 to \$15 a face foot. A standard stonework front can be \$18 to \$20 a face foot, with fancier designs upping the price

The best selling point for wood work tends to be word-of-mouth advertising from satisfied customers. Sydow points out that he advertises in the Yellow Pages, makes his presence known to landscape managers, and he presents a book of photographs when pitching potential customers. Says Sydow: "They usually see what I've built or they see my portfolio."

Using wood in the landscape: tips

by Brian Lotz

■ Here are some important considerations when choosing wood for landscape/golf course projects:

□ Natural hardwoods make excellent bridges (pedestrian and vehicular), walkways, shelters, docks, piers, terraces, site furniture, light and sign posts, and retaining/noise abatement walls.

□ Use the right tree/wood species for the job. For instance, 12- by 110-foot clear span through truss bridge in the City of Batavia, N.Y. used "Ekki" for structural members because of its strength and availability in large sectional sizes. "Jarrah" was selected for

the rails, ballisters, decking and light fixtures for its superior aesthetic appearance and stability.

□ Use kiln-dried wood where you need a stable material. Kiln-drying stabilizes wood to a moisture content equal to the air which surrounds it. In many cases, no maintenance or preservative need be used.

□ Contact natural hardwood representatives before writing specifications for bid or to allow alternative bids. Pointing out environmental concerns will enhance the ability of bidders to properly respond in term of economics and suitability to the job.

□ Use natural wood sound barriers

where golf courses or landscapes are exposed to high vehicular traffic.

□ Knowledge of installation and maturation characteristics is also important. For instance, Ekki is imported only in a fresh-cut stage and has a moisture content of 35-40 percent. When used for smaller sectional areas, it is prone to movement from shrinking, twisting and warping. Therefore, steel dowels must be used for fastening.

—The author is director for Timer Holdings/Timbatech in Milwaukee. He has spent years providing his expertise to project managers.