# Computer imaging
## *lets you be picture perfect!*

*Landscape imaging gives residential customers a chance to "see" their landscapes before they're installed.*

By RON HALL/ Managing Editor

Computer imaging for landscape designers is changing the way contractors attract residential customers. The proponents of landscape imaging claim that it

▶ speeds the design process,
▶ allows rapid design changes,
▶ gives clients more opportunity to participate in the design process,
▶ increases the contractor's chances of selling the job.

"It doesn't come down to, purely, how do we create better designs," says Jim Karo, president of Visual Impact Corp., Hopatcong, NJ. "It really comes down to better communications. How to better deliver a concept to your customers, have them understand it, agree with you and move forward. And in less time."

Traditionally, landscape designers have relied on pen and pencil drawings to help customers and potential customers visualize the landscapes that the contractor is proposing. Some contractors now produce these site plans with their computers. The overhead site plan is a view from above the property. It shows representations of structures such as homes and outbuildings, features such as creeks or hills, and any proposed landscape improvements such as patios, decks, pools, trees and ornamentals. These are all drawn to scale, sometimes lovingly so.

These drawings serve several purposes, including the location and size of landscape features and plants. They can serve as a working plan for installers. The designer also counts on the site plant to help sell the project to the client.

But, as Karo points out—"Your friends don't come to your house in helicopters. It doesn't matter what your landscape look like from up there. It matters what it looks like from the curb."

He says that customers are more likely to respond favorably to a more realistic view of their proposed landscape. This is where computer imaging is strongest. Here, basically, is how it works. Like everything else, familiarity with the program speeds the process.

The "designer" takes a photograph of a client's, and scans the photograph onto a computer. Obviously, the better the quality of the photograph, the better the computer image. For most purposes, a small, automatic-exposure, self-focusing, 35 mm camera will do just fine. Or, the designer can use a digital camera and immediately download the image. If he or she has a laptop they can do this in the cab of their truck, or in a client's living room. For now anyway, the image from a digital camera is



The 'before and after' capability of selling with imaging programs makes them just the thing for the faster-paced lives that many people seem to live.

not as sharp as a photograph, but the price of digital cameras keeps falling and the quality gap is narrowing too.

Once they've scanned the photo of the house into the computer, they go to the imaging software's library and retrieve whatever features (pavers, retaining walls, etc.) or plant material. They "layer" and size these landscape features onto on the image of the house and surrounding property. These libraries offer several thousand plant choices, just about anything that's commercially available.

"What you want to create is an image that looks so realistic that you can't tell that it's an image," says Karo. "You want to wow the customer. The customer has to see your idea. The customer has to understand it."

That's why most customers prefer to see a photo realistic image of what their landscape is going to become rather than an overhead site plan. Even so, he acknowledges, the site plan is valuable too, particularly for job costing and also to give

the installation crew a plan to work from.

"It also makes a lot of sense to do it on a computer because you can make your



The question to pose to potential customers when showing them this comparison might be, Would you rather live in the 'before' house or the 'after' house?

moves and changes a lot quicker," he says. More and more landscape companies are offering the computer-generated image, then putting together more detailed plans if the job looks like a "go".

Landscape imaging has caught the eye of other industries, says Karo. For example, some real estate developers are using it to show prospective homeowners what their property could look like with a professional landscape. Or, even, to sell the landscape as part of the home package.

Nurseries and garden centers are beginning to use it to increase plant sales. One growing trend is to offer free design services with, say, a certain amount in plant sales to a client.

"This is a tool, just like all the other tools you have in your business. It really comes down to, how can it help my business? How can it make me more effective? How can it separate me from everybody else out there?," says Karo.

"And, how can it help me sell the job that much quicker?" □

# Getting started is getting easier

Computerization is a necessity for today's grounds manager or landscape company. Computers save labor and time when it comes to performing routine, repetitive tasks. And, increasingly, they're being used as a creative tool.

The good news for landscape companies is that the price of personal computers and software keeps dropping, and the tasks that they can perform—including landscape design—keeps increasing.

Here, in a nutshell, is what you'll need to create landscape designs with imaging, according to Jim Karo, president of Visual Impact Corp., maker of Computer Landscape Design Software:

▶ a personal computer with, at least, a Pentium chip and 16 meg. Most new computers have 32 meg. The software is designed to be used with Windows '95, and will be compatible with the to-be-introduced Windows '98.

▶ a monitor. Buy the largest one you can afford.

▶ a scanner. You should be able to find one that will scan at 300 dpi for under $300.

▶ a color printer. Again, you can buy an acceptable one for under $300.

▶ a 33 mm camera to take photographs of client's properties. The small, automatic-exposure, self-focusing models costing $120-$300 will work fine.

▶ A Zip drive to back up your designs after they've created on your computer.

▶ imaging software from a reputable company. And one that continues to offer new products, upgrades, and prompt technical support.

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