

# Make lawn maintenance low maintenance

## Common sense ideas for selecting and siting trees and plants for affordable long-term beauty

BY RALPH NICOLosi, PH.D.

**T**oo often, landscape architects and designers create landscapes with little, if any, regard as to how much it will cost to maintain them. Their designs can become so bogged in aesthetics, harmony, composition and the interrelationship of spaces that they fail to recognize the costs associated with property upkeep.

With the exception of payroll and taxes, grounds maintenance is one of the most costly operating expenses property and facility managers face. Consequently, landscape architects and designers have an obligation to deliver a finished product to their clients that reflects serious consideration of long-term maintenance and associated costs.

### Understanding consequences

A commercial landscape design should do the following:

- Maximize a property's overall appearance, drive-by and curb appeal.
- Control current and future landscape and grounds care costs and expenses.
- Protect and enhance the client's landscape investment through careful plant selection and placement.

As a result, a successful landscape architect or designer knows how to do more than just draw pretty shapes. He or she understands every consequence of every com-



Select street trees that can survive limited space, reflected heat and — in the North — de-icing products.

ponent of a proposed landscape before it's installed, when it's installed and 10 years after it's been installed.

### Pick the right plants

Proper plant selection and placement is a cornerstone of good design. Select and arrange species and cultivars suited for their purpose, such as providing screens, accents or shade. Choose and site them with minimum maintenance as one of the primary considerations.

**Pest resistance:** Regardless of their aes-

thetic value or intended use, avoid plants that are even marginally susceptible to pests. Why increase the potential for regular chemical control? It's environmentally unsound and expensive. For example, while crabapple trees are attractive ornamentals, many of the cultivars still in the trade are susceptible to apple scab, which requires regular fungicide applications.

**Culture:** Match plants with their site conditions. Urban settings present a harsh environment for trees and shrubs. Usually,

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How large will this tree become as it matures? What is its purpose? These are vital considerations for a commercial site like this one.

the soils are compacted, heat reflects from parking lots and sidewalks, and the plantings are exposed to urban pollution such as de-icing agents. Flowering dogwoods thrive on country hillsides but could never tolerate these tough urban conditions and should be avoided.

Select plants with few cultural or physical maintenance requirements both generally and within the specific context of the design. It's not wise to select plants that require regular pruning or ornamentals that are weak-wooded or produce a lot of fruit. Also reconsider using plants that require specific soil conditions.

Fast-growing shrubs such as pyracantha or forsythia require regular pruning. Sweetgum trees annually produce thousands of 1-in. diameter spiny fruits that are messy, unsightly and difficult to clean up. Plants that require acidic soils such as rhododendrons and river birches need costly remedial soil amendments to ensure their survival when they're planted in the wrong site. Herbaceous perennials were erroneously marketed years ago

as low-maintenance plantings, but they should be used with discretion as well.

**Plant placement:** Be aware of trees and shrubs' mature sizes in relation to their proximity to other landscape elements to avoid creating additional regular maintenance.

Select plants with few cultural or physical maintenance requirements both generally and within the specific context of the design.

Don't plant trees such as pin oaks that have pendulous lower branches next to walkways, streets or parking lots where those branches could interfere with traffic. Likewise, fast-growing, spreading shrubs such

as burning bush and dense yews shouldn't be sited within confined areas.

**Variety:** In addition to providing seasonal color and textural interest, a variety of plant species will reduce the likelihood of pest problems and subsequent maintenance costs. Monoculture plantings (e.g. the use of one species of shade tree) are more susceptible to insect and disease infestations than mixed species plantings. Webworm infestations on Honeylocust trees, for example, can defoliate individual trees and spread rapidly to others throughout a landscape. Furthermore, because monoculture plantings are uniform in texture, size and general appearance, even minor insect or disease damage is more noticeable than if it occurred in a diverse planting.

#### Location, location, location

The location of elements in a landscape influences its long-term maintenance needs nearly as much as the elements themselves. Locate sidewalks, for example, according to "desire lines," the preferred convenient

routes people choose when walking from one place to another. If sidewalks aren't placed properly, people will damage lawns and shrubs by establishing shortcut paths.

Don't plant beds, trees and other landscape elements too close to one another or to a lawn border's edge. These areas become too difficult to mow efficiently. Configure bed lines and other defining elements in a landscape to provide easy access and maximum maneuverability for mowers and other maintenance equipment.



Maintenance will be easy here.



Small plants can grow into large plants. Site them properly.

#### Tackling trees

**Street trees:** Tree lawns (the areas between sidewalks and streets) are difficult environments for most trees because:

- limited space restricts root growth,

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- adjacent surfaces of sidewalk and street reflect intense heat, and

- regular use of salt or other de-icing agents in the north creates toxic soil salinity levels.

That's why it's critical to specify the most urban-tolerant species for street tree plantings.

Carefully consider size (height and breadth) and branching habits when specifying trees for tree lawns. Trees that will grow tall shouldn't be placed where there are existing or planned overhead utility lines. Be careful of the types of trees you site at properties' entrances and exits. They shouldn't interfere with pedestrian or vehicular traffic, or obscure the vision of motorists and pedestrians entering or exiting a property. In these areas, use trees with fastigate or upright growth habits as opposed to



**These low-growing evergreens don't block the view in this parking lot, and mulch allows the area to be maintained without mowing. However, plants so close to the road can suffer damage from de-icing spray.**

those with broad and full branching patterns.

Trees that tend to heave sidewalks (river birch, Norway maple, honeylocust) should never be used.

**Parking lot plantings:** Just as with street tree plantings, trees and shrubs specified for

parking lot islands and borders must be urban tolerant. They, too, are subjected to the dangers of snow piling, reflected heat and limited planting areas.

Plant trees with upright-growing branches to avoid interfering with traffic and obscuring pedestrian and motorist visibility. Similarly, shrubs used in parking lot islands or separation islands should be dwarf-growing with a maximum size of three feet at maturity.

**Building and foundation plantings:** No landscape element **This small island creates a maintenance problem because of the small area of turfgrass that needs regular tending and mowing.**

ments should be positioned where they will block lighting or create recessed spaces that could potentially compromise security and safety. Walkways, patios and other communal areas should be designed and planted so they remain unobstructed and open. Don't select trees or plants that will block windows at any stage of growth and maturity.

To minimize future maintenance, building plantings should be spaced as follows:

- Medium-sized shrubs (to six feet at maturity) should be sited no closer than four feet to buildings.

- Small shrubs (to three feet at maturity) no closer than two feet.

- Shade trees (those ex-





Above: (Top) Trees' mature height should be considered when overhead features like power lines are involved. (Bottom) Access to meters is important, but adequate screening should be offered to the passerby.

ceeding 45 feet in height at maturity) no closer than 20 feet.

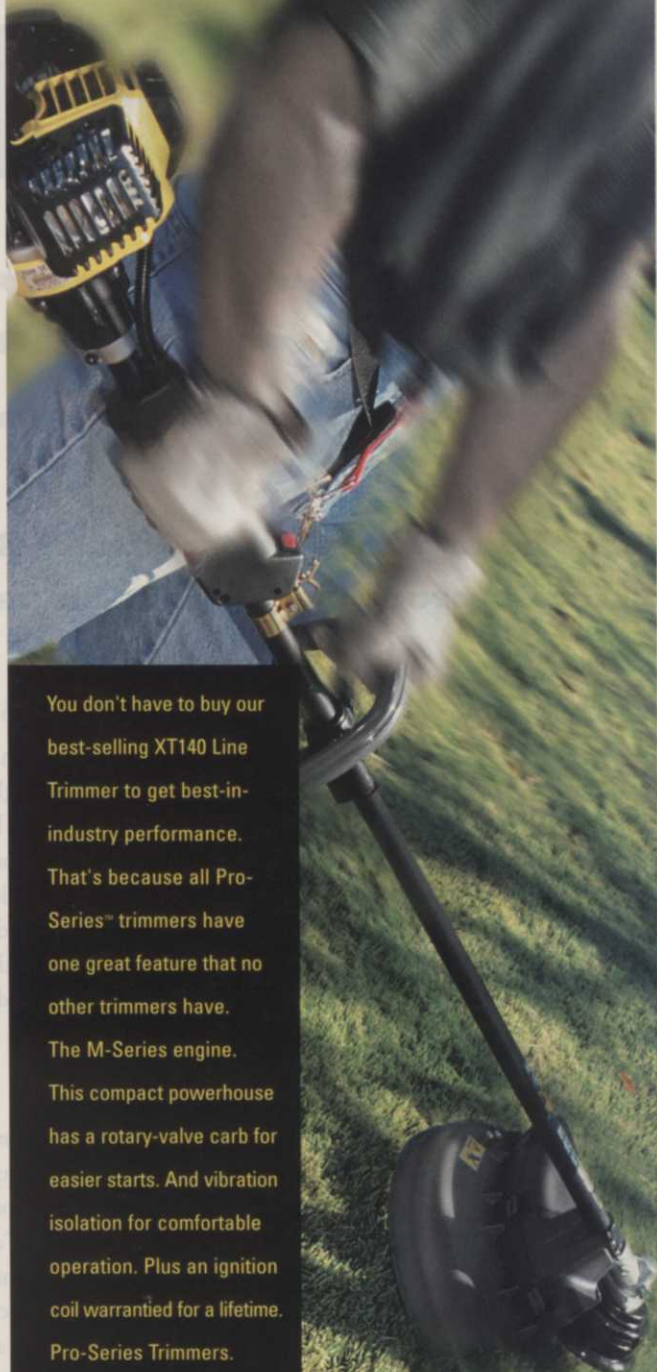
- Ornamental trees no closer than 12 feet to buildings.

While much of this has to do with common sense, we sometimes don't see it exhibited in some of the ill-conceived designs in newly constructed commercial developments. We need to restore low maintenance to landscape design and make it one of the most important criteria by which it's judged. We need to restore common sense in landscape design. **LM**

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