



# Hardline on hardscape

BY VICKY POULSEN

## Three landscape company managers talk about the risks and rewards of installing hardscaping

**H**ardscaping done right can be a landscape professional's signature mark, especially in high-end residential and commercial markets where price isn't a huge factor. Those contractors who can "deliver the goods" at the price promised are a hot commodity.

Whether it be a simple brick-edge design to showcase a flowerbed or an elaborate, natural-looking stone wall nestled around a koi-filled pond, it seems like everyone these days wants to add a feature to their outdoor space. Consumers are hungry for products and materials similar to the ones they see on HGTV (Home and Garden Television). The astute contractor will find a way to feed their insatiable appetite with appealing designs that will make their homes stand out.

Unlike plant installations, hardscapes carry huge financial risks. Retaining walls that fail and pavers that crack cost contrac-

▲ PHOTO COURTESY YARDMASTER, INC.

tors thousands of dollars to redo. Whether the installer or the manufacturer is to blame, the results can be disastrous to a contractor's reputation.

The rewards for properly installed hardscaping are big, though. To get an idea of how others have succeeded in this field, we asked three contractors from across the country to lay out their blueprints for hardscape project success. Here's what they had to say:

### LARGE CONTRACTOR

**Name:** Kurt Kluznik, CCLP

**Title:** President

**Company:** Yardmaster, Inc.

**Location:** Painesville, OH

**2000 revenues:** \$9 million

**Business mix:** 50% residential, 50% commercial

**Employees:** 250

**Company profile:** Started business in 1971.

Has three locations in Cleveland area, one in Columbus and another in Detroit. Operates 50 to 60 crews of up to six members



a team, depending on the job. More than half of the design/build services the company provides are devoted to hardscapes (i.e. water features, walls, patios, walks, arbors, fences, gazebos, pools, etc.).

**Product picks:** "We buy a lot of stone from manufacturers and from quarries in Ohio and Pennsylvania. We also use a lot of the Unilock products." Wood, liners, filters, pumps, outdoor lighting and irrigation supplies also top their product list.

**Design stage:** "We have landscape architects on staff who do our design work. Through their interview process with our clients, we get a feel for what our clients like and what will work well with the site. We try to pick up colors and textures that already exist on the site and match those styles or properties with the products we'll be using. I think more people are being exposed to creative and functional landscape design, and that exposure is driving the market.

"We also have a studio loaded with photos portraying samples of our work and pallets of materials and styles, so when customers visit they actually pull a photo or material from our display board and find exactly what suits their tastes. It also exposes clients to other hardscape possibilities they weren't looking for when they first came in."

**Profit tips:** "We get our budget clues from the types of homes our customers own. We also have an excellent estimating process that develops the most cost-effective budget for each project."

**Extra help:** "We subcontract some of our work (even some design work) to meet the 'seasonability' or demands at the time. We'll also use subs who worked for us at one time but now have their own design or construction businesses."

**Words of wisdom:** "Hardscaping is a lot of fun because it allows you to get creative. However, there are lots of risks involved. If you build a wall and it falls, or if a patio doesn't drain right and you have to redo it, it can cost you \$100,000. It takes a lot of experience. Plus, there's a lot of non-billable time that's involved before you set foot on the site. If you don't estimate that time, it can be a nightmare."

## MEDIUM CONTRACTOR

**Name:** Mike Wheat

**Title:** Owner

**Company:** Wheat's Lawn & Custom Landscape

**Location:** Vienna, VA

**2000 revenues:** \$6.7 million

**Business mix:** Mostly residential

**Employees:** 80 off-season/90 peak season

**Company profile:** Started in 1978, the company serves high-end residential ac-



counts. Service mix includes 30% design/build, 55% maintenance and 15% turf and tree/shrub care. Of design/build services, 25% is de-

voted to hardscape. Also employs a mason. Specific hardscape services include pavers, retaining walls, benches, arbors and gazebos. Operates two- to three-man crews; number of crews depends on the job.

**Product picks:** "We look for quality products with great manufacturer and dealer support. That's critical to us."

**Design stage:** "We have landscape architects and designers on staff."

**Profit tips:** "We interview our clients to learn what their wants and needs are, and then we present various options to them based on what they tell us. We're in a high-income area, so price really isn't an issue."

**Extra help:** "We do everything in-house. We subcontract some electrical work."

**Words of wisdom:** "Be selective with clients, and make sure you price accurately. We're not in it to make a quick buck. We're in it for the long-term relationship with our customer. Our customer service is second-to-none, and that's key to our success."

## SMALL CONTRACTOR

**Name:** Michael Becker

**Title:** Co-owner

**Company:** Estate Gardeners, Inc.

**Location:** Omaha, NE

**2000 revenues:** \$470,000

**Business mix:** Mostly residential

**Employees:** 15

**Company profile:** Estate Gardeners, Inc. was established in 1993. Landscape design/build installation work amounts to 80% of the services they provide, with the remaining 20% devoted to garden maintenance. Operates three-person crews devoted to both installation and maintenance. "In our area, we have the highest percentage per capita of millionaires. We have one customer who hired us to install

two 10,000 sq. ft. lakes, the cost of which will equal our total sales of last year."

**Product picks:** "When purchasing products for our hardscape projects, I'm looking for quality and appearance. I can't use a highly durable product if it doesn't look good. Looks and durability have to go hand-in-hand. If I'm doing segmental concrete retaining walls, I want blocks I can break for corners. With pavers, I'm looking for a variety of colors and shapes. Unfortunately, I think these man-made walls lack the soul of natural products, but they're effective for what they're made to do. You can't

beat these walls when it comes to strength. And we do incorporate natural materials such as moss rock boulders and rubble stones when we can."

**Design stage:** "We do our own landscape designs with the help of a computer software program. We also charge for our landscape designs, and make that clear when we meet with clients. At the end of the design process, the customer can keep the design and do what they want with it."

**Profit tips:** "Before we plan designs for customers, we want to know their budget

"Educate yourself about the materials and processes of installing them properly by talking with your suppliers. Never cut corners. Follow the manufacturers' suggestions.

constraints and ultimate goals for the entire site. From there, we develop a master plan and begin to inventory their favorite colors, garden preference such as an Italian or French design, and lifestyle needs. Communication is key to our success. We listen to our customers as well as educate them. Many times, they've never worked with a design/build firm and don't know what to expect. They want a nice garden, but they don't know how it comes together."

**Extra help:** "A good network of subcontractors is key in keeping ahead of a project. However, any communications go through us first. We're the ones our customers go to if they have a question or concern. This gives us control over the entire project."

**Words of wisdom:** "Educate yourself about the materials and processes of installing them properly by talking with your suppliers. Never cut corners. Follow the manufacturers' suggestions. Like your lawn chemicals, always read the labels first. Unlike landscape work, hardscape work can cost you thousands of dollars if something goes wrong." **LM**



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