



Champagne landscapes

on beer budgets

**Give your
customers the
best possible
landscapes at
the least
possible cost**

BY GEORGE WITTERSCHEIN/
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

Turning beer into champagne is the kind of miracle landscape contractors are frequently asked to perform. Many clients have high expectations but limited budgets. How do you cope?

Two experienced contractors who have been successful with this situation agreed to share their experiences and recommendations on making clients happy.

Get close to the customer

David J. Frank is founder and president of David J. Frank Landscape, Germantown, WI, with branches in Madison and the Fox River Valley. The \$15 million, 300-strong company provides landscape architecture, athletic field care, design/build, commercial services, maintenance and irrigation. It also has an interior landscape department and a nursery.

In booming suburban northwestern New Jersey, Miles Kuperus's Farmside Landscape and Design is a \$2 million full-service landscape company with about 20 employees. Services include maintenance, turf care, plant health care and (mostly residential) design/build.

Kuperus's approach is based on a deeply-held personal philosophy of service. "We are Christians," he says, "and treating people with honesty and integrity is founded off our faith." His strong service mentality plays directly into his thoughts

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on quality landscaped environments.

"We stay very close to the customer right from the beginning," he says. "We get to know what the customer's dream really is, and we incorporate that into a design plan. From there, we phase the project out. We can then achieve the customer's ultimate goal on designs and installs over a number of years, thus making it possible to spread the expense out over time."

The approach has been successful for Kuperus and his customers. "It has allowed us to achieve a good rate-of-return customer for the ongoing projects," he says. "And each step of the way, it's not like a construction project on which you say 'thank you and goodbye' to the customer. Instead, we're



A landscape project will often get to the stage shown here, and a customer will decide it isn't anything like he or she originally wanted. In these cases, the "beer first, champagne later" approach would have been better.

looking to develop and maintain that reoccurring customer."

Staying close to the customer from the beginning means that when it's time to maintain the landscape, Farmside Landscape is in prime position to provide him or her with proper maintenance.

A similar mentality characterizes Dave Frank's approach to "beer and champagne."

It's all about fun

"I've been doing this for 43 years," Frank says, "and about 15 years ago, it stopped being work and started being fun."

One of the principal pleasures he derives from his profession is guiding a project from the beer stage to the champagne stage.

"For one thing, we find that our customers are much more sophisticated about landscape than they were 15 years ago. They are more knowledgeable, and the landscape they want for their dream home is more com-

plex, more beautiful — and more expensive," says Frank.

"The wish list is twice as long as it used to be. We find that people who talk about a terrace are not thinking about a concrete terrace; they want a terrace done in a paving material that complements the residence. It could be brick, natural stone, exposed aggregate or textured concrete — so instead of something based at \$3.50 or \$4 per square foot, we're in the \$20 to \$22 per square foot range or more. That means that if you have 800 feet of terraces and you're multiplying by \$24 per square foot, rather than \$4 per square foot, you now have a big-ticket item.

"At the same time," Frank continues, "the cost of construction has escalated over the last five years at about twice the rate of inflation or more in some places. We have seen instances where lumber has gone up 30% in a 30- or 60-day time frame. While we used to

think that a \$1 million home was a big deal, now the million dollar home out in the suburbs is an everyday thing."

The simultaneous increase in the cost of building that dream home, coupled with the dramatic growth in home construction costs, creates a squeeze for both the customer and the landscape contractor. How does Frank's company deal with that squeeze?

Get involved early

Like Farmside, they get close to the customer at an early stage. "We believe that the earlier we get involved, the better. We try to introduce ourselves early in the design/build process because it really becomes an educational process. There are two things we can do early on for a prospective client:

"At the mortgage negotiations stage, get them to talk to their banker about the value of home landscaping," says Frank. "We supply customers with data from the real estate industry about the value landscaping adds to a home, and we ask

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Farmside Landscape and Design co-owners Miles and Lisa Kuperus:
"We stay very close to the customer right from the beginning."

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them to sit down with their banker to discuss allowing for landscaping in the mortgage. This is something more and more people are actually doing. There are several advantages to including the landscaping in the mortgage: first, the client gets the money for the landscaping they want, and second, the interest portion is tax-deductible," he continues.

"To avoid mistakes, we pay close attention to the client's desires and wishes. For example, we consider the ultimate design as a way of avoiding duplicated effort during construction.

"Frequently, one of the first things a builder does at a home site is run a construction driveway in. That's kind of silly because the builder takes out that driveway some months later, leaving us to replant the new residential driveway with whatever the builder ripped out. If we knew the location of the proposed residential driveway and how that would interface with the rest of the development, we could do it all at once, saving money. So we try to work early with the client on issues like these and others that can affect the final cost, including elevation."

Also like Kuperus, Frank believes in the value of phasing. "Nearly all of our clients complete their landscapes in phases, which is why a master plan is so important. The cost of a landscape plan is often the

Keep your installation costs down

Besides general business-philosophical approaches to the "champagne landscape on beer budget" dilemma, there are a number of practical things the landscape contractor can do to hold down costs while delivering excellent work. Cheryl Cone, vice president of sales and marketing at Dennis' 7 Dees Landscaping (a 44-year-old, 200-person, \$12-million design/build, maintenance and installation company in Portland, OR), culled the following list of "work smarter" items after meeting with her management staff:

- Design plantings out of inventory or local growers' overstock. You can stretch a budget and get instant bang for the buck because you can often purchase larger plants for the same dollar.
- Plant in the bare root season. You can save the cost of B & B, which can be up to a 20% savings.
- Use larger plants and space them out to avoid overcrowding and attain an immediate effect.
- Focus on creating a few unique features.
- Reduce lawn areas to minimize maintenance costs.
- When applicable, use native plants that have ornamental qualities, i.e. drought tolerance, slow growth.
- Use ground-branching conifers to reduce bed areas. Use less expensive, locally grown plants when selecting conifers.
- Focus developed landscape improvements to most important areas.
- Make focal point planting areas outstanding. Even though the rest of the landscaping can be bland, this focal point gives the client's entire landscape pizzazz and sets the tone.
- Grade to create slopes and reduce the need for walls.
- Do early site planning for residences to save dollars in the end.
- Use drainage swales instead of piping for drainage.
- On larger projects, consider creating master plans and phasing projects. Create a "critical path" for the client that provides a logical order to installation and eliminates the need to redo work.
- Provide client with irrigation, lawn, site preparation and major trees or plant groups. Provide a plan so they can install smaller plants as budget and time allows.
- Use different materials to create interest and texture, i.e. boulders and river rock mulches.

smartest money the client spends as part of the home building project, but for some customers money or budget is nonetheless an issue. Gardening is America's number one hobby, and I don't get my feathers ruffled when someone says, 'Couldn't we do some of

the planting to save money on that?' They might plant the ground covers and perennials." The company's approach has worked for Frank, bringing in such benefits as long-term business relationships. "We've been successful this way. If I do a good job for the client this

year, I will be working with that client next year."

Beer first, champagne later

Frank finds that sometimes it's a good thing to slow the client down and get him or her to adopt a "beer first, champagne later" approach. "For example,

sometimes we see the client who suddenly has a pile of money, and their first impulse is

to build their dream house in one fell swoop from start to finish. While the sophistication

level is high regarding the landscaping features people want for their homes, few people can read blueprints well. So, at the beginning of the project, they cannot clearly picture how the landscape will look after everything is built. After doing hundreds of thousands of dollars of work on a project, we don't want a client to say, 'I had no idea it was going to look like this. It turns out that we wanted something else after all.'

"By adopting a phased, 'let's start with the beer and get to the champagne a few years later' approach, we gradually educate the client and start building the expensive stuff when the client is more sure of what

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"We ask our customers to discuss allowing for landscaping in the mortgage with their banker," says David Frank, owner, David J. Frank Landscape.

they want," Frank says.

"Over time, people frequently decide they don't want high maintenance items like water features, for example," he adds. "We put a lot of those in, and unfortunately we take a lot of them out. Both the company and the client are better off if we avoid that scenario." **LMI**