

PROSPECTIVE CLIENTS, Mr. and Mrs. Jones, arrive at your office for an initial meeting. They walk up a beautifully landscaped path and are greeted at the door. They are escorted down a hallway displaying numerous landscape awards.

In your conference room, they see beautiful photographs of your past work on the walls. Mrs. Jones is thinking she made the right choice by contacting your company. Mr. Jones is thinking about how much a new landscape is going to cost. He speaks first.

"We just want a patio," he says. "Nothing too fancy."

This is a common scenario for landscape design-build companies. It could lead to Mr. and Mrs. Jones having a modest patio designed and installed by your company that summer. Or, it could lead to a long relationship between the Joneses and your company. If the sales rep and designer are listening to the clients and

asking the right questions, it often becomes apparent that the clients don't think they can afford what they really want. A master design, installed in stages, could be the perfect fit.

Client benefits

"A master plan can get the focus off the budget, assuming you're forthright with the client and get them looking at things they might want to add later," says Rick Doesburg, president of Thornton Landscape, Maineville, OH. "Ideally, it can save the client money and time over the long haul by looking at the big picture."

Those savings come from planning. A master plan makes it easy to avoid in-

A **master plan** leads to long-term **relationships** with clients and ongoing **revenue** for your operation.

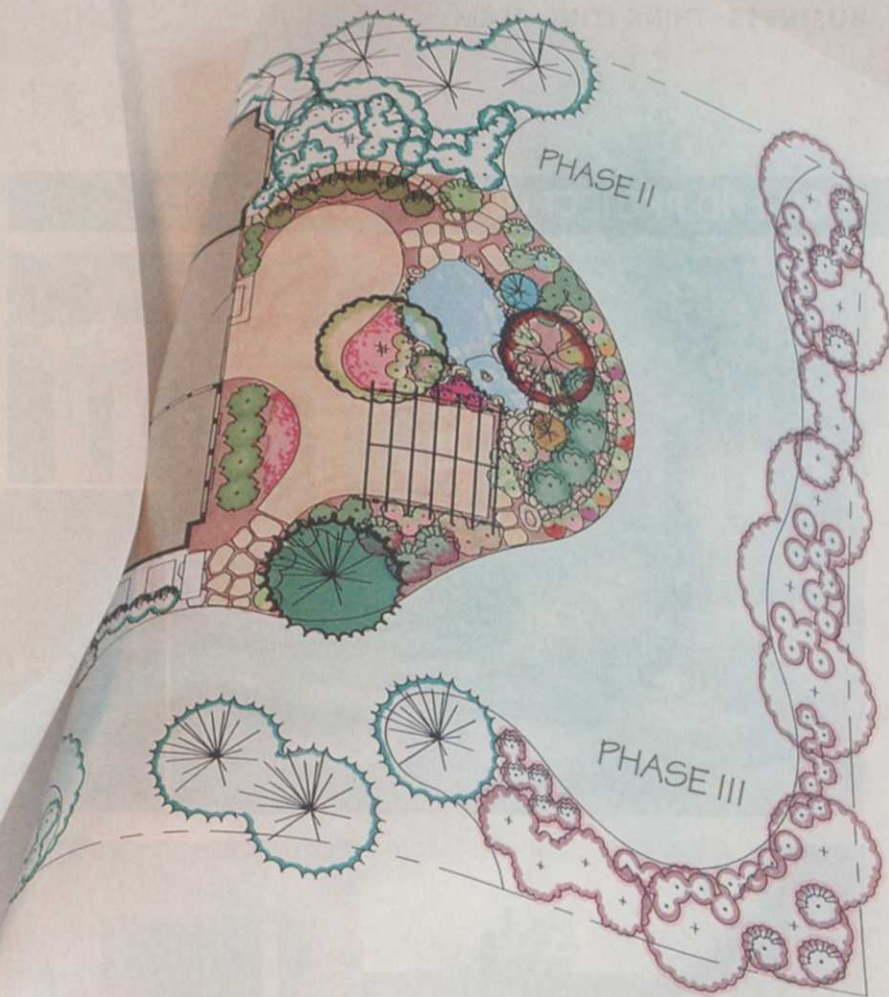
BY JAMIE J. GOOCH

STEP

stalling something the client will need torn out to accommodate a future project. It also helps the various phases of the project to work together.

"Maybe the client wants a circle driveway someday, and we're designing the walks and drive," Doesburg offers as an example. "We can design the way the main drive approaches the garage so it can easily accept a circle driveway in the future. That's harder to do and costs more if it's not planned."

Miles Kuperus, president of Farmside Landscape & Design in Wantage, NJ, agrees that planning yields efficiencies. Kuperus, director of the Design/Build/Installation Specialty Group for the Professional Land-care Network, says a master plan can address infrastructure requirements that make future builds on the site go more smoothly.



BY STEP

HIGH-END PROJECT DEVELOPED IN STAGES



Because Farmside Landscape & Design developed a well-thought-out master plan to provide the clients with a “bigger picture” of what their landscape could be, it was able to give them exactly what they desired. The project unfolded a stage at a time, allowing the homeowners to budget and enjoy each feature as it was completed. The plan also took into consideration factors such as noise and other homeowner inconvenience during construction.

“If you have a master plan that includes infrastructure, such as drainage, irrigation and lighting, you can build that infrastructure for the future,” he says. “For instance, you can install the drainage needed to allow for future projects to tie into that. With irrigation, you can install a control box that is able to receive additional zones that will be needed later. The same thing can be done with lighting.”

A master plan also allows a design-

build company to install footings for future structures when other earth moving work on the site is being done, Kuperus says. This shortens the time the client is inconvenienced by the noise and mess that excavating machinery can cause.

Zoning is another potential mess that can be lessened with a master plan. A plan can shine a spotlight on problems with what clients may ultimately want to accomplish in their landscapes. Kupe-

rus cites one of his state’s zoning laws as an example.

“In New Jersey, we have 15% to 25% non-pervious coverage thresholds,” Kuperus says. “What that means is that the house, driveway and any kind of pavement cannot exceed 25% of the property. The rest has to be able to receive groundwater so it can percolate back into the system. A master plan could

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give the client warning that a future phase of the landscape they want would not meet requirements."

Perhaps the biggest benefit of a master plan is that it shows prospective clients what is possible. On the design, they can see how everything is going to tie in with the various parts of a landscape. This not only addresses clients' true hopes for their landscape, it can also cement your company's long-term relationship with them.

"A master plan is an opportunity for the designer to be much more creative," Doesburg says. "It's an opportunity to stretch the client's thought pattern not necessarily their budget, but it can. It allows you to show clients how ideas relate. Instead of a pool, you might find out they really want an overhead structure and an outdoor kitchen. The master plan shows them how all their outdoor spaces and uses can function together."

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MASTERING MAINTENANCE

A master plan can be used to show the client what it is they really want in a landscape, but it can also help you show them what they don't want to maintain. A project, built in phases over a number of years, is a great repeating advertisement for your company. However, a big project that the client can't maintain becomes an eyesore and reflects poorly on your company.

"It helps to create a master plan for plantings," says Rick Doesburg, president of Thornton Landscape, Maineville, OH. "Even if the client has the money to do a big project at once, it's a good idea to break them in slowly."

The client may soon discover that what they initially wanted would be too much for them to maintain. Thornton offers horticultural services to its design-build clients, but makes sure the client knows what kind of maintenance commitment they're getting into from the outset.

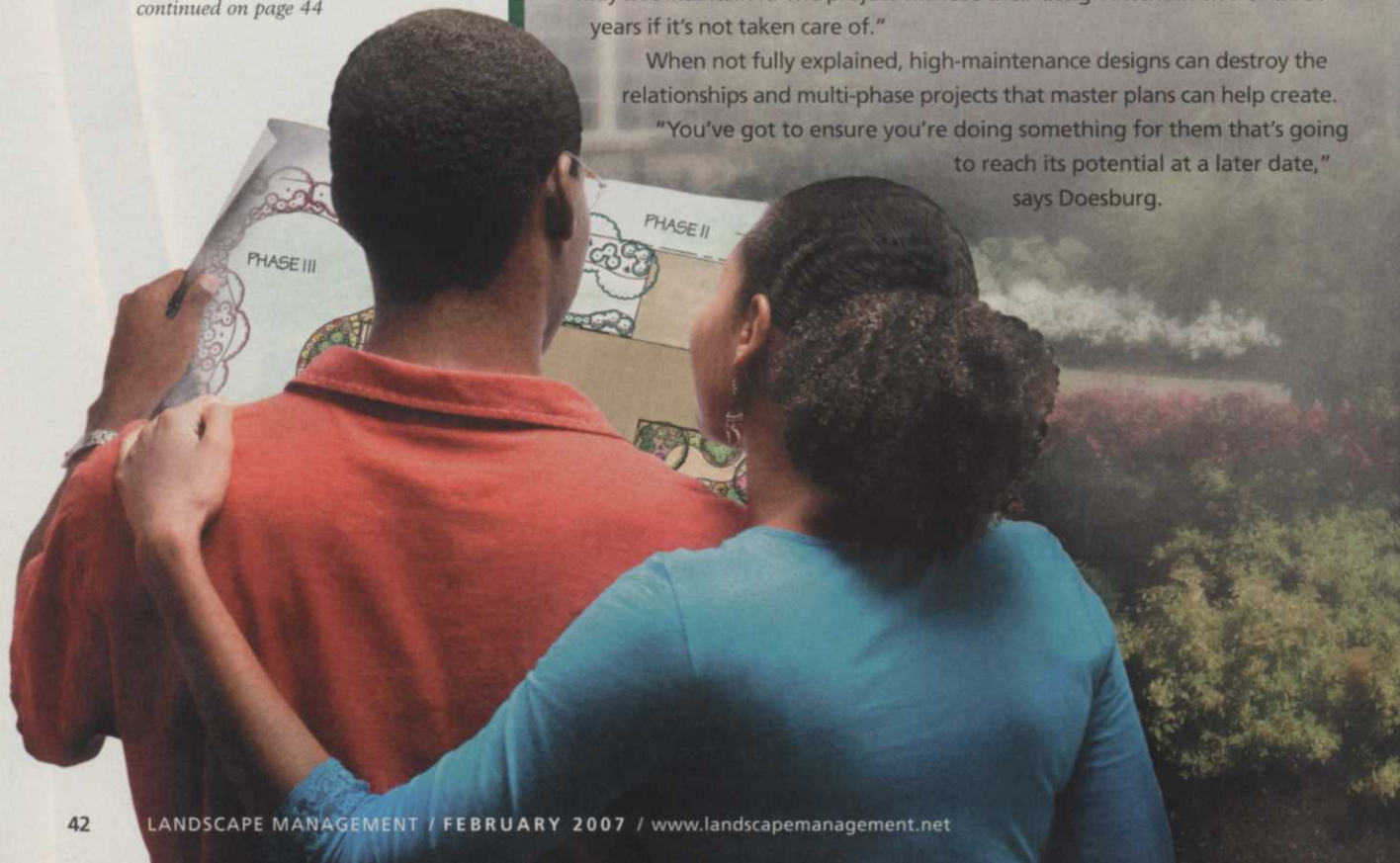
"There's nothing worse than designing a beautiful plan that the client can't maintain themselves or afford to have maintained," Doesburg says. "We didn't do our job if we presented a master design they can't take care of."

Maintenance is also on the mind of Miles Kuperus, president of Farmside Landscape & Design in Wantage, NJ, when creating a master plan. His company provides turf care, maintenance and plant health care services, in addition to design-build services.

"We do a high level of design detail on construction projects," he says. "If the customer doesn't understand what the maintenance cost is, then they may not maintain it. The project will lose their design intent in two or three years if it's not taken care of."

When not fully explained, high-maintenance designs can destroy the relationships and multi-phase projects that master plans can help create.

"You've got to ensure you're doing something for them that's going to reach its potential at a later date," says Doesburg.



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From the perspective of the design-build contractor, there are a lot of good reasons to do a master plan. Designing a project in stages may be necessary when the permitting process doesn't match up with the work season. For large projects that require outside engineering, there is often a long lead-time involved in bringing in an engineer. The master plan brings potential issues to light. It also points out the best sequence for a project.

"For instance, the client might eventually want a shaded patio," says Doesburg, whose company does about 60% of its work in stages according to a master plan. "The shade trees could be planted now so that they are mature enough to provide shade when the patio is installed five years later. Without a master plan, the client could be waiting a long time for a shaded patio. The same could be done with trees and plants that provide privacy screening."

Kuperus uses a mantra that sums up the importance of having a master plan: Build the plan, work the plan.

"From a production standpoint, a master plan allows us to get a handle on the length of time and scope of a project," he says.

Master plans can also convince cus-

tomers to go the extra mile for their landscapes.

"During our first meeting with the client, we introduce ourselves and discuss what they'd like," says Kuperus. "We take a base map to our second meeting and design the landscape in front of the client. We get a huge buy-in right there. They get a great deal of insight and value from a master plan."

Though Kuperus' company hand draws all of its master plans, he sees increasing value in digital design.

"With virtual landscapes, the client can walk through the computer-generated master plan," he says. "If you make that that a positive experience, you could really show the client what they're getting for the money."

Both Kuperus and Doesburg say clients often get so excited about seeing the master plan that they decide to do the entire project right away.

That kind of buy-in can be great for the bottom line of large companies, but small companies should be careful, cau-

tions Kuperus.

"Depending on who the client base is, sometimes smaller companies have to realize that some projects are too big for them," he says. "Sometimes you can get into big projects and be in there so long that you lose other clients because you're not available to them. Make sure that you take on projects that are properly sized to your niche. If the projects are too large or small, you can partner with other companies. Carve out your niche and perform at excellent levels in that niche."

Big or small, a master plan helps contractors build relationships with clients. It ties in especially well with companies that offer maintenance or horticulture services because routine visits to the client serve as a reminder to complete the next phase of the landscape design. But design-build-only firms can steal a trick from Thornton's Doesburg.

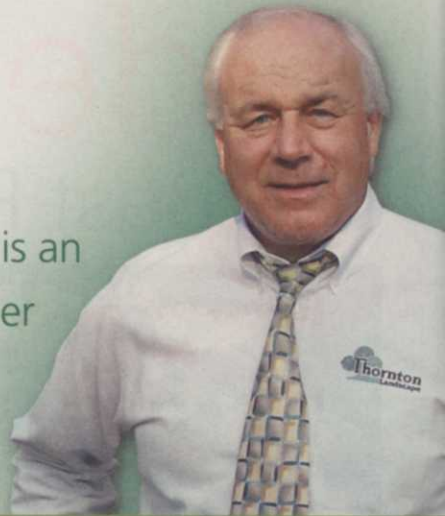
"It's important to continue to touch the client," he says. "Sometimes we'll pull a master plan out in the winter, color in the next step, and then send it to the client as a reminder."

"I need work now, and three years from now," Doesburg says. "If we make the client happy with the first phase of a master plan, they'll call us back to do the next. That's good." **LM**

— The author also writes and edits the monthly LDB Solutions newsletter. To receive it, visit the Web site www.landscapedesign-build.com/solutions. Contact the author at jgouch@questex.com.

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— Rick Doesburg, THORNTON LANDSCAPE



Once they see the design, they want to finish the whole thing.

— Miles Kuperus, FARMSIDE LANDSCAPE & DESIGN

