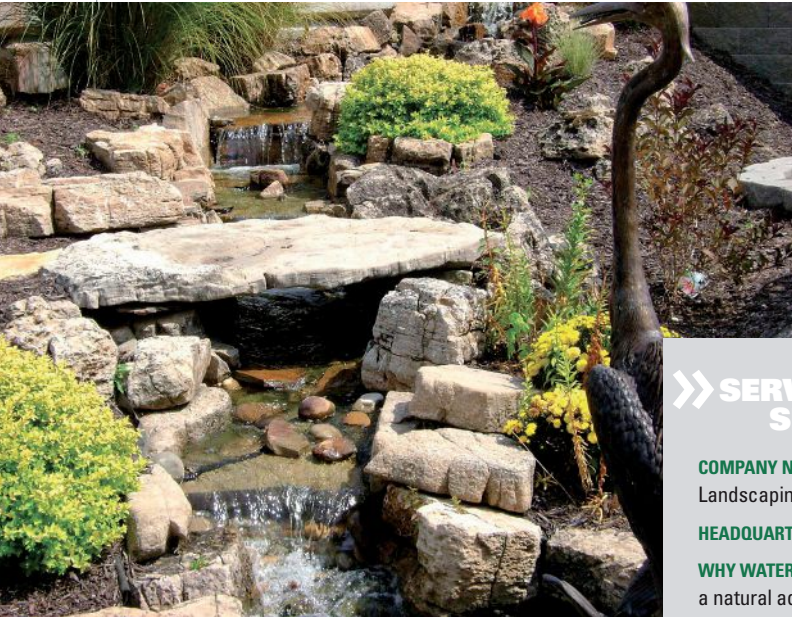


Clients love the sound of water

Water features flow nicely with Weilbacher Landscaping's other services



A Weilbacher waterfall made from limestone boulders.

Weilbacher admits selling water features has become tougher in today's shaky economy. Many potential clients view them as an extravagance. Consequently, Weilbacher promotes moderately priced water features that add curb appeal and increase property value.

Pondless waterfalls in the \$2,000 to \$5,000 price range have become more popular and are easier to sell, he says.

"With the pondless waterfall, you don't have to build the whole pond. It makes them low maintenance and more cost effective. But you still get the same look and sound," he says.

Since adding a water feature division, Weilbacher says his website has become more important. Clients want to see recent color photos so Weilbacher makes sure his site is up to date.

Aesthetics are involved in water features, and Weilbacher says it takes a keen eye to make a job attractive. However, that's where he's seen other contractors make the biggest mistakes.

"I've seen other landscapers just dig a hole and throw the water feature and some rocks in," he says. "There's more to it than that. We actually go to the quarry and hand-select boulders. And we may have rocks all laying out on the ground and rearrange them with the Bobcat three or four times until we get it just right.

"You do have to have an artistic eye to be successful with water features. Having attractive existing jobs makes a big difference in future sales," he says.

The author is a freelance writer with six years of experience covering landscaping.

» SERVICE SNAPSHOT

COMPANY NAME: Weilbacher Landscaping

HEADQUARTERS: Millstadt, IL

WHY WATER FEATURES? It was a natural addition for the 8-person company that does about 90% residential work.

INITIAL INVESTMENT: It depends on the size and scale of projects. Weilbacher purchased a \$25,000 Bobcat Mini Excavator that could be rented for about \$250/day. Other equipment includes hand tools like shovels, rakes, and knives. Smaller water features only require the basic tools plus labor.

INVESTMENT RECOUP TIME: Installing \$2,000 water features, should return \$1,000 on each one. Labor is the biggest expense since large equipment isn't required for smaller water features.

WHY CUSTOMERS LIKE IT: Water features create a relaxing retreat at home. Instead of taking costly vacations, clients enjoy a paradise right outside their door.

A SIMPLE REQUEST FROM a client led Andrew Weilbacher to launch a profitable new division offering water features. Weilbacher, owner of Weilbacher Landscaping, Millstadt, IL, recalls he was finishing a retaining wall using boulders when a client suggested a waterfall would also look nice.

After thinking it over, he accepted the job, invested \$25,000 in a new Bobcat Mini Excavator and installed a \$55,000 water feature for the client. That experience five years ago convinced Weilbacher his team could do this work well. Today, the segment brings in about 25% of the revenue for the \$500,000 business.

Now whenever he's working up a landscape design, he always suggests a water feature. Any time of year is fine for selling, but Weilbacher prefers not to do installs during January or February when the ground is frozen. He'd rather not risk tearing up clients' yards with large equipment. That's easy to do when the ground is frozen or wet and muddy. In Illinois, summer is the best time to build water features.