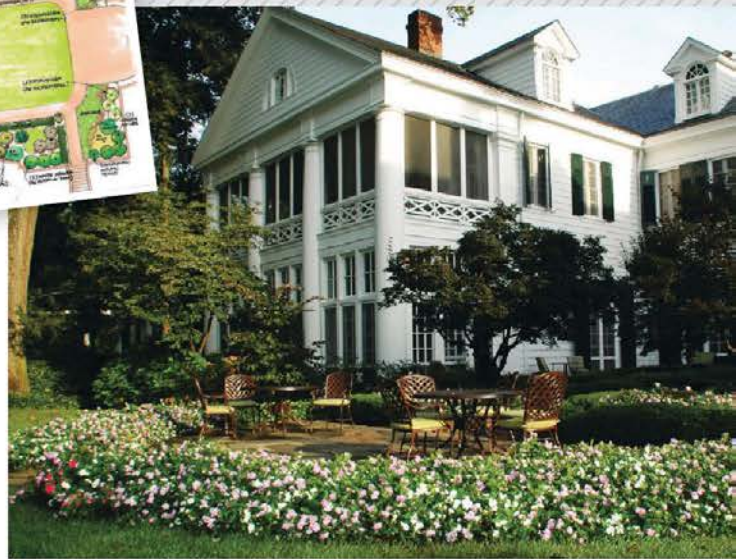
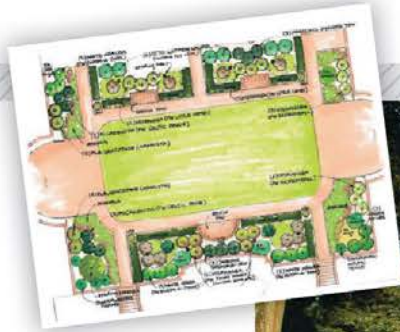


MAINTENANCE

History in the making

Providence Landscape gets the chance to redesign and maintain a Proven Winners Signature Garden at 100-year-old The Duke Mansion.

By MARISA PALMIERI



The decision nearly 20 years ago to provide landscape maintenance at cost for a high-profile but financially struggling property with historical significance has turned into a unique opportunity for Jim Lawrence, owner of Providence Landscape in Charlotte, N.C.

Today the \$8 million landscape maintenance and design/build company is a partner in the effort to redesign the gardens at The Duke Mansion in celebration of its 100th anniversary in 2015.

“As a landscaper, to be a part of a project like this, it’s once in a lifetime,” Lawrence says. “If you can’t get excited and passionate about something like this, you shouldn’t be in the business.”

The relationship between Lawrence and the mansion started in the mid-1990s. At the time he was with the Charlotte branch of Atlanta-based HighGrove Partners. (Lawrence purchased the branch in 2006, forming Providence.) The Duke Mansion, which operates as a nonprofit event and meeting venue with 20 guest rooms, was going through some financial troubles. It had a full-time horticulturist on staff but was looking to cut costs. Lawrence’s company, offering its services at cost, was able to improve the look of the property and do it less expensively than the Duke was paying a full-time staff member.

“We do it at cost for them because it’s Charlotte’s most historic property,” Lawrence says. “We can help preserve it and at the same time it helps us sell more work because it’s a very prominent, high-profile property and we can show that on our resume. It works out really well for both of us.”

Currently, Providence sends a three- or four-man crew to the mansion twice a week. For the centennial garden project the company will be on site even more, providing project management, design, installation and eventually maintenance on the new gardens. The Duke Mansion aims to raise \$5 million, about \$800,000 of which will go to the gardens. The rest will go to an endowment to maintain the mansion for years ahead, Lawrence says.

» WEB EXTRA

To learn more about the Signature Garden program and why The Duke Mansion gardens were a good fit, visit the Web Extras section on LandscapeManagement.net.

‘SIGNATURE’ DESIGN

As the project is still in the fundraising stage, only one “baby step” is complete, Lawrence says. Two small gardens were completed in time for the campaign’s kick-off last spring to give patrons and donors a taste of what’s to come. Many of the details are still in the works but one vital component has been solidified: The Duke Mansion will be home to a Proven Winners Signature Garden—it’s just one of three in the U.S. The others are the Hotel Iroquois on Michigan’s Mackinac Island and Grand Tradition Estate and Gardens in Southern California.

After Lawrence heard about plant brand Proven Winners’ Signature Garden program from his local grower, King’s Greenhouse in Matthews, N.C., he, the folks at the Duke and Proven Winners began a months’ long “courtship” to ensure it was a good fit for all parties, he says. The property was officially accepted as a Signature Garden last year.

As for specifics of the design, it’s still in the early stages, but it will include a path to welcome visitors to tour the gardens. Currently, the grounds of the mansion are open to the public, but the building’s stateliness is intimidating. “You feel like maybe you shouldn’t go behind the gate,” Lawrence says. “These gardens are going to invite people to take advantage of this property.”

A Southern aesthetic also is expected, including roses, camellias and magnolias. “It will include Proven Winners’ latest and greatest signature and heirloom plants throughout,” Lawrence says. “The challenge is to preserve the Southern architectural heritage and the historical value of the property.”

Lawrence is also quick to point out even though the Duke is a century-old property, its landscape will feature new technology, including a brand new “smart” irrigation system and LED landscape lighting.

“It’s those kinds of things, coupled with the latest and greatest-engineered plants, that are going to be the one of the neat things about this,” he says. “Through the collaboration we’re going to be able to put out an incredible garden for Charlotte, and I really think it will be known throughout the U.S.”

Providing services for The Duke Mansion at cost is a win-win, Jim Lawrence says.