

## Learning to (yard)walk



Yardwalking is a stand-alone educational service, not a sales tactic.

**WHEN TALKING ABOUT** horticulture, Tom Strangfeld is a natural at addressing crowds. The independent landscape designer and horticulturist has lectured at Boston's Arnold Arboretum and appeared on "This Old House," to pick a few bullet points from his resume. But a few years ago he got the urge to teach in a more intimate setting to give people more individual attention. He's been conducting "yardwalks" ever since.

Dubbed by his wife as yardwalking, Strangfeld describes the service as "private horticultural instruction" with homeowners in their yards. Homeowners choose from one of three topics—planning, pruning or planting—and, at a price tag of \$95 per hour, Strangfeld walks the property with them, teaching how to properly care for their landscape. The service offers homeowners his 40 years of experience in one, concise meeting that's directly tailored to their needs.

Strangfeld estimates he's performed about a hundred yardwalks, although he essentially has been doing it as an initial design consultant for most of his career.

He notes some key differences between yardwalking and an initiation site meeting. The biggest one is yardwalking is not a service meant to lead to a sale. It's completely focused on education, providing the homeowners with the information to oversee their own properties.

"You cannot go into this looking to sell a job because that's not what it's about," Strangfeld says. "You need to focus on the client and what they need. They'll be able to tell if you're turning it into a sales pitch and then they'll wonder why they're paying for it."

While this sometimes means sacrificing "trade secrets," Strangfeld says that's OK because, essentially, that's what the homeowner is paying for versus someone else doing the work. To that end, ideal yardwalk clients are "do-it-yourselfers," he says. Thus, it's a bonus if those homeowners do turn into design

clients—and 10 percent to 20 percent of them eventually do, Strangfeld says.

"I think the fact that I go there as a teacher and not a salesman actually helps me get more jobs," he says. "And if I don't, I'm fine with that because it wasn't why I was there."

Strangfeld markets the service mostly through his speaking engagements at garden clubs and on his website, but this year he's considering targeting a few communities with a direct mail program or local newspaper advertising. Last fall, he caught quite a bit of business after an article ran in *The Boston Globe* about yardwalking. Several months thereafter he was doing five to eight yardwalks per week.

### » SERVICE SNAPSHOT

**PROFESSIONAL:** Tom Strangfeld

**LOCATION:** Wayland, Mass.

**SERVICE:** Yardwalking

**WHY:** To share horticultural knowledge with homeowners to help them improve their landscapes independently.

**BIGGEST CHALLENGE:** Marketing. While Strangfeld has gotten the word out through teaching and an article last year in *The Boston Globe*, he has time for more clientele. "I can't drive by a home without wondering how I could help them," Strangfeld says.

**BEST TIP:** It's not just about talking. "I spend a lot of time listening to what the client has to say," Strangfeld says. "Then I repeat what they said back to them to make sure I understood it correctly (and so) they know I'm listening."

### WHAT IT TAKES

Although offering yardwalking has a low barrier to entry, with no new equipment required, Strangfeld says it's not a fitting add-on for every landscape professional because clients are paying for knowledge. With Strangfeld, for instance, they're paying for his four decades of experience, plus his knack for teaching.

"You need to have the ability to talk to people," he says. "It's like being able to hold an ongoing conversation at a cocktail party. You also need to have a fairly even temper and be an overall pleasant person. You have to be fully engaged."

It also requires the ability to understand a landscape within minutes of getting on the property, Strangfeld says.

"I'm coming onto a property and have no previous knowledge of what's there or what I'll see," he says. "One of my favorite things about the business has always been my ability to be dropped into a landscape from outer space and understand it right away. That's a necessary skill for yardwalking."

Payton is a freelance writer with eight years of experience writing about the landscape industry.