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## PROFITING FROM DESIGN

JODY SHILAN

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# It's time to play "What's My Budget?"

**Q** How do you get homeowners to tell you what they want to spend on a project without being pushy?

— Amanda Bell, Landscape Designs by Amanda, Red Lion, PA

**A** One common problem for landscape designers and contractors is trying to find out what a client is budgeting for a particular project. Clients are hesitant to throw out a number, and contractors know that without a budget number, they are flying blind.

The perfect time to have this discussion is at your initial appointment — just after walking the site, discussing ideas, taking notes and reviewing their goals and objectives. This is where it's time to play everybody's least-favorite game: "What's My Budget?"

Although the concept of the game is quite simple, winning is extremely difficult. We ask our potential clients, in various direct and indirect ways, what they are looking to spend. Clients hedge, weave and bob, and do everything they can to protect or hide that information.

If we learn the "magic number," we win, and will most likely get the project. If not, we are destined to waste our time and not get any work.

Why won't they tell us what their budget is? There are two main reasons: fear and hope. Fear that we are going to raise our prices artificially because they told us what they want to spend. Hope in that we are going to propose something that is less than they want to spend, thus getting a deal.

So what do you do?

After you've walked the site and discussed the scope of the work, you should have some idea of the cost of the project. For example, let's say a particular

project is going to come in around \$25,000.

Here's how your conversation should go:

**Contractor:** *This sounds like a really great project. What would you say your budget is for this phase?*

**Homeowner:** *Well, we don't know what landscaping costs. Why don't you come up with something, and we'll tell you if it is what we want to spend?*

**Contractor:** *Let me give you some idea of price ranges. I've done projects similar to this from \$10,000 up to \$75,000, depending on the type of materials we used or the size of the plantings we install.*

**Homeowner:** *\$75,000? That's a lot of money! The most we want to spend is \$20,000.*

What you have just done is intentionally given the client a low and bare bones budget number, and also made him aware that things can get quite expensive. He never would have thought that this much money could be spent on a project like this, and he surely knows that \$10,000 probably won't go that far. Your prospect will quickly realize that if you were thinking \$75,000, and he was thinking \$15,000 or \$20,000, then this would be quite a mismatch and a waste of everyone's time.

A similar approach provides price ranges. When the prospect tells you, "We don't know what we want to spend," you say something like this:

"Depending on how much work you do, and what materials we choose, we've done similar projects for 10 to 20K, 20 to 30K, 30 to 50K or 50 to 75K. What is the range you are thinking of?"

Your clients will say, "I guess \$20,000 to \$30,000 is what we were thinking."

Quickly follow up with, "Would you say closer to \$20,000 or \$30,000?" They will respond with, "We were really thinking of \$25,000 but could go to \$30,000 if we had to."

The best part of all of this is that you will minimize the amount of time you waste developing designs and proposals, while dramatically increasing your chances of selling the job.

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**Profiting from Design** is a quarterly column from award-winning landscape designer, consultant and former design/build contractor Jody Shilan. Shilan is also the president of the New Jersey Landscape Contractors Association. If you have a question you would like answered in Profiting From Design, please contact Shilan at jshilan@gmail.com.

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# Spring trials

## PREVIEW

Blushing Pink is one of three new SuperCal introductions from Sakata.

**W**HEN GLENN Goldsmith opened his greenhouse to show off his new varieties to customers in 1967, he could not have predicted it would start the ball rolling on what would become the California Spring Trials.

This year's trials will take place March 24-29 at 17 locations that include nearly 40 companies showing off the plants that will be available next year. Visitors who pre-register can make their way from Gilroy, CA (where the Goldsmith family began the trials and officially retired last year), all the way to Encinitas, CA, more than 400 miles to the south. Along the way, they can participate in roundtables, hear from expert speakers, learn from product demonstrations and, of course, see some amazing displays of new varieties.

### WHAT TO EXPECT AT THE PLANT INDUSTRY'S MAIN EVENT.

BY JAMIE J. GOOCH

#### What's new

For example, Syngenta Flowers, Inc., which purchased Goldsmith Seeds in 2008, will highlight its flowers, Syngenta Crop Protection products and Fafard soil mixes.

"We have a lot of new seed varieties being introduced this year, including seven all-new series," says Tracey Gorrell from Syngenta Flowers' Marketing Com-

munications department. "In our vegetative assortment, we're proud to launch three new colors in the market-leading Calliope geranium series as well as some unique novelty colors in our award-winning Lanai verbena series among our introductions for the 2012-2013 season."

Also in the northern region of the trials, Sakata will display new colors of its SunPatiens hybrid impatiens, three new SuperCal introductions, which combine petunia and calibrachoa traits, and new plant series at its Salinas, CA, trial location.

"We're coming out with Magic Carpet Yellow Mecardonia," says Jeanine Standard from Sakata's Media Relations department. "It has an upright habit, but is low to the ground so it's good for paths

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livescapes > SPRING TRIALS



Cosmic Orange is a new color in Ball FloraPlant's Patchwork series of impatiens.

or pavers.” The plant, which can be walked on, has petite upright blooms that come up from its foliage.

“Another thing I’ll be sharing is that we have a new Sundance portulaca series,” she says. “It has an upright habit and large flowers that stay open longer during the early evening. It’s extremely heat tolerant. There are six colors in that.”

In the seed area, Sakata is introducing the first “clear” Majestic Giants II pansy. The solid yellow pansy will not be mottled like other Majestic Giants II pansies. The company will also display a new line of snapdragons with five colors, as well as a new dianthus series.

Stops in the northern region also include displays from Danziger ‘Dan’ Flower Farm at Headstart Nursery’s stop; Pacific Plug & Liner, which includes the Israeli suppliers of Cohen, Hishtil, Jaldety, Isaacson Flowers and Schwartz Nursery; Golden State Bulb Growers; American Takii; and Speedling, Inc., which is hosting ABZ Seeds, Greenex USA, Inc., Hem Genetics, Plant Source International, Inc., Schoneveld Breeding, and Thompson & Morgan.

### Ball gets artsy

In the central region, Ball Horticultural Co.’s stop in Santa Paula, CA, will feature

all of its breeding companies, as well as its retail brands and Daniels Plant Food. The company’s theme this year is “The Art of Plants.”

Ball will show off more than 295 new seed and vegetative varieties, as well as 18 new series.

Some of those new introductions include the Cool Wave pansy, which trails up to 30 in.; a new Everlast Garden Dianthus from Selecta North America, which is a Zone 4, cold-hardy plant that won’t die in heat; and three new colors of Patchwork Cosmic Orange Impatiens — Cosmic Orange, Burgundy and Pink Ice.

Ball will also display the new Pretty series of petunia. These seed-grown petunias have a better branching habit with improved airflow for less disease, according to the company.

Visitors to the PanAmerican Seed display can check out Angelonia Serenita, a new Serenita that is a more compact and controlled version of the company’s Serenita angelonia. It has high deer and rabbit



Lavender is one of the new colors in Syngenta Flowers' Calliope geranium series.

Darwin Perennials' Double Scoop Cranberry Echinacea.



tolerance, as well as low-water needs, according to the company. PanAmerican will also feature Spring Matrix pansies.

Darwin Perennials is expanding its Sombrero series of Echinacea with a new Lemon Yellow color and the company's Double Scoop series of double coneflowers now includes a Cranberry color.

Beyond Ball's partners and brands, the central region includes Dümmer USA, Inc., which is showcasing the HGTV Home plant collection; Greenheart

Farms; Floranova; Skagit Gardens; Fides Oro, Inc. with Flamingo Holland; and GroLink Plant Co. with Westhoff, Athena Brazil, Florist Holland B.V., GroLink, GreenFuse Botanicals, Hort Couture and PlantHaven displays.

#### Trend spotting

The southern region includes stops at Proven Winners; Paul Ecke Ranch; and Plug Connection, which includes displays from Suntory Flowers, Benary, Cultivaris

and America In Bloom.

The trials have grown over the years to include more than just a show and tell of plant materials. Whether traveling to all of the regions, or focusing on a specific area, the Spring Trials provide a great opportunity for landscape professionals to keep on top of the latest trends in color, marketing, and design. **LMM**

**Gooch is a freelance writer and editor based in Northeast Ohio.**



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**Berry nice**

As a newly introduced companion to **Tesselaar Plants'** 'Strawberries and Cream' lacecap hydrangea, 'Blueberries and Cream' offers indigo-saturated blooms surrounding a milky white center. It can be planted outdoors in the garden in USDA Zones 7 and higher, from early summer on for a beautiful show the following year. In Zones 6 and lower, it still can thrive in wind-protected areas or when given extra care. [Tesselaar.com](http://Tesselaar.com)

**Get inspired**

Bred for a wide range of weather conditions, 'Inspire' Pansies (*Viola wittrockiana* Pansy F1) from **Benary** are now available in 29 colors, in both clear and blotched faces. Six new colors were recently added to the series, including Blue Angel, Blue Velvet, Deep Blue with Blotch, Lemon with Red Blotch, Lilac with Blotch and Terracotta (pictured). In addition, the Inspire Peach Shades blend of pinks and yellow were improved upon. [Benary.com](http://Benary.com)



**Party hearty**

New *Cistus* 'Mickie' is **Terra Nova Nurseries'** stable variegated form of *Cistus hybridus*. It has a low, mounding habit that hugs the ground and creates a colorful, ever-green focal point. Hardy to USDA Zone 7, it hails from northern Washington State and has survived some brutal winters. White flowers punctuate the flashy foliage in May and June. [TerraNovaNurseries.com](http://TerraNovaNurseries.com)

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### Midnight sweet

**Pan American Seed's** new Vinca 'Jams 'N Jellies' Blackberry (*Catharanthus Rosea*) features a deep purple with a white eye. In some settings, this summer accent plant's flower petals appear almost black. This 2012 All-America Selections winner is easy to grow, with excellent tolerance to drought and heat, according to the company. Mature plants will reach 10 to 14 in. tall, with 2-in. flowers that are complemented by deep green, shiny leaves. Best in full sun, hardy to USDA Zone 9. [PanAmSeed.com](http://PanAmSeed.com)

### Playing dress-up

Hardy in USDA Zones 7 to 9, **Monrovia's** 'Dolly's Dress' Fuchsia (*Fuchsia microphylla ssp. aprica* 'Dolly's Dress') features small-toothed leaves on upright twiggy stems that bear large, flared bright pink tubular flowers all summer long. Named after the vernacular name for this plant, Dolly Mixtures, and for the dress shape of the flowers, this moderate grower from the Dan Hinkley Collection will reach 5 ft. tall and wide. [Monrovia.com](http://Monrovia.com)



### Royal beauty

New *Rosa* 'Princess Anne' from **David Austin Roses** flowers over a long period and in large clusters, the individual blooms opening in succession. There is a medium-strong Tea Rose fragrance. The petals are strong and not too long, and many are heart-shaped, resulting in a ruffled, water lily effect. The inner petals create an informal button eye center, revealing the backs of the petals, which are a warm shade of deep salmon pink. Over time, the petals gradually age to a shade of purple-lilac. Hardy in USDA Zones 6 to 9, its mature size is approximately 3x2 ft., making it ideal for borders, hedging and pots. [DavidAustinRoses.com](http://DavidAustinRoses.com)

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## Catering to clients

A company finds container gardening to be full of possibilities.

**C**ONTAINER GARDENING HAS proven to be a successful add-on service for Christensen Landscape Services, LLC in Northford, CT. In fact, container gardening has brought to light some additional opportunities, such as container storage and seasonal plant displays, in which the company can continue to drive revenue in the off-season. With all of the service possibilities container gardening brings to the table, the company has classified it as an add-on

service for both the design/build and maintenance divisions. But to make it successful, it requires some personal customization for the client.

"It definitely takes a little bit of catering to each individual client, as everybody has different tastes," says Donna Christensen, co-owner and designer. "You can't just say you're going to do a certain container design for every client.


Everyone likes different pots, different flowers and different color schemes, so it's not a quick service."

Since she started offering the service, Christensen says that the possibilities it has presented have continued to grow. She can have her garden crews charge to maintain the container gardens for those clients who don't want to do it themselves. That would include cleaning up, cutting back and shaping the plantings, along with regular maintenance such as watering if they don't have a drip irrigation system in place.

Christensen has also found a niche in offering tropical designs for clients.

"We have done some interesting things, such as offering palm trees that we bring in for the client and help maintain," she says. "We have also done a variety of tropicals. We can then store those in our greenhouses in the off-season. When it's time, we'll get them set up again on the client's property."

She notes that the tropical service has



Christensen Landscape Services has benefited from selling containers, tropical plants and other add-ons.

been a year-round opportunity because she's able to bill for storage and maintenance in the off-season.

### NEW SEASON, NEW DESIGNS

Each new season poses an opportunity to potentially sell a new container garden design, Christensen says.

"In the early spring, we may suggest pansies and tulips, and as the season goes along, we'll ask about switching them out for some annuals," she explains. "In the fall, we can do mums, cabbage, kale and grasses, and then in the winter it's evergreen and holly berries. We have a number of clients that want all four seasonal presentations, so it's a great source of steady income."

Christensen has even found a nice little upsell opportunity in the actual container itself. Some clients may already have their own pots, but she's found that some clients like her to order them.

"That's another great sell," she says. "I may find a really interesting pot and be able to sell it to the client along with the plantings and service."

Christensen has been able to market this service through presentation. Neighbors of clients see the beautifully designed pots and inquire about them. Christensen says she's also found a great opportunity through displaying her container presentations at a local inn. She provides the property with some container gardening, and in exchange the inn lets her put her company name on all the pots.

"The innkeeper has a holiday tour that goes through the inn, where guests look at all the decorating," says Christensen. "That's been a wonderful opportunity for us to get this service out there.... We provide them with beautifully decorated pots and they let us market ourselves. It's a win-win."

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

### » SERVICE SNAPSHOT

**COMPANY:** Christensen Landscape Services LLC

**HEADQUARTERS:** Northford, CT

**NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES:** 50

**ADD-ON:** Container gardening

**WHY:** It provides a variety of billable services that the crew can add while they're already on the property doing other tasks. It also keeps the company in regular touch with clients.

**OVERALL SERVICE BREAKDOWN:** 50/50 maintenance and design/build

**CLIENTELE:** 90% residential; 10% condominiums and commercial properties

