

Landscaping Your Yard: It's More Than Laying Sod

Like home decor, your yard, garden or patio can be an extension of your personality and lifestyle.

story by Noelle Chorney

Preferences, dislikes and little quirks are often evident in landscaping choices. My own personal quirk, when it comes to plants, is that if I can't eat them I'm not interested in caring for them. My potted herb selection reflects that.

Whether you're updating your yard or considering a radical change, here are expert tips on putting a personal stamp on your outdoor space.

Think of Your Yard as an Outdoor Room

Megan Payne of Wilson's Greenhouse and Garden Centre points out that if you think of your yard as an extension of your home, you may find it easier to imagine creative changes or additions. You use your kitchen for cooking, your TV room for watching TV, your bedroom for sleeping – what do you want to do in your backyard? If your answer is sleep, plant trees to hang a hammock or design around your existing hammock tree to make it more private. If you want to entertain, design a deck that's big enough to hold 20 guests. If you want to relax in beautiful and fragrant surroundings, install garden paths and benches, plant flowers and consider raised beds for growing vegetables.

Look at the Big Picture

Landscaping experts take cues from their clients' homes when making recommendations. Neil Robinson of

Garden Architecture and Design walks through both house and yard to get an overall feel for the type of surroundings a client prefers. He makes suggestions based on his observations. You can do the same thing by asking yourself some basic questions.

First, take a look at aesthetics. From a beauty standpoint, looking at the big picture involves determining how you want to use your backyard. Do you want a secluded reading spot or your own holiday area at home? Do you want to host neighbourhood barbecues or sunbathe on your deck? Industry trends show that many people are looking for more privacy than the traditional raised deck provides. They want shade, quiet and a relaxing outdoor area away from neighbours' eyes. Some homeowners want more than one deck, each with different functions. Once you know what you want, you can organize your outdoor spaces to meet your needs.

Second, look at functionality, particularly water flow. Is the area around your home properly drained? If soil angles toward your house, rather than away from it, moisture in your yard will flow toward your home and eventually damage the foundation. That can lead to damp basements and unhealthy indoor environments – primarily from mould. It can cost thousands of dollars in improvements simply to maintain your property value.

According to James Polley at Allan's Landscaping, Ltd. dealing with water flow problems to prevent potentially devastating problems in both new and older homes is a common part of the job. Redirecting roof drainage can be part of the treatment. Proper landscaping prevents water draining along house foundations, channelling it instead to areas of your yard that need water. Also, soil built up around your home acts as an insulator – 30% of heat is lost through basements. Combined with a proper slope away from your home, your basement will stay warmer and drier.

Landscape consultants can integrate time and cost saving devices into new and redone yard designs. Directing slopes toward tree roots, for example, can give your trees extra water every time it rains... without your having to lift a finger.

Budget Your Time AND Money

Polley recommends deciding how much time you want to spend building and maintaining your yard. This will help determine how involved a landscaper will be. Ask for a consultation based on your needs. Hire someone to do the hard landscaping, such as building beds and laying topsoil, and do the rest yourself. Or sit back and let them do the whole thing. Just sign on the dotted line.

The amount of money you spend will also determine the amount of work you do yourself. For maximum results

spending as little as possible, prepare to invest in sweat equity. A nice balance is to plan the work in phases. Landscaping consultants commonly create phased designs that can be built over several years.

Short Term Effort, Long Term Gain

What's your take on maintenance over the long term? Do you want to do the minimum and get out of there? Do you love cutting grass? How much access to water do you have? These questions will determine how much money and effort you put into your yard at the outset.

Grass is one of the fastest and cheapest landscape elements to install. Over the long term, however, it is maintenance intensive. It requires aeration, adequate water, mowing and fertilization to look

green and lush. Other options may cost more up front but will require less effort to maintain down the road – leaving you more time to enjoy your yard.

One long-term low maintenance approach is xeriscaping, the practice of using drought tolerant and hardy plants in landscape design. By blending these plants with moisture-conserving mulches, you can have a beautiful and low-maintenance yard with little effort. Xeriscaped yards require a little more planning and therefore cost a little more up front. Landscape designers will need to know how you plan to use your yard, if you need a grassy area for the kids to play on, for example. You can still have grass, but by surrounding it with less demanding plants the upkeep will be minimal.

Finishing Touches

Once you've worked out how your yard will look and function, add the personal touches. Local greenhouses employ knowledgeable staff who can help with everything from a single flowerbed to the full meal deal. Megan Payne has these tips.

Beyond Garden Gnomes. Garden accessories are becoming more and more sophisticated. Mix them in pathways among foliage, add a chair or bench in a secluded spot or place a gazing ball in a prominent part of your garden.

Just Add Water. Yards don't have to be all about decks and plants. Focal points such as ponds and water fountains are popular too. Whether you have a consultant plan and build it, or take a class at your local greenhouse and do it yourself, a bubbling spring can provide hours of pleasure with minimal maintenance.

Contain Yourself. If you choose low maintenance perennials for your yard, brighten up your deck and focal points with container gardening. Potted plants are a great way to add colour without too much water or upkeep. And don't confine yourself to plants in those planters. Remember the water fountain - try that in a pot! 🍀

When considering landscape design and installation costs, keep in mind that 15% of your real estate value is landscaping, not including drainage issues. Use the value of your home as a guide for how much to invest.