

essentials

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HOW DOES YOUR GARDEN GROW?

Not all landscape projects pay off. We'll tell you which ones do.

BY LESLIE LAND

Do you crave a tranquil pond surrounded by cascading plants and moss-covered rocks? A flagstone patio with a built-in stainless-steel gas grill and a custom bar? Or do you want both?

Welcome to the club. Spending on landscape design and installation has more than tripled in the past five years, hitting \$14.3 billion in 2002. While much of this is spent on the classic "10% of the value of house and land" that should go into landscaping a bare lot, quite a bit is devoted to upgrading. With help from low interest rates, homeowners are shelling out \$30,000 to \$50,000, sometimes more, to build paradise in the backyard, installing waterfalls and pools, planting whole parks' worth of trees and shrubs. "People really want to distinguish their property," says Bob West, editor of *Lawn & Landscape*, a trade magazine. "It's no longer a matter of keeping up with the Joneses; people want to *be* the Joneses."

But if your goal is adding to your resale value, being the Joneses can burn you; a lot of the sexiest landscape trends cost far more than they return. Here's



Step this way to a successful sale: Wide walkways and lush plantings bring buyers in.

The six most important words in yard improvement: curb appeal, curb appeal, curb appeal.



WHICH PAYS?

The pond (left) looks serene, but it's a pain to maintain, so buyers may not pay extra for it. They are more likely to pay a premium for the flagstone patio (right).

our guide to what's hip and what's too hip. We take three critical areas—backyards, water features and front yards—and show you the savviest ways to spend your money. For those who might want or need professional help, see below for tips on hiring a yard pro. And don't miss our short treatise on trees on the next page. Finally, one caveat: The price ranges we list reflect the broad regional differences in landscaping costs,

but what's worth doing and what's not remains the same everywhere.

THE BACKYARD PARADISE

All over the country, the backyard has replaced foreign shores as a place to escape to and relax. As Jim McCutcheon of HighGrove Partners in Smyrna, Ga. puts it: "People want to create a safe

environment at home rather than taking that trip to Tahiti." They're adding hot tubs to the pool area, planting rare trees beside marble benches and installing landscape lighting to create a serene mood. And it's not a matter of either/or; homeowners want it all. "The lots are getting smaller," says Kim Bertotti, a co-owner of Bertotti Landscaping in Novato, Calif., "and they *still* want a play area, a vegetable garden, a water feature and an outdoor dining area." Bertotti's not talking about putting a hibachi on the picnic table. "We've been getting more and more of these outdoor kitchens with a stove and barbecue, and maybe a little arbor," she explains.

These escapes can be inviting, and real estate agents say they do entice buyers—at first. But they don't necessarily convince buyers to pay extra. And sometimes they act as brakes because not everyone has the same fantasy. You spend \$50,000 on a formal Italian garden and what happens? Buyers want an English cottage garden or an open yard for their kids. Outdoor kitchens go out of fashion faster than the indoor kind, and unlike plants, barbecue pits don't grow lovelier over the years.

WHAT'S WORTH DOING Keep it simple. Build a deck if the house is on a slope (\$10 to \$25 a square foot); a stone patio

Help wanted

Finding a yard pro, whether you have green thumbs or are all thumbs

Most landscape firms offer full service—design, installation, maintenance—but you needn't buy the whole package. If all you want to do is plant a tree, a landscaper can help you pick the appropriate one for your home, deliver it and plant it for you in a suitable spot (the price will vary with the size and type of tree). If you love to garden, consult with a pro on a master plan (\$500 to \$1,500), then roll up your sleeves and dig in.

SOME TIPS ON TITLES *Landscape architects* have academic degrees and are licensed by professional boards of oversight. *Certified landscape professionals* and *certified landscape technicians* have passed tests administered by the National Association of Landscape Contractors. And some states require *landscape contractors* to get a license (check to see if your state requires one at www.contractors-license.org). While states oversee financial soundness to varying degrees and professional associations make sure members have the requisite skills, only previous jobs can show you what those skills have wrought and only previous clients can describe how well their needs were met. Real pros provide plenty of references. To find a landscaper, try contacting the **American Society of Landscape Architects** (888-999-2752; www.asla.org), **Associated Landscape Contractors of America** (800-395-2522; www.alca.org), **Association of Professional Landscape Designers** (717-238-9780; www.apld.org). —L.L.

if the land is level (\$8 to \$25). Or expand what you have. Adding outdoor living space can pay back 100% or more, according to realtors. That includes "taking back" areas of your yard that are unusable because they're too close to busy roads or neighbors. Just screen them out with a living fence (a 25-foot hedge will cost \$400 to \$1,500, depending on the size and kind of planting).

WATER, WATER EVERYWHERE

"Water features are huge, from a little \$3,000 reflecting pool to \$200,000 waterfalls," reports Steve Pattie of Pattie Group in Novelty, Ohio. "We have two crews doing nothing else all year long." And ornamental features aren't the only thing that's hot: Everywhere except in

maintenance, which is not a plus. And pools, because of the risk of drowning, are a liability in more ways than one. Even in Florida, says Sebring, Fla. real estate agent Chip Boring, pools return no more than 50% of their cost.

WHAT'S WORTH DOING The most popular water feature, measured by how many go in, is also the one that makes the most sense: a zoned irrigation system on automatic timers that lets you water different areas (lawn, trees, flower beds) according to their specific needs. It may not sound sexy, but it quickly pays you back, cutting way down on water use, which helps in times of drought restrictions and cuts your water bill. It also makes it much easier to protect your investment in plants. And buyers attracted to the landscape will

also be attracted to the fact that it's easy to maintain. (A multizone system for a quarter-acre yard will cost \$2,000 to \$8,000.)

PUTTING UP A GREAT FRONT

Forget the border of marigolds beside the concrete walk. Front-yard fashions these days run to flowering trees, sculptural evergreens and flagstone paths that wind beneath lovely rose arbors. It's a good thing that the six most

important words in landscaping are curb appeal, curb appeal, curb appeal.

"The front yard pays the greatest dividends," says Scott Griffith of ERA Griffith Realty in Brighton, Mich. Why? Because, as Bill Lincicome of HighGrove puts it, "there's nothing better than having somebody desperately want to go in your house, and that begins in the front yard."

WHAT'S WORTH DOING Before you start on the enhancements, don't forget Tidy Up 101: Prune overgrown shrubs, especially those that block

A sure thing

You can't go wrong with a tree.

No other landscape investment promises a bigger return: Property with mature trees can bring as much as 20% more than treeless land, while young trees themselves cost very little. But not all trees are wise buys. European white birch, for instance, is prone to insect damage and often short-lived; a white oak can grow to 80 feet—not good in front of a bungalow. Landscapers have this kind of knowledge, the equipment to dig large holes and—usually—replacement guarantees, so it's a smart idea to hire one at tree-planting time. Prices for trees—and the planting thereof—vary with size, which is measured by height for evergreens and by caliper (inches in diameter at a set height from the ground) for hardwoods like maples and crab apples. Small trees (1½-inch to three-inch caliper hardwoods, six- to eight-foot evergreens) run \$150 to \$500 each. Larger trees (three- to six-inch caliper hardwoods, 12- to 18-foot evergreens) are about \$450 to \$800. —L.L.



THINK TREES

Well-planted (and well-placed) trees can bump up your land value by 20%.

the far North, hot tubs and spas dot the landscape like mushrooms after a rain, and pools have morphed from rectangular tanks into aspects of high design.

In Florida, for instance, customers want "things like really awesome lagoon-type pools," says Chris Phillips of the Clearwater, Fla. landscaping firm Phillips Environmental. He also gets many calls for elaborate custom fountains with water jets and other splashy effects.

Unfortunately, water features are high

windows or doors, and clear weedy areas. Then move on to the turf: Patch any sketchy grass with seed or new sod and fertilize (\$200 to \$600 per 1,000 square feet). Next, progress to new plantings and the upgrading of hardscape like the front steps or the driveway. If funds are limited, spend them on flowering shrubs, small trees and perennials to help frame the house and distinguish it from the neighbors' (\$2,000 to \$6,000—plus for a quarter-acre lot). If necessary—and it will be when your neighbors have done it—widen the front walk, replacing concrete or cracked brick with handsome, low-maintenance natural stone (\$8 to \$25 a square foot). **E**

Leslie Land writes the Gardens Q&A column for the New York Times. Her most recent project is The New York Times 1,000 Gardening Questions & Answers (Workman Publishing).

ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY MAYA JACKSON