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Paved With Gold

Grand Landscapes Have Grown Beyond Trophies
for the Wealthy

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Kristyn Reed-Salow and her husband, Mark Salow, moved into their new Northern Virginia home two years ago and immediately set about fixing what they saw as a glaring problem: The rear yard had little depth and its lonely deck offered no privacy from the neighbors.

The couple had lived four years in San Francisco and knew the value of well-designed outdoor spaces. They hired a landscape designer, Laura Donoghue, who spent the next few weeks figuring out why theirs didn't work and, moreover, how to fix it. The result, as the photographs at right show, is a transformation from a dull suburban yard to an inviting outdoor living area that is used every month of the year.

"We felt confined by the edge of the deck," said Salow, 40.

"And what was left," said Reed-Salow, 35, "was an alley of grass that was flooding.

The Vienna couple represent a phenomenon that landscape designers, contractors and nurseries have been seeing for the past few years: a fundamental shift in homeowners' relationships with their yards.

Once the province of the wealthy, landscapes that are professionally designed and constructed are becoming mainstream. The garden is the new kitchen. And like a trophy kitchen, it doesn't come cheap. Expect to pay between \$30,000 and \$50,000 for a typical patio with seat walls, arbor and plantings, according to designers interviewed. For large projects with big-ticket features such as swimming pools and fire pits, the costs can quickly hit six figures. "A hundred [thousand] and up is not out of reach at all," said Donoghue, who works for a McLean company, Carlson Design Build.

In a recent study of the economic impact of the entire horticultural industry, three university researchers calculated that consumers in 2004 spent almost \$40 billion on landscaping services, the sector that provides design, construction and maintenance to residential and commercial consumers. (The figure is not broken down to residential alone.) If you add the amount of business this sector generates for other businesses, the sum climbs to \$58 billion, by far the largest segment in the \$148 billion green industry and one that has grown at an astonishing rate since the late 1980s. It has a sustained average annual growth rate of 6 percent, said Alan W. Hodges, an economist at the University of Florida and one of the study's authors. Growth like this might occur in a new industry such as information technology, but only in spurts. "Rarely do you see it sustained over this period," he said. "This is the kind of stuff we may associate with developing countries like China and Brazil, to see industry growth rates like that."

Designers say they are seeing a cultural and generational shift toward a desire for professionally designed, built and maintained landscapes coinciding with soaring home values, broader acceptance of large mortgage debt and, in Washington at least, a general emphasis on nesting in a threatening world.

They say makeover shows on TV are having an influence, too, even if they don't convey the true time,

effort and cost associated with building a lasting landscape.

"I think the desire for beautiful gardens has increased by leaps and bounds," said Tom Mannion, who owns a landscape design company in Arlington bearing his name.

Today's client profile covers "a whole range of people, a whole range of incomes," said Cynthia Ferranto, a landscape architect in Northwest Washington who specializes in residential projects. "When I started out 12 years ago that wasn't the case at all. It was much more clients who were wealthy."

In that time, there has been a shift in awareness that, just as you might call in an interior designer to shape your home inside, you use a pro outdoors, too. "I love to work in the yard, but it's like decorating: You hire a professional," said Jennifer Dengler, 41, whose home overlooks the South River at Thomas Point near Annapolis. She and her husband, Rick, 45, hired Annapolis landscape architect Mike Prokopchak to make improvements to their one-acre lot, including a redesigned driveway and an elaborate pool that features an edge that seems to vanish into the South River and jets of water colored by laser light. "We enjoy it immensely, and it's wonderful for entertaining," Jennifer Dengler said. "I think most of the people who have done elaborate landscaping are in our age group. It just adds a lot of value to the property." Asked if such alfresco living was part of life growing up in Olney, she said, "Not at all."

The Salows had moved to their house in a subdivision named Coventry Springs near Vienna in December 2003 and knew that the deck, soggy grass and rows of baby Leyland cypress to someday screen the neighbors' view wouldn't hack it. They set about getting a methodical makeover, researching an anticipated return on investment in increased property value, and then sought a design-build firm. They found five, solicited three bids and went with Carlson, even though it wasn't the low bid, because "we felt we would be getting a better design," said Mark Salow, vice president of a wealth management company.

One of the casualties of current design trends may be the deck, which in so many cases stands in the way of connecting people to the outdoors, perched in isolation from the earth. At the Salow house, where two neighboring houses overlook the rear yard, the deck was making the lack of privacy worse by putting its occupants on a pedestal, said Donoghue. In addition, the deck's rails formed an abrupt, arbitrary ending to a space that should have capitalized on the entire length of the home.

The solution is a patio that runs most of the length of the house, is set below the finished floor elevation of the building and is bounded by a bowed seat wall of stone with thick coping on top. The Leyland cypresses have been moved to a new bed in the side yard, and the patio is screened with strategically placed, large, upright hornbeams and bayberry, a big evergreen shrub. The sunken nature of the patio increases the couple's privacy, but "we couldn't screen everything," said Donoghue, "so we didn't even try."

Amenities include patio furniture, a gas-fired patio heater the couple added and a built-in grill that Donoghue configured so that the cook is facing the guests on the patio. Mark Salow takes breakfast out here when the weather is clement, and uses the grill three times a week in summer. On a recent mild winter's evening, he cooked some salmon steaks.

The cost of this elegance? Approximately \$50,000, which covered improvements to other parts of the lot, including new beds and plants, drainage and large steppingstones through the front garden.

The couple saw not just the cost, but its worth, said Reed-Salow, who is the chief financial officer of a technology company. "There was a point we could have scaled back in plantings. We thought there was value in the price," she said.

Designers find sticker shock with some prospects, but for the most part, said Donoghue, "the majority of my clients know what they are getting into. They are calling us for a reason, because we don't

advertise; it's pretty much all word of mouth."

Prokopchak, whose company is called Walnut Hill Landscape Co., said he does find people shocked at a bid, until he explains he is giving them a master plan that they can build in phases. He also breaks down a project into its component costs, "and it's easier for them to digest." He undertook the Dengler project for his former employer, Town Creek Landscaping and Construction.

There are costs not readily apparent both in designing and constructing a landscape properly, including time spent by the designer sourcing 15-foot trees or building adequate drains and footings for walls.

The installation of oversize trees also raises the cost. At another of Donoghue's projects, around a stone Georgian-style mansion in Langley, she installed large shrubs and trees, including nine English boxwood at least five feet around and big maples, to make the setting look mature even though the house and landscape were only finished in the fall.

Christina Howard, 42, said she and her husband, Jerry, 50, had moved from a house where they spent 15 years waiting for the trees to grow, and were determined to have larger plants from the start at their new home in Langley Forest. "We never got to enjoy the shade; this is already attractive," she said.

Even in far more modest projects, homeowners are ordering bigger plant materials. A decade ago, a tree with a trunk two inches in diameter was the norm; now it's three to four inches. These are older, taller, more densely branched trees, and typically twice as expensive to buy.

Prokopchak said there is one other common trait in younger consumers today: an aversion to the do-it-yourself approach that was once the hallmark of home ownership in the United States.

From his vantage point in Orwigsburg, Pa., Frank Heffner has seen the growth in home landscaping from the contractor's side: He rents and sells grading, digging, trenching and hauling equipment. When he and his partners started Ark Enterprises in 2001, they thought they would be catering to commercial contractors but have seen tremendous growth from landscape contractors. About half are now buying rather than renting equipment, a sign that they are getting steady work. "Our sales have probably increased 300 percent in the last two years," Heffner said.

With more business have come more designers, some of whom, like Ferranto, design and oversee construction but don't build, while others, like Donoghue, supply the whole package. A decade ago, Ferranto said, "you could count them on your hand working in D.C., but no more."

"The business just seems endless for all of us," said Donoghue. "Everybody is busy."

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