

# Landscaping pays many dividends

By Susan Brimo-Cox



## It may seem obvious

that a home with landscaping sells faster and at a higher price than one without. But what does that really mean for builders? The American Nursery & Landscape Association cites a study in South Carolina that found that “lots with trees sold for \$1,500 more per acre than lots without similar vegetation.” That means that landscaping can pay dividends.

Whether, as a builder or developer, you make efforts to save existing trees and vegetation on a building site or you install landscaping after a home is completed, landscaping provides additional value to a home—and not just in curb appeal. The ANLA reports trees add economic value by “helping to reduce heating and cooling bills” and provide additional environmental benefits. “A mature tree removes 26 pounds of carbon dioxide from the air each year and releases approximately 13 pounds of oxygen. Plants also control water runoff, a major source of water pollution.”

Home buyers can appreciate saving money and helping the environment, as the movement toward “green building” practices illustrates. And studies have shown home buyers are willing to pay more for “green”

homes. But, as it turns out, builders who implement “conservation development” principles can save money and make more money at the same time.

## Conservation development

Steve Windhager, director of programs at the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center in Austin, Texas, has offered Conservation Development Symposiums for builders and developers for the past three years. He reports there is a growing interest in conservation development.

“A developer who (dedicates) up to two-thirds of a property as an open space and then, on the remaining one third, clusters homes” is an example of conservation development, Windhager says. “Instead of one house per acre you’d have one house on 1/3 acre with two-thirds of the community in green space.” While this results in denser housing, you are preserving the look and feel of the countryside, plus there are fewer roads and less pollution. And a builder or developer can save money with this kind of arrangement, too.

It is “easier to build in blocks and units that are closer together,” plus it saves on infrastructure costs, Windhager points out.

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## Landscaping

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"Infrastructure is localized and, therefore, minimized."

Sometimes this concept doesn't mesh with existing building codes, but Windhager says that when municipalities or county or state agencies understand the concept they are usually agreeable.

Another way to think of conservation development is like selling a golf community without the golf. "Studies have found that people at golf course communities are there not necessarily because they play golf, but

because of the open space," Windhager says. With conservation development, then, builders can build the same number of homes at a reduced cost and, often times, sell the homes at a premium.

### Livable communities

A similar concept described as livable communities also looks at landscaping as a part of the development plan. Studies have shown that being in a green environment is de-stressing for people—adults and children alike. Planning green spaces into communities, then, is an attractive benefit.

Anna Martin, marketing director for the

800-plus-acre Moon Nurseries in Chesapeake City, Md., believes thinking more broadly about landscaping in a new community goes hand-in-hand with "smart growth."

"Planning and building livable communities, which include adding trees, a pedestrian-friendly environment and common green space, these are attractive to new home buyers," Martin observes. "Where you live and what you're surrounded with is just as important as what's in your back yard," she adds.

### Other trends

On one hand, you are seeing more builders striving to save existing trees on their building sites. And, Windhagen points out, it can result in a higher price tag for a property, especially if there are specimen trees on the property. "Developers who take the time to work around big trees that have a premium attached to them will often find the home easier to sell and often for more money, which helps offset any extra expense in building this way.

On the other, you may have heard the phrase "native plants"? Well, they are drawing interest in the building industry, too. Martin reports, "There's a trend toward using native plants, when possible, because they are easy to grow and sustain in a local environment."

Windhagen agrees that making the proper native plant selections can be beneficial for a number of reasons, including: "They don't require as much water, are less likely to die and, once established, don't require a lot of care." But, you need to make sure you select the right plant for the site. That's where a good nurseryman or landscaper can be invaluable.

If you don't already have one, Martin recommends contacting the state landscaper association, but "usually it's through word-of-mouth that you find a good nurseryman or landscaper." Make sure the nursery or company is of good size and has been around a while. Then, ask for recommendations as to what grows well—or not—in your area.

Landscaping may often be an afterthought, but planning landscaping into a building or development project up front has many benefits—for builders, developers, home buyers and the community at large.

(Note: The next Conservation Development Symposium at the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center is scheduled for Sept. 9-10. For more information, visit [www.wildflower.org](http://www.wildflower.org) or call (512) 292-4200.)

(Susan Brimo-Cox is a free-lance writer and editor who monitors trends in the residential construction industry.)

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