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## Landscape Design in the Green Industry

CAREER WORLD  
April/May 2003, pp. 13+

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### Landscape Design in the Green Industry

By Monika G. Vaccaro

• *Feeling "green"? Green, as in "environmentally conscious"? Then a career in landscape design may be just what the doctor ordered.*

"We are in the decade of the environment," says Philip G. Gibson, Ph.D., an instructor at Gwinnett Technical College in **Georgia**. Gibson, who has created more than 3,000 landscape plans, teaches courses as part of Gwinnett's environmental **horticulture** program. "Horticulturists are environmentalists. People are drawn to our programs because they want to be in what is called the 'green industry.'"

*Landscape designers* design outdoor, and sometimes indoor, areas for both residential and commercial spaces. Designs always include **horticulture** (trees, flowers, and ornamental plants) but also may include fountains, walkways, fences, ponds, decks, and lighting.

"There are various types of designs," says Tom Delaney, executive vice president of the Professional Lawn Care Association of America (PLCAA). They may be used for anything from a small project "renovating a landscape with plants, to a medium project with pavers and a wall, to a large project with fountains."

#### What the Customer Wants

A landscape designer must first meet with a customer to find out what he or she wants. A preliminary sketch will help the designer stay on the right track.

Meeting the customer's needs is one of the most critical components of designing a landscape. In fact, in design competitions sponsored by the Associated Landscape Contractors of America (ALGA), it is the most important criterion by which student designs are judged.

"It's what the customer wants and how you translate it," says Edward (Ted) Mitchell, owner of a landscaping and lawn maintenance business in New Jersey. "Some people have trouble envisioning things. You must interpret what they want. If you misinterpret something, then you don't get the job."

#### Looks Good--But Does It Work?

A landscape designer needs to know what looks good to the customer's eye, but must also know what works well in a particular environment. Mitchell says you must be able to advise the customer on what works in that geographical area and what doesn't work.

"There is a huge selection of plants. There are all different types of environments," he says. "Some homeowners who don't use a landscape designer may put trees in places where they actually become a nuisance, even though they may look beautiful at first," says Delaney. "There are challenges in different areas of the country, depending on the weather."

### **Maintenance and More**

An important aspect of any landscape design is the amount of maintenance it will require once the design is installed. "A landscape designer will ask the customer how much maintenance they will want to do," says Delaney. "Having good designs to meet the customer's maintenance expectations is important."

Mitchell notes that success with a landscape design also means avoiding problems before they start. "You'd better be able to identify funguses, molds, and insects," he insists. "[This knowledge] is important to design. [Everything] is all so interrelated. The best landscaper knows what works in the area. It makes [for] a better designer."

### **Presentation Is Everything**

Once the design is complete, it must be presented to the customer. There are now software programs that will "age" the design so that the customer can see what the landscape will look like in several years when the plantings are more mature.

Once approved, the project enters the "build" phase. The designer will typically oversee the landscape installation to ensure it is built according to the approved design.

### **Get Involved Early**

You can get involved in landscape design early by looking into organizations such as a local 4-H club or Future Farmers of America (FFA), which promote student interest in agricultural careers. Taking classes in agriculture is also helpful.

"Students [in high school] should check to see if their school has a horticultural program," says Gibson. "Some high schools even have greenhouses."

Math courses are also useful to the landscape designer. "You have to take a survey and break [the site] into scale," says Mitchell. "You have to consider all elevations, like if you're building steps to a pool apron that's not there. You have to consider the pitches."

### **Field Work a Plus**

By getting out in the field and doing landscape "build" and maintenance, you may work your way into a landscape design career--if you have the creative ability.

"Students out of high school may begin with landscape installation and maintenance and then get to design as part of that business," says Gibson.

"I've seen some of the best landscape design people come out of the field," says Charles Bowers, of Garden Gate Landscaping, Inc., in Maryland. He has hired students following a two-year program. "They have an inherent talent, a design ability."

## Additional Education

In addition to learning by doing, there are programs at colleges, workshops, and certification programs that can help you enter the field.

"There is some sort of horticultural program with a design component at most two-year colleges," says Bowers.

Mitchell agrees. "There are course opportunities at colleges and seminars," he says. "There are all types of horticultural courses."

## Architect vs. Designer

A landscape designer is not the same as a *landscape architect*. They vary in terms of educational requirements and salaries earned. For instance, a minimum of a bachelor's degree (in landscape architecture) and licensing are required in most states to become a landscape architect.

"There is a tremendous opportunity for landscape design in residential areas because landscape architects are more focused on commercial [properties] and homes above a half a million dollars," says Gibson. "Normally designers and architects don't bump up against each other much."

## Never Bored

Delaney believes there is always something new and exciting in landscape design. "Landscape lighting, how the property will look in the night, is something new," he says. "As trends and demands change, you'll never be bored."

Gibson says that there are opportunities for landscape designers, such as running your own business or working for public institutions, such as highway departments. Designers can also do public gardening and professional personal gardening for wealthy individuals.

"A salary of around \$35,000 could be brought in doing this," says Gibson. "It is creative and something where you can see what you've done."

Mitchell agrees. "The lawn maintenance is the bread and butter, but what I love to do is the design."

## Growing Strong

"People are demanding green space," says Gibson. "They have a connection with the earth, and they want a peaceful feeling. Green space is becoming more valuable. Any career associated with the environment is going to flourish."

# Design a Career

Do you have a green thumb? If you answer yes to most of the following questions, a career as a landscape designer may be for you.

I have a desire to work with plants. **Yes/No**

I like to work outdoors as well as indoors. **Yes/No**

I am physically fit. **Yes/No**

I am able to communicate my ideas to others. **Yes/No**

I have solid writing skills. **Yes/No**

I enjoy making presentations. **Yes/No**

I am creative. **Yes/No**

I have some artistic ability. **Yes/No**

I can visualize how things might look. **Yes/No**

I have good math skills. **Yes/No**

I like working with people and have the ability to build customer relationships. **Yes/No**

I like to sell. **Yes/No**

## For More Information

Associated Landscape Contractors of America  
[www.alca.org](http://www.alca.org)

Professional Lawn Care Association of America  
[www.plcaa.org](http://www.plcaa.org)

The National FFA Organization (Future Farmers of America)  
[www.ffa.org](http://www.ffa.org)

## Review/Discuss

- What does a landscape designer do?
- What is the difference between a landscape designer and landscape architect?
- What abilities and interests does it take to succeed as a landscape designer?

### Answers

- *designs outdoor or indoor environments for residences or commercial spaces*
- *A landscape architect is usually licensed, has a bachelor's degree, and works with commercial properties and high-end real estate. A landscape designer needs to fulfill fewer requirements and works primarily on smaller projects.*