

The great outdoors: beautifying a long-term care landscape in a down economy

Craig Ruppert September 30, 2009



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As you face decisions on how to maintain a high standard of living for residents of your nursing home or long-term care facility, there are many elements to consider that can bring value to their daily lives. A pleasant landscape is among one of the most important attributes to making your long-term care facility a place where residents will want to call home and their guests will want to visit. Landscaping, when maintained properly, can lift residents' spirits, bring peace and comfort, encourage exercise in the outdoors and stimulate the senses.

As we continue to face this economic downturn, it may seem easy enough to let your landscaping go by the wayside. However, the recession makes it just that much more important to differentiate your property from other long-term care facilities by providing the daily comforts mentioned above. The good news is that maintaining a healthy and beautiful landscape does not need to cost a fortune. It's very possible to create the environment best suited to your residents' needs, all while staying within your budget. Here are some tips to ensure you're maintaining your property's landscape without breaking the bank.

The first step in this direction is to identify a trusted landscape partner who will work with you to customize a plan to meet your facility's specific needs. (See "*Tips for Hiring a Landscape Contractor*" below.) Seek a landscape contractor who will provide you with creative solutions for maintaining your property within your budget, and discuss with him or her the best way to meet your needs.

High-traffic areas are high-profile areas

As visitors and residents enter your property for the first time, the visible landscape will make a lasting impression. Ensure that impression is a positive one with grounds that are welcoming and attractive. Build your guests' confidence in what your property has to offer by exceeding their expectations at the outset.

High traffic areas such as property entrances, parking lots and pedestrian walkways are a wise place to begin allocating financial resources, as they are typically the most visible. Give these areas a splash of color with clusters of seasonal annuals or flowering bulbs. If these areas are large, incorporating perennials, which last for several years once planted, can provide an array of colors and textures. You might find that perennials cost more initially but they require less long-term maintenance, which will ultimately create a cost-savings.

Popular destinations a priority

Since so much of your residents' sense of "home" has to do with the environment you create for your property, it is important to focus on landscape around the areas that residents frequent. These could be areas around tennis courts or swimming pools, designated picnic areas or gardens. Speak with your landscape contractor about creative and cost effective ways to make these areas appealing destinations for resident gatherings.

Select the best, limit the rest

All plants are susceptible to insects and disease, so limiting the types of plants used for your property will generally help minimize potential issues and the need for treatment. This will not only help your grounds to appear more visually striking and tidy, but will also help to save money. By having larger masses of the same plant in a bed, your contractor will only need to prune along bed edges and sidewalks to maintain a sense of order among plants, minimizing the hours required to maintain the overall property.

Minimize interruptions of your property's serenity

Keeping landscaping maintenance behind the scenes as much as possible will limit interruptions to your property's serene atmosphere. Minimize time spent pruning, trimming and cleaning up by incorporating large flowing beds and sweeping areas of turf into the landscape. This will reduce maintenance costs per square foot compared to smaller areas, and your landscape contractor's mowing time will be decreased with larger, labor-saving equipment.

The natural element

Leverage the climate and natural scenery in which your long-term care facility is located by incorporating native plants into your landscape. As the grounds move away from the main traffic areas, implement those landscape elements that grow on their own and that require minimal maintenance. Allow native grasses to grow to meadow height to reduce the need for cutting to just two to four times a year. Seed outlying areas with native wildflowers and watch

them transform into visual assets. Tactics such as these will reduce necessary maintenance, resulting in even more savings.

Save money by saving resources

Reduce wasted resources and save money with a properly designed irrigation system. Speak with your landscape contractor to ensure you're maximizing water efficiency for your property. Various climates and plant types will require different watering techniques, and amount of water used and time of day watering is done are also important considerations to be discussed when identifying the best cost-saving solutions.

Maximize your landscape contractor's value

Your residents and property are unique, so it's important that your landscape partner fully understands your and their needs. Challenge your landscape contractor to provide creative solutions to maximize the appeal of your property and also save money. He or she should be able to guide you as to which plants will create the most aesthetically pleasing grounds and which ones should be eliminated, how and when to water them, and how best to maintain them, all while staying within your budget.

Share your property's goals with your landscape contractor and request they put their expertise to work in developing solutions to meet them. Together, you will be able to provide your residents with a beautiful place to call home.

Tips for Hiring a Landscape Contractor

Hiring the right landscape contractor can make or break your project. So it pays to spend the time up front to ensure you are working with someone who is qualified, reputable and also a good match for your project. To do so, consider the following:

* Ask to interview the field manager who will be your primary point of contact on the site. Even great contractors can have weak field managers. So it's important to know who will be there weekly to maintain your property and if they are capable of meeting your needs. Your contractor's front line person is critical to your landscape's success, so find out if he/she is educated about proper landscape procedures, is easy to communicate with and trustworthy enough that you want to work with him/her.

* Is the contractor capable of handling multiple projects? In the event that you decide to use them on more than one project, does he/she have operating procedures in place that will ensure continuity on multiple projects so that you won't have to recreate the wheel with each new addition?

* Does the contractor have the ability to properly manage your property? Do they have the expertise to manage a comprehensive package including turf fertilization, weed control and

snow removal to irrigation maintenance, tree pruning and mowing? Having multiple contractors to handle related areas of your landscape maintenance can lead to significant finger pointing, which can be eliminated by having a contractor who can handle it all.

* Can the contractor provide you with design ideas in addition to just cutting your grass? Landscapes evolve over time, so you want to be sure that you are hiring a contractor who can not only maintain what you currently have but can improve it with ideas for enhancements as well.

* Does the contractor have structure and systems in place that will ensure quality, safety and reliability? Most contractors have the best of intentions. But asking them to tell you about their company's safety program or infrastructure may help ensure that they will be able to follow through with the plans you develop.

* Does the contractor have a stake in your project's success? It's a good sign when a contractor you are considering is performing work right next door to your site and is well known in your community. It increases the likelihood that he/she will do the right thing if you have a problem with your job, as they will be invested in keeping their reputation within the community in good standing.

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