

Are you yard-obsessed, jealous as you jog past your next-door neighbor's velvety lawn, ogling the magnolia tree down the block, and coveting that rose-covered arbor around the corner? Then you're not alone. Gardening has become America's number-one hobby, according to the National Gardening Association. New Jersey landscaping firms say that despite a tough economy, homeowners are more interested than ever in improving their outdoor spaces.

"The snow had barely melted before homeowners started calling," says Drew Madlinger of Madlinger Exterior Design in Branchburg. "Perhaps it was the bad winter that made people long for their gardens, but there's something else afoot. These days a lot of homeowners would rather make their own backyard into a resort than travel to one. Right now we're working on some very elaborate projects with outdoor kitchens and fireplaces, terraced flower beds and lawns that can stand up to kids and entertaining."



PLANNING MATTERS

Anybody driving around the Garden State knows landscaping firms are ubiquitous. How do you choose the right one?

"There's more to it than just getting a quote for what it will cost for a crew to come in and mow and blow for half an hour," warns Mike Kukol, owner of Horizon Landscape Company in Wyckoff. "Deal with somebody who understands plant materials, can design a landscape if that's what you need, and keeps up with great new paving materials, irrigation and lighting products."

Madlinger agrees: "Actually the process requires homeowner to answer almost as

many questions as he should ask the landscaper," he says. "I always ask the homeowners what kind of garden they see in their minds. But many times that's not what suits their property or lifestyle. Once they've answered key questions about the way they'll use the yard, a different vision may emerge. Will they entertain out there? Do they need a lawn for the kids to play on? What plants do they like? How much maintenance can they put up with? Once we have those answers, we can go ahead and plan a garden they'll love and that makes sense."

COMMON MISTAKES

Landscapers say many mistakes can be made, but most find one point especially prickly. "Homeowners buy plants without knowing their growth habits," says Kukol. "They should pick plants that grow only to the size they want. If they need a five-foot-high screening between their yard and the neighbor's, they shouldn't put in something that grows 10 feet high. It'll have to be chopped back all the time."

Many homeowners are cutting down on their lawn sizes while enlarging flower beds and areas of groundcovers and mulch.

correct mixture of color and texture, and, of course, curb appeal. Beyond the greenery there are special features to consider, from fencing to fountains.

Surprisingly, there's little difference between designing a landscape and an interior, according to garden planners. They advocate that you think of a tree or shrub as you would a chair or sofa in a room. Then think of a lawn as the rug, and flowers, vines and groundcovers as accessories. It's all in the layering, they claim. This is what contributes most to the finished product.

YARD MAKEOVERS

Giving a tired or overgrown yard a new look is a challenge that both Kukol and Madlinger cherish.

Madlinger adds that nurseries often mislabel plants' maximum height, so either get a knowledgeable planner or do some homework. "These days you can look up any plant, shrub and tree on line."

He lists other considerations, such as planting a shade tree in the right place, the view of the garden from the house, the cor-

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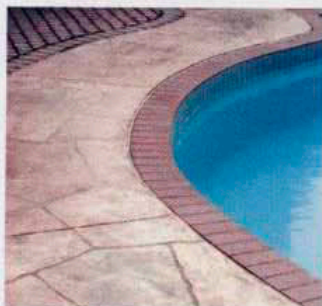
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"When you take over an old garden, you have to assess," says Kukol. "Why doesn't this yard look right? Why is that shrub sickly? What's the matter with the lawn? What was originally planned? Only after assessing numerous variables can you make a yard better. And once it's in shape, it has to be maintained. Only proper maintenance can keep a design consistent."

"I always walk the landscape with the homeowner to evaluate various features," Madlinger adds. "Together we'll decide what can be kept, what can be transplanted to another spot and what has to go."

BRAVE NEW LAWN

Tired of high water bills, weekly mowings and a schedule of fertilizing and weed-control applications, homeowners are taking a good look at new options.

Xeriscaping, a term based on the Greek word for dry, is one of them. It uses native plant materials rather than exotic imports. The colors and textures of indigenous vines, shrubs and perennial flowers are played up, and there are many types of grasses, some drought-resistant. So even if you're conservation-minded, you needn't neglect your lawn.

Madlinger says many of his clients are cutting down on their lawn sizes while enlarging flower beds and areas of ground-covers and mulch. However, he favors the inclusion of a lawn in practically every landscape. "It creates a balance," he notes.

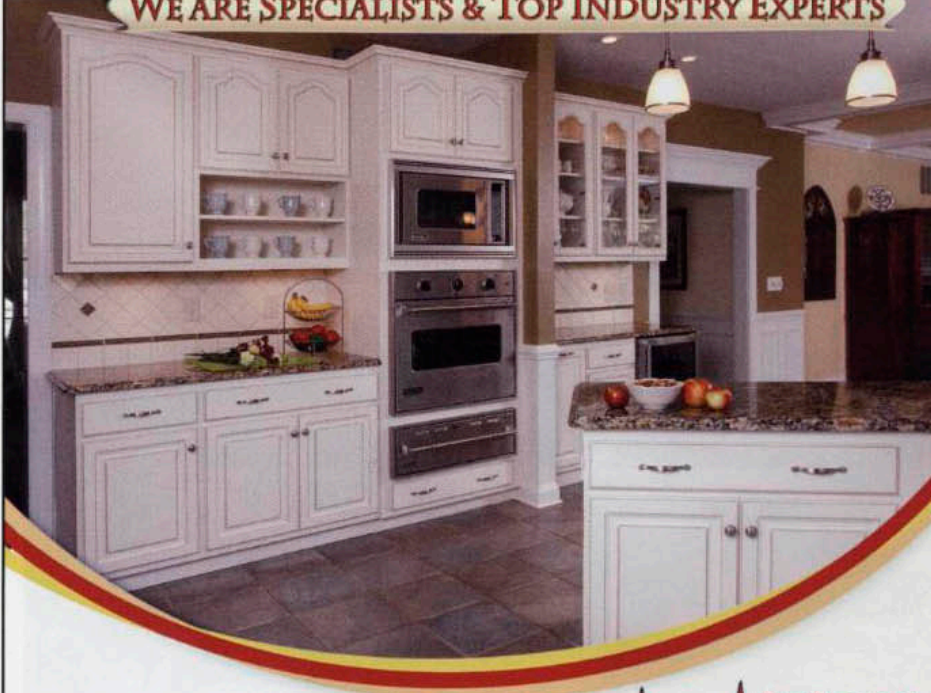
Madlinger is enthusiastic about a new perennial grass called Hunterdon County Mix. "It's a mix of four kinds of fescue, two kinds of ryegrass, and bluegrass," he explains. "It's an excellent all-purpose mix and even does well in shade. I just checked on a project where we seeded 15,000 square feet with this mix just two weeks ago and it's already a full short mat of grass."

HIRING A LANDSCAPER

If you want a good landscape-maintenance firm, it isn't enough to open the phone book and sign up with the first company you see. Remember, not every

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WHAT DOES IT COST?

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Kukol suggests you get references from each company and look at the gardens they're taking care of. Make sure the service has business, liability and workers' comp insurance, and ask whether they provide work beyond lawn care. Ask to see the company's portfolio. Study the pictures for their overall effects as well as clean edging and healthy plants. Make sure the firm gives proper notice before spraying chemicals, as you'll want kids and pets out of the way. And get everything in writing.

BEWARE OF INVADERS

Invasive plants are a big concern, so get the firm doing your lawn to guarantee it works with clean blades. Once the seeds of garlic mustard get into your yard, you'll be fighting pesky, tall spikes for forever.

Madlinger points out that the State of New Jersey now lists many popular varieties as invasive plants. These include such old standbys as forsythia, vinca and Boston ivy.

"They can be pruned and kept within bounds in most home gardens," explains Madlinger, "but next to fields or forests they can become a problem. Heck, I have even seen Japanese barberry in the middle of a forested area. These plants are



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Courtesy of Sweeney Landscape Services

problems because they take over native plants. It's becoming a serious problem in New Jersey. The good news is there are many excellent substitutes for the old garden favorites. For example, there's a new forsythia that doesn't spread, and it flowers earlier and longer than the old species. There's another plant we're using a lot now. It's called Fothergilla Mr. Airy, and it blooms before the leaves come on. It's deer-resistant, too." 

LANDSCAPING MYTHS

Yard care is mired in myths. Here are a couple:

It isn't true that you should water your lawn in the evening to conserve water. Doing so is harmful. The water ends up sitting on top of the grass, allowing lawn fungus and disease to fester.

If I mow my grass shorter, I won't have to do it as often. Not so. You'll rob your lawn of its ability to produce sugar from photosynthesis, exposing sensitive root systems to excessive sun and giving weeds a leg up.



Photo by Peter Raymond

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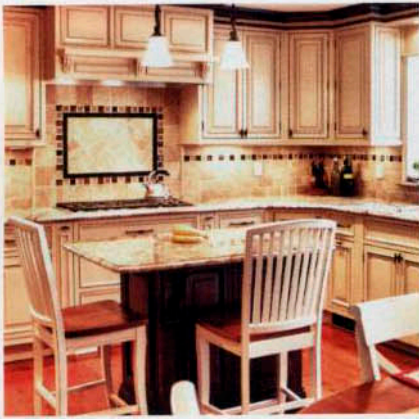
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"The Hampton" by Canterbury Design

This Hampton-inspired kitchen features white shaker inset cabinets, a mantel-style hood and illuminated mullion glass cabinet doors, blending seamlessly with the new coffered ceiling. The matte look of honed black granite tops, maple block top at the bar, bead board and white subway tile backsplashes, with a white Rohl farm sink, complete the theme. The end result of this inspired project is a home enjoyed by all that feels like summer year round.

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