

Yards to Paradise

By Max Phelps

*Creativity In Landscaping
Must Successfully
Navigate a Few Mine
Fields*

It is a rewarding labor to help bring people's dreams into reality for them. Sometimes it involves helping them build the dream. Not everyone knows what they want. For others it's convincing them you can actually do what it is they are asking to have done. And perhaps the task more challenging than creating a masterpiece of a landscape for a client is sometimes resisting the urge to price a job a little too cheap to be sure and not lose the work. Today's topic may not help with designing the pretty yard, but if it clears some of the mines to successful landscaping then it will have helped both the customer and the landscaper.

In 1998 yours truly earned over \$30,000 before taxes laboring for a landscaping partnership in Lexington, Kentucky. The owners paid me once I clocked in, except for subtracting out thirty minutes at lunch time, for all the hours until I clocked out. Then, just driving to and from the office were the only hours I didn't get paid for.

As a landscape and water garden contractor, I may take more money to the bank than the \$30,000 per year, but I would hasten to say that when all the bills are paid—then taking what is left and dividing it up among the hours driving from the office to the job, the hours going to meet someone and then the hours to accurately design and calculate costs of implementing my design—then searching out and acquiring and transporting all the necessary materials to the job site, getting all the 'ducks lined up right'—then actually using a shovel, hammer, pitchfork or whatever including the old back and getting the hands dirty—then when the customer is satisfied you've done your job, get him to pay for the lovely work without extra trips to collect the next day and the like—then do the banking, the bill paying, and yes the taxes too, it takes billing for more than thirty or forty dollars per hour for the time actually sweating on the job in order to have even minimum wage when it's divided among the hours that go into a successful design and completion of a major landscaping project.

Another way to say the same thing is that in 1998 the efforts of my crew and one other crew made enough money to not only pay our own wages, plus benefits, but we paid for the architect and for the salesman who obtained the jobs, as well as paid pretty well for the two owners of the company. Each hour I worked had to earn enough to pay my wage, pay the office help and pay the owners, and then actually have a little left for PROFIT, (for growing the company is a main reason for not just clocking in and out and going home to relax when the day is done).

I think some of my good customers think I should be able to quote their job for a whole lot less than the big company with all the non-productive people getting paid. Let me say, as a do-it-all contractor, I am those other people doing the 'un-productive' chores too. And if I am like one self-employed contractor I know who charges \$15 an hour for his time on the job and nothing for all the other hours, it's no wonder he has to have a real job for forty hours a week so he can do what he loves the rest of his daylight hours. As for me, I know I earn every dollar I charge, and I sleep good at night. (And occasionally I fail to get a job I bid on because someone mistakenly thought I was about to get paid more per hour than what they make at their job.) OK, too much about me. And not enough on mines

and traps one can encounter on the way to a lovely lovely landscape masterpiece.

A homeowner is smart to carefully go over a landscape plan and to come to see and understand it before signing a contract. For once two people agree to something, it's not so simple to change it. And the landscaper is not going to want to do extra things, nor re-do things, without an additional charge, additions the customer may decide they want. Both the contractor and the homeowner should know what is about to take place and have some idea what the finished product will look like.

Another little mine in the sand can be working with the homeowner who always thinks he has to get you to give a few dollars on your price or get you to throw in a couple 'little things' he is not being charged for. If the landscaper sees this behaviour coming, he is smart to pad his bid a little higher to begin with, so he can give a little to these folks and not have to close his notebook and go home without the job because he already quoted it as cheaply as he was willing to do it for.

Having a good reputation, which is earned by both doing super work at a fair price, as well as being a man of your word and not promising more than you deliver, but delivering without fail on what you promise. Word of mouth spread by satisfied customers is worth hundreds if not thousands in advertising. When someone says good things about me, I truly appreciate it. (And even if I get the rare negative comment, if I learn from having not impressed that particular client in some fashion, it is still to be appreciated that they shared with me the part where they think I could have done better.) As a matter of habit, I generally include a plant or two for a customer that is more than what we agreed to; it may not be expensive, but it does a lot for the feeling of getting a little extra.

It is smart to charge for time and travel costs to consult with a prospect in any business. (The exception here would be where they have hired a professional to draw up a blueprint, and my job is to simply put my price on doing it for them.) When someone who has an improperly functioning project done by some competitor, it is imperative to charge for one's expertise. For a simple diagnosis of what is not working might possibly get me a thank you, but when I've told the homeowner what was not done right, they usually then go call the guy who did it the first time and let him fix it. If I don't ask for money to cover my gas and time, I won't get it covered. We all know somebody has to pay for those sorts of trips...but it shouldn't be the one that is giving the useful advice.

(And once you've seen two or three messes or gombs created by a competing contractor, any glee or thrill goes away fast upon reflection you spent a half day of productive time and twenty-five dollars in gas to look at the mess, while telling them it will now cost more to tear it out and redo it correctly than what they paid originally, knowing full well they aren't going to ask 'where do I sign'?)

Just as risky as the unexploded grenade on a battlefield, so is giving money to someone you don't know without asking for references (and then actually checking those references and any other source of information both good and bad on the company or owner).

A slick well-groomed salesman can talk an eskimo into buying ice cubes sometimes. But who is going to do the work? Who is going to come review the finished job and collect the balance due? Avoid this problem by asking to meet the person or

persons who will be tearing up your yard before you sign the contract. (And don't even think about giving the fast talker a deposit without a contract proposal you are given time to read and understand.) (How many voted for Obamacare without reading it...and how many would have NOT signed on if they'd really understood what was in the bill?) Be the same way with hiring a contractor, know what you're getting and what it's going to cost you. Sometimes we all face unexpected snares along the way. Do you suspect a landscaper who just put in a \$50,000 landscape masterpiece in Boulder, Colorado is going to have an issue collecting on a project that washed away in the flood? Or one where half the plants died from flood or drought...conditions not considered when the deal was struck.

Sometimes the utility company may mark paint all over the yard, but when you get a backhoe and start digging five feet away and tear up a fiber optic cable, or worse yet a natural gas line that could blow up the whole block, who has to be responsible? Problems not foreseen can be problems indeed when they have to be dealt with under pressure.

Once in awhile I bid a commercial job. Maybe a municipal job. There is always the risk of somebody who knows personally the chairman, the judge, the mayor, and so forth getting the job even though their proposal was not better nor cheaper. And maybe one or more even were shown my bid before they turned theirs in. Not all bids are sealed bids, nor are all done on a level playing field. Only when the rules are understood and they are applied to everyone alike, only then is it good to spend valuable time quoting work. It's unproductive to play with a stacked deck. The honest official, committee, chairman, etc., will be doing everyone a favor (expect special interests). Such persons in positions of responsibility spend wisely the people's money they are entrusted with. (How rare this is in politics!)

So, navigating the obstacles can be half the chore when it comes to creating a work of art with plants and

stones and mulch and the like for an expectant homeowner. Finding that special client who appreciates the extra attention of the landscape artist who knows their stuff and enjoys working—let's just say, I've been blessed to meet quite a few and have had the pleasure of placing some of my artwork where they can appreciate it regularly from both outside or inside their castle.

*The author is a landscaper.
Comments and ideas welcome.
Email:
waterfallsinyards@yahoo.com*



AUTO FINANCING?
WE CAN HELP!
Call Amy or Bill or apply online
mannchrysler.com
859.625.1422
Mann

Chadwell Family Dentistry

Accepting New Patients
Registered Hygienist
In Network with the following insurances:
Delta Dental Premiere
Guardian
Anthem
Call today for an appointment.
606-256-5812
325 Richmond Street

Premium Windows
\$**89** **\$0 DOWN!**
PER MONTH
JUST 36 MOS.!

- Eight 4000-Series windows
- No hidden fees
- Solar-Zone glass
- Energy Star approved
- Basic Installation

LIFETIME WARRANTY

Window World
"Simply the Best for Less"

• WINDOWS • SIDING • DOORS • AWNINGS

Free In-Home Estimates: 606-258-1774
142 American Greeting Rd., Corbin • WindowWorld.com

*PAYMENT BASED ON 7.99% A.P.R. UNSECURED LOANS. TERM LENGTH LISTED IN AD. BANK APPROVAL NEEDED.

COLLEGE MATH READINESS COURSE

4:30 PM - 6:30 PM
Each Tuesday October 1st – December 3rd
10 week course

Course Overview:

- Opportunity to "brush-up" on mathematics skills prior to taking a college level mathematics course.
- Combines face-to-face, two-hour class with online learning.
- Small class size to provide more individual attention from a dedicated instructor.
- Post-test on December 10th.

FREE!
Provided by Rockcastle Adult Education
Instructor: Scott Adams
Location: Rockcastle Adult Education Center - 955 West Main Street, Mt. Vernon

Register Now **Registration required: Call (606) 256-0218 prior to first class on October 1st.**

Bittersweet Festival
October 4th & 5th
Downtown Mt. Vernon

FUN FOR THE WHOLE FAMILY!

**FREE inflatables
Vendor booths
Parade
Music
Cloggers
5K run/ 2 mile walk
Car Show
Much More!**

Schedule of Events

**Tuesday, October 1st
Beauty Pageant**

Friday, October 4th
4:00- 5:00 pm---Romp & Stomp
5:00- 6:15 pm---Ruby Powell
6:30- 7:45 pm---Level Green
8:00-11:00 pm--- Medley Boys (Street Dance)

Saturday, October 5th
7:30 am --- Bittersweet 5k run / 2 mile walk.

10:00-11:00 am--- Open Mic
11:00-12:00--- Bittersweet Cloggers
12:00-1:00 pm--- Parade
1:00-2:30---Jake & Jordan
2:45-4:00---Wilderness Road
4:15-5:45---Carl Doan Band
6:00-7:45---Old Town Project
8:00-11:00---Wild River

**Thursday, October 3rd
Bittersweet Cruise In**
on
Main Street- 5-8p.m.

Demonstrations
Rockcastle Shaolin Do
Friday & Saturday---6 pm
Toodle Langa---Recycling Art (free for the kids)

For more information, contact City Hall at (606) 256-3437