



BEST THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND WHEN PLANNING LANDSCAPING

LOCAL LANDSCAPE experts hear a chorus of similar requests. Throughout the year, as they visit front and backyards and field queries from homeowners interested in amping up their gardens and outdoor spaces, experts say homeowners want low-maintenance, four-season landscapes that will serve as verdant backdrops for outdoor entertaining. From postage stamp-sized patios to multiple sprawling acres decked out with pools and outdoor kitchens, Northern Virginia landscapers are tasked with greening our surroundings, making them as pleasing and practical as possible.

How to get started? Talk to your neighbors about their curb appeal. If you like what you see, ask them for referrals. Either way, start doing some research. Spend some time online paging through their photo galleries and reviews.

No matter how green your thumb, if you're looking to redo your yard, it's a good idea to keep a folder of your likes from magazines or pin pictures to Pinterest. That will show potential contractors where your interests lie and get the conversation started.

Their biggest requests are for low-maintenance landscapes, but experts say if homeowners could ask for "no maintenance," they would. Truth is, some amount of upkeep—even if it's very little—is still required.

"We do a lot of paver patios," says Ali Hashimi, president of NOVA Landscape and Design. The square footage varies, but he might create focal points with a Japanese maple, its weeping

branches of burgundy foliage providing near year-round color. He'll add sitting walls and complement them with sensible, attractive plant combinations, using natives when appropriate. Hashimi likes the contrast of reds and yellows, selecting a brilliant dwarf shrub called Firepower Nandina and pairing it with a cascading Mophead Cypress.

"People are really looking to get outdoors and take advantage of that space that they do have," he says. Beyond the playful spring, summer and fall months of entertaining, Hashimi says, evergreens look great year-round, and a fire pit can add warmth and style even in late autumn and winter.

But because everyone wants their backyards in top shape for spring, Rob Groff, president of Groff Landscape Design, says it's never too soon to start planning. "For most companies, if you get ahold of them in January or early February, that gives you enough time to get through the planning process, figure out who you want to use and put down a deposit with somebody so you get on their early spring schedule," Groff says.

But if you miss that window, don't despair. "A lot of people think spring and summer are our busiest times, but it's actually spring and fall," he says. Summer can be a good time to catch contractors because they have fewer simultaneous jobs.

So do your research. Make sure you have the right contractor, and figure out what you like and what you don't, says Groff. "That'll really help in the long run."

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