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Large Installations and Site Prep

## Anatomy of a Landscape Project

*Bid, design, build*

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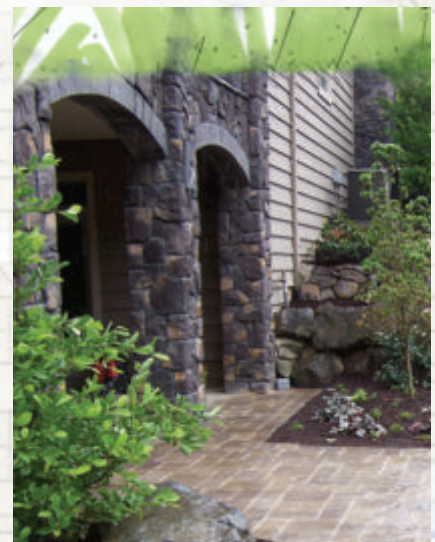
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# Anatomy of a Landscape Project

Bid, design, build

by Wayne Mills

**J**im Lewis, president of Lewis Landscape Services, Inc. ([www.lewislandscape.com](http://www.lewislandscape.com)) in Beaverton, Ore., literally grew up in the business. His grandfather owned Lew's nursery in Salem, Ore., in the 1950s. At age 14, Lewis worked 40 hours a week pulling weeds in between rows of tree seedlings. He did that for two straight summers. He says, "It taught me a good work ethic."

It also made him realize that he did not want to do grunt work. He went to Oregon State and studied business administration, and then took a job at a credit card bank. "It was too robotic and boring for me. After a year and a half, I couldn't stand it anymore," he says. Suddenly, landscaping didn't look so bad.

Lewis says, "I began mowing lawns and started doing the math. I found that if I kept getting more clients, I could actually be making some pretty good money, and I wouldn't even have to be doing all the hard work. 'This could be a pretty decent business,' I kept saying to myself."

*Above, Jim Lewis' previous relationship with the customer combined with Dane De Turk's design landed Lewis Landscape Services its biggest landscape project.*

*Right, Landscape islands were placed throughout the patio to bring balance to the landscape.*

PHOTOS COURTESY OF LEWIS LANDSCAPE SERVICES.



He recalls, "The first few years were very rough, but we have grown every year by 30 to 40 percent since we started in 1996. In 2000 or 2001, we starting getting into landscape design/build and irrigation. We have continued to grow at that same pace, except for 2008. In 2008, we only grew by 8 percent in total sales, but it was better than most companies in the area did. It's still difficult. Being a landscaper in a state where you can only really landscape for about seven or eight months of the year is difficult, but we now do about \$1.2 million in annual sales. We have eight part-time employees in the winter and up to 16 full-time employees in the summer."

The bulk of his business is in residential maintenance accounts, handling about 190 accounts annually, with landscape installs sprinkled in, mostly from existing customers. The company's landscape installs generally run in the \$5,000 to \$20,000 range.

## Bidding wars

In 2007, Lewis was called by a homeowner to bid on a small, front yard, residential landscape job at a three-year-old property in a high-end subdivision in nearby Lake Oswego. Lewis won that contract, which included new irrigation and lighting for the 3,000-square-foot area for around \$30,000. In the course of the job, extras brought the contract up to \$45,000.

Subsequently, the homeowners had a substantial back deck area built using concrete

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# Anatomy of a Landscape Project

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with stone veneer. The contractors for that job had little or no regard for the existing backyard, ruining the irrigation system and, in Lewis' words, "Turned the turf into mush." At that point, the homeowners turned their attention to redoing the backyard.

Although the homeowners were happy with Lewis's work on the front yard, they opened the more substantial, 10,000-square-foot, backyard job up to bidding, inviting Lewis to submit a bid. The scope of this job attracted the larger landscape contractors in the area to the bidding process. As decision time approached for the homeowners, Lewis was left bidding against the largest landscape contractor in the greater Portland area.

Lewis was at a disadvantage in the process at that point since he did not have an in-house landscape architect like his competition did, and they had submitted a plan to the homeowners. Because of the positive relationship Lewis had fostered with the homeowners, he convinced them to share the competition's plan with him.



The site before excavation

## The design

Upon review, Lewis was convinced he could do better on the design, but was still faced with the dilemma of not having his own in-house designer. What he did have, however, was a relationship with freelance designer Dane De Turk, who had previously worked for Lewis for a year and a half.

De Turk received associate's degrees in horticulture and sports and commercial turf-grass management from Michigan State

University. Lewis convinced the homeowners to pay De Turk's fee for a new design.

When asked how he usually designs a landscape, De Turk says, "In terms of my actual process, I see the size, shape and placement of a plant first, followed by texture and then flower color. The organization of these characteristics will define the space you are creating."

After coming to the site, measuring the area and walking the site for two hours, De Turk sat down with the homeowners, who

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Lewis and his crew spent about three days excavating the property.

had slightly differing visions for the design. He says, "The husband liked more of a formal look, and the wife liked more of an informal, natural look. They both wanted a very large patio, which is not a problem, but due to its large size, it was prone to have a very sterile feel."

To meld the ideas he says, "I combined both formal and informal by using a formal type of brick in an informal, random pattern and not using a straight line for more than 8 feet. The irregular patio edges were used to give a rhythmic feel and to help bring the plant material and the patio together. The use of the landscape islands within the patio was also done to bring balance to the landscape and to create more of an intimate feel.

"Katsura trees were planted on either side of the terrace staircase to bring scale and to help soften the transition from the terrace to the patio. Various flowering ornamental trees (dogwood, hawthorn, Japanese snowbell) were planted around the patio to enclose and create intimate spaces as they mature.

After seeing De Turk's design, the homeowners were so impressed, they handed the \$80,000 job to Lewis.



The crew set the pavers on top of a 6-inch compacted gravel base with a 1-inch sand topping.

### On-site

Lewis and four of his employees tore into the site. They excavated the back and side yards. A full-size backhoe was used to rip out some large tree stumps and to make a cut near the patio. Then, they back-filled and leveled the area and made two more cuts going away from the house to create more level spaces in an area that sloped fairly steeply.

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## Anatomy of a Landscape Project

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Lewis used a Bobcat MT55 mini track loader and attachments to handle most of the remaining machine work. He started by installing the basalt rock steps and rock boulder walls. The rock slabs for the steps, weighing 1,500-plus pounds, were from a local quarry.



The stone slabs for the steps came from a local quarry.

The irrigation mainline was next, and then drainage lines and the outdoor lighting main runs and hubs. Lighting for the project was from Unique Lighting Systems, Inc. ([www.uniquelighting.com](http://www.uniquelighting.com)), and was supplied by the local John Deere Landscapes. The lights are constructed of solid weathered brass. Lewis says that they are “very thick and sturdy.”

In the area of the paver patio, a 6-inch compacted gravel base with a 1-inch sand topping was installed under the pavers. Lewis used Venetian pavers by PaveStone. They have the look of chiseled stone and, he says, “They kind of break the mold of traditional cobblestone-looking pavers.”



Designer Dane De Turk incorporated plantings and rock outcroppings throughout the patio area.

Soil amendments were added to on-site topsoil, which was rototilled into the existing soil substrate before being graded out. Plantings included perennials, shrubs, ornamental grasses, vegetables and blueberry bushes.

Lewis Landscape Services is a Rain Bird Select Contractor and follows Irrigation Association and

Rain Bird guidelines for irrigation head placement. Heads were placed in planting beds to cover each area of plants. Lewis says, “In the lawn areas, head-to-head coverage is essential for a good precipitation rate.” The irrigation system was completed with the installation of a weather-based control system, a Rain Bird E.T. Manager.



Lewis Landscape Services had a good relationship with the homeowners after installing the landscape in the front yard.

A sun/shade seed mix of perennial ryegrass and fescue blend was spread on the topsoil, as well as bark dust mulch in all open beds and in the backyard. The final stonework was a seat wall in the corner of the paver area and more basalt flagstone steps through the grass to the lower levels of the backyard.

The homeowners requested several changes during the course of the project. Installation of a concrete slab for a sports court on the side of the house. This involved more excavating and boulder retaining walls and extending the paver pathway to the sports court area. Other changes included stone steps to the play structure, a stone pathway leading to a woodpile, and additional lighting and plants.

Lewis says, “A large job like this often grows during construction as homeowners realize they are spending a lot of money and might as well get all the stuff they were thinking of done at once rather than later when the landscape is finished.” By the time the work was finished, the job came out to a cost of \$130,000, which was the largest Lewis and company had ever accomplished. With this job under his belt, he’s ready to take on any project.

**LHC**

Wayne Mills is a freelance writer with a background in real estate development and construction.

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