
Introduction to Landscaping

BASIC LANDSCAPING SKILLS

A landscaper performs three main functions: design, installation, and maintenance. To be a professional landscaper, you practice all these skills. In this section, you'll learn how to do exactly that. You'll learn how to put together a design, from the approach through the layout and on to the final landscape plan. You'll also learn about such landscaping installations as edging, ground cover, and retaining walls. We'll explain how to carry out all kinds of maintenance duties, including mowing and trimming, bed tending, and pruning. You'll need to have some knowledge of each of these areas, no matter what kind of landscaping you may get into as a professional specialty.

Design

There are four areas you have to focus on to create a successful landscape design: the approach, the layout, any restrictions, and the landscape plans. We'll talk about each of these areas in some detail.

Approach

Let's start with the design approach. When you start on a project, it's important to look at the scope and the layout of the job, because the size of the project will affect how you put together your plans. The first step is to visit with the client to talk about what specifically the site needs. From this first discussion you can decide on your approach to the project. Keep in mind that not taking the proper approach at the beginning may well ruin the whole project.

Next you should study the site to get familiar with the existing landscape features. Once you know all the current features of the property, you can decide how you'll work them into the

final design. For instance, if there are rock formations on the property, you may be able to use them to produce a desirable effect. Always remember that your client is looking for the most effective means of reaching the objectives you've discussed. You have to make sure the area you're dealing with can handle the changes proposed. You also have to make sure the changes will suit the existing structures and features. What the end result will look like is very important. Usually the property owner wants both to solve some practical problem, such as poor drainage, and to make the property's appearance more appealing.

Ask yourself the following questions when you're working out your approach to the project:

- Exactly what is the scope of the project?
- How will you work the present features of the landscape into your design?
- Will the project you have in mind suit the property and the structures on it?
- Is there enough room for the project you have in mind?
- Does your plan meet with the owner's needs?
- Will your plan make the property's appearance more pleasing?

"Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

Layout

The second factor to consider in landscape design is layout. Once you've determined your approach and how you'll do the job, you have to study the area. Start by thinking about the limitations of the area you have to work in. For example, an area 100 feet by 10 feet gives you a lot less room to work in than an area 100 feet by 100 feet. Remember, whatever you plant has to fit in and look good with whatever else is in the area. Most importantly, you have to allow enough room for what you've planted to grow. If you don't, your client will probably be pretty unhappy in a year or two when the plants you've planted grow beyond the boundaries of the area.

Make sure you know exactly how large every plant you install will be when mature. If the label on a spirea shrub tells you the shrub will grow to be three feet in diameter, be sure you're planting it in a spot where it has room to grow. Also make sure the shrub won't inhibit the growth of nearby plants. For example, a blue-star juniper will only be two feet in diameter when mature if you plant one next to a spirea (Figure 1).

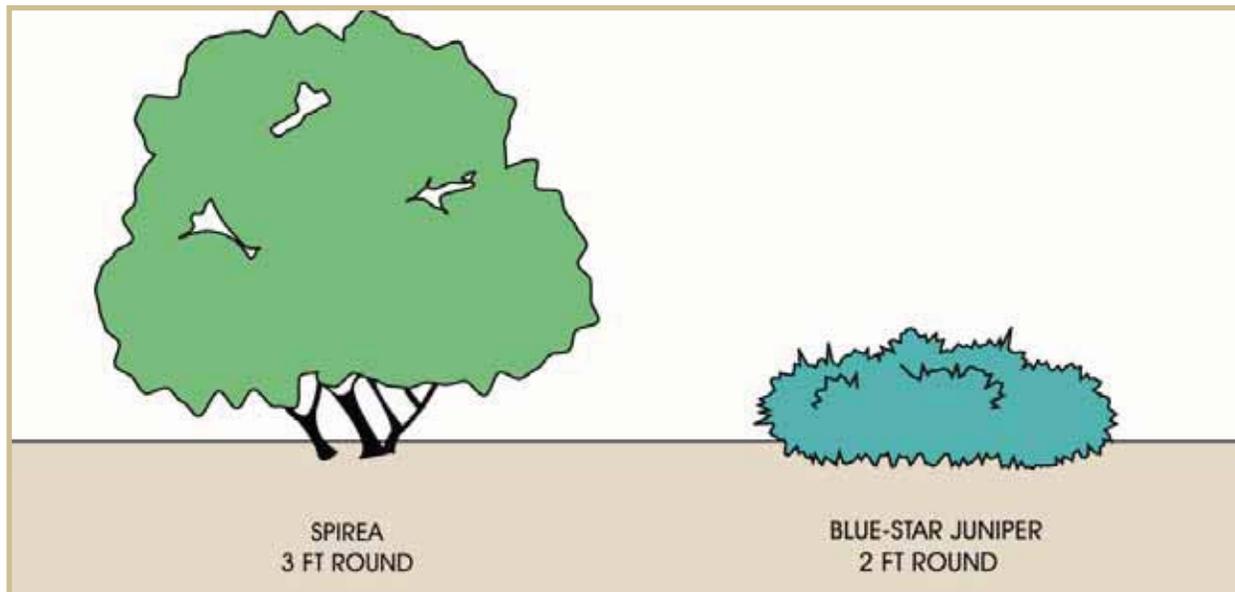


FIGURE 1—Remember to leave enough room for your landscape plantings to grow.

It's particularly important to plan for growth if you're planting trees. Remember that the trees may come up against such structures as fences or light posts as they grow. The labeling on all trees indicates how big they'll be when mature. If the tree will be 40 feet in diameter, make sure it has room to grow on all sides (Figure 2). You have to space all the elements evenly to keep the landscape from looking cluttered and crowded in two or three years. If you plant landscape elements too closely together, you're asking for trouble.

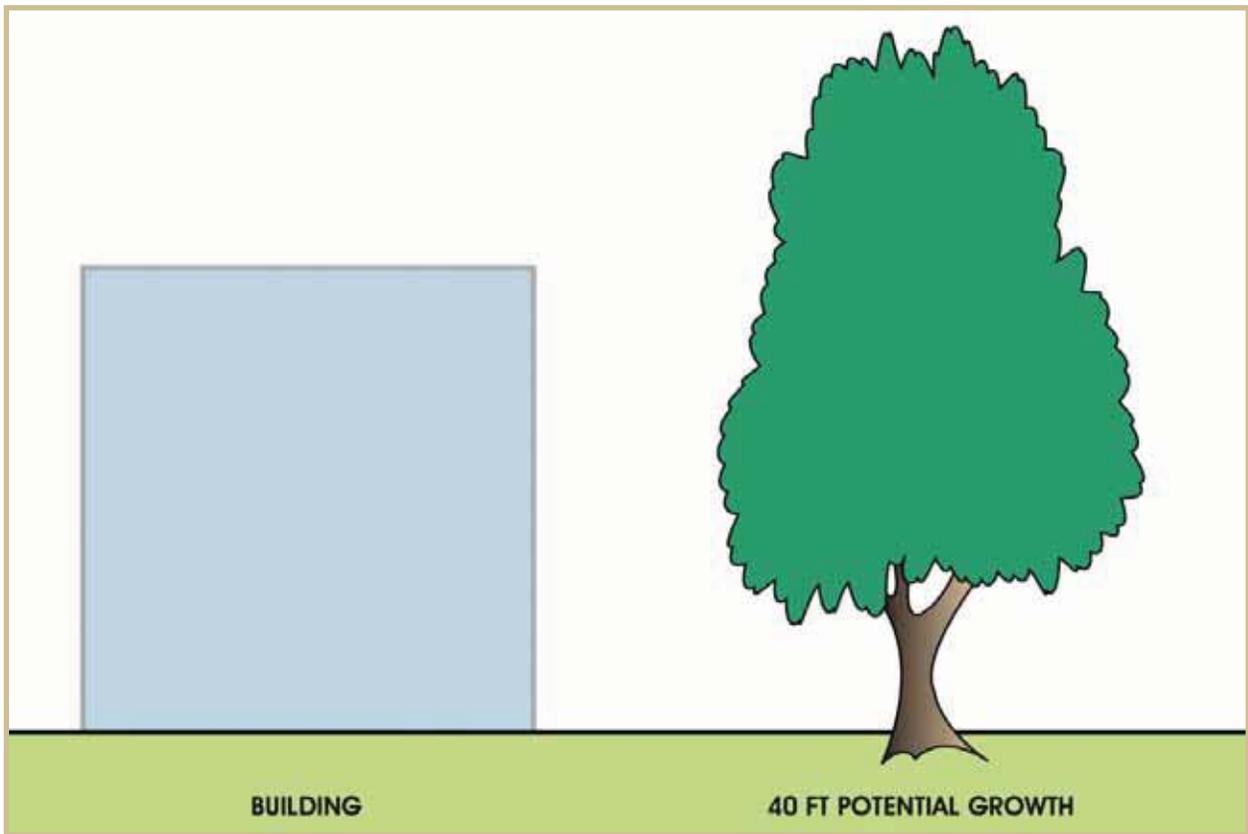


FIGURE 2—A tree 40 feet in diameter needs plenty of room to grow on all sides.

Restrictions

After you've determined your approach and established a layout, you must decide whether there are any design restrictions you'll have to observe. The crew chief on a construction job will normally know what covenants or zoning regulations there may be in the area in which you're working. Such regulations may forbid you to plant in certain spots. Make sure the owner knows what you're proposing and has checked that your proposal doesn't conflict with any covenants or restrictions. Be sure before you start that you can do the work you're proposing. It's not unknown for a designer to form a plan with the owner's approval and find out only when the work is well under way that the project doesn't comply with local restrictions. Check all the covenants before you design a project.

Plans

Finally, let's talk about the plan itself (Figure 3). A plan is a layout of exactly what you're going to do.

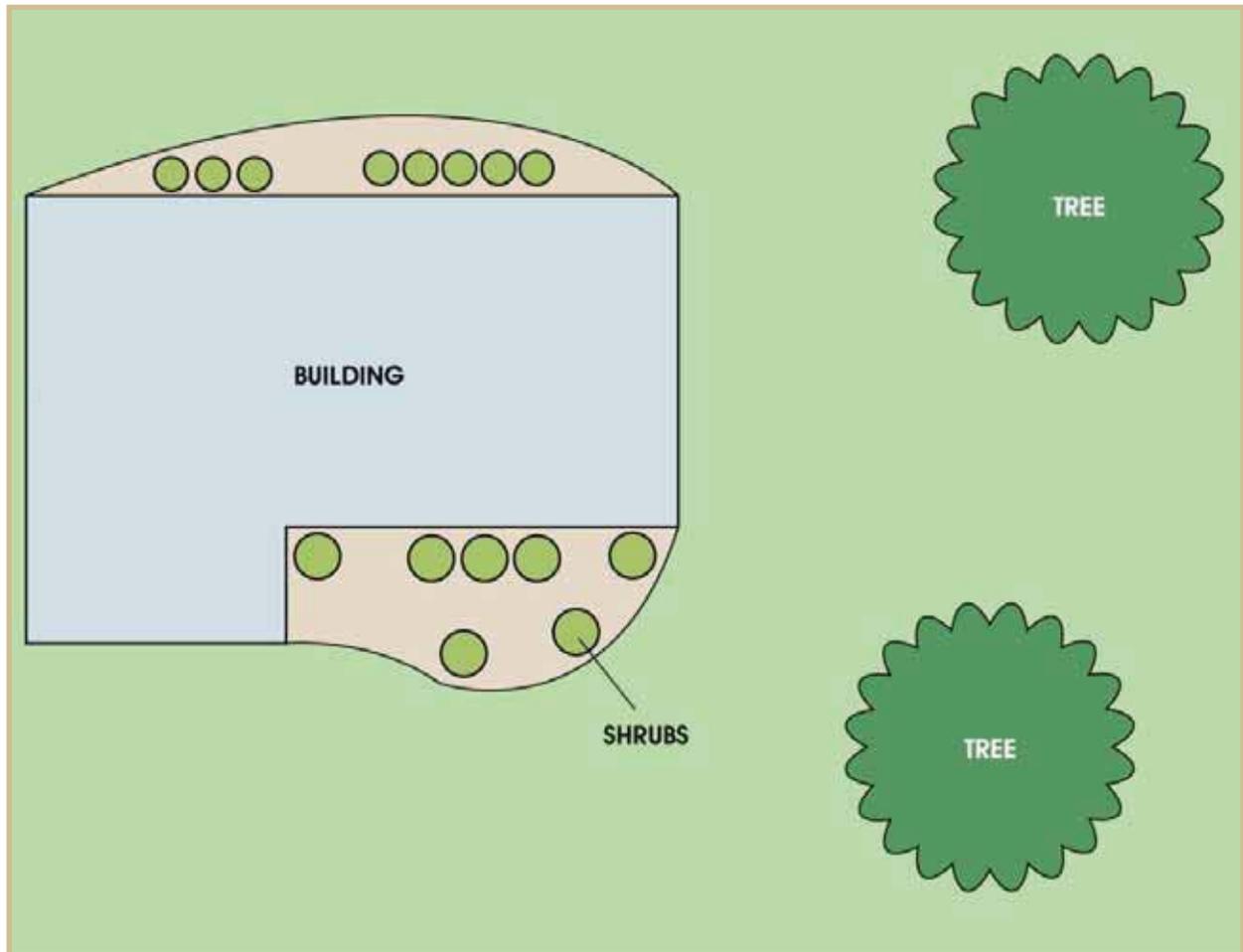


FIGURE 3—Proposed Plan, Showing Placement of All Trees and Shrubs

Submit your plan and let the owner decide what changes, if any, you should make. If there are changes proposed, make sure before you finalize the plan that the owner knows the heights and sizes of each mature landscape element that has been substituted. When you have the owner's approval, you

can draw up a working plan (Figure 4). Everyone involved in the project, from the installation crew to the maintenance crew supervisor, should then work from this plan.

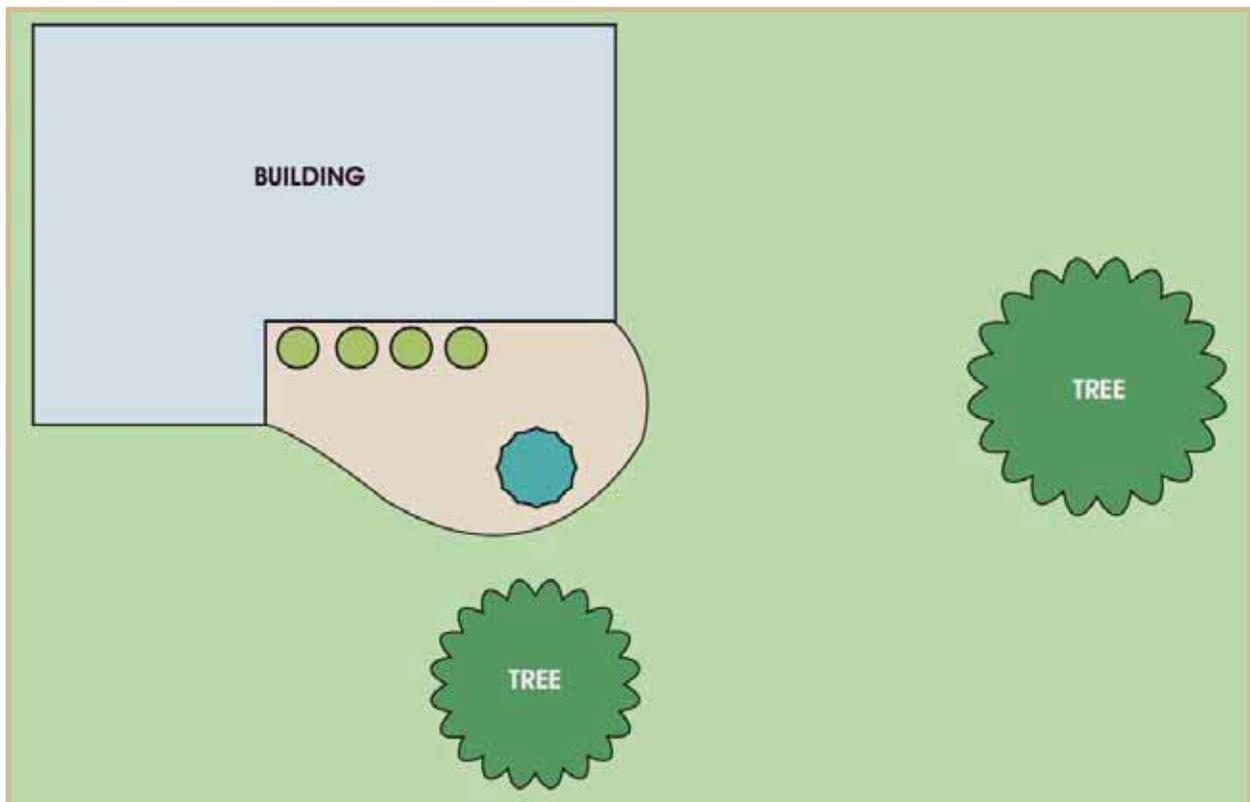


FIGURE 4—Final Working Plan, Incorporating All Changes to the Proposed Project

When you finish a project, keep a copy of the plans on file. Also give a copy of the plans to the owner to use as a reference if problems arise. For example, if the Number Three shrub, a rhododendron, dies two months after you plant it, you and the owner can both be sure you're talking about the same plant when you discuss the problem. Since it's a good policy to guarantee your work for one year, you would replace the shrub with no questions asked in this situation.

Installation

For the sake of clarity, we'll break up our discussion of installation procedures into six topics: sod removal, edging, weed barriers, installing the plants, mulching, and retaining walls. Let's take a look at each of these topics in turn.

Sod Removal

Before installing a landscape bed in an established lawn, you should completely remove the sod from the area so grass won't grow up in the bed. If you cut the sod at right angles to the ground surface (Figure 5), the edging will fit nicely, it will look good, and it will last longer.

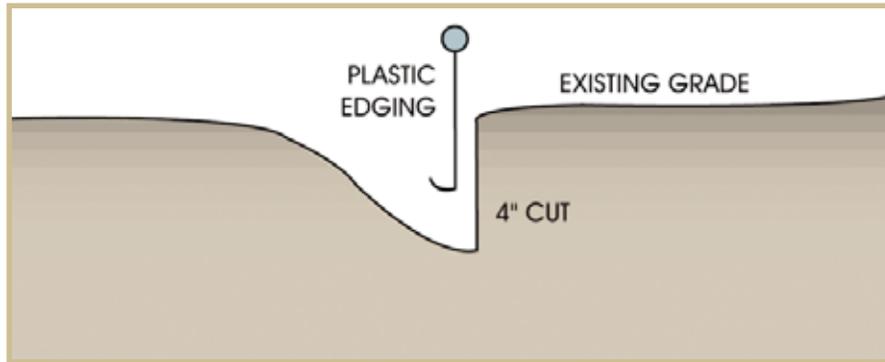


FIGURE 5—Cut the sod at right angles to the ground surface.

There are three ways to remove sod:

1. You can cut the sod away by hand with a nine-inch flat shovel.
2. A hand-operated sod cutter will cut 12-inch strips of sod you can use in other areas.
3. You can use a gasoline-powered sod cutter.

Edging

After you've removed the sod, you should install edging around the landscape bed. There are several kinds of edging. If you're going to use black plastic edging (Figure 6), install it four inches below the surface of the lawn.

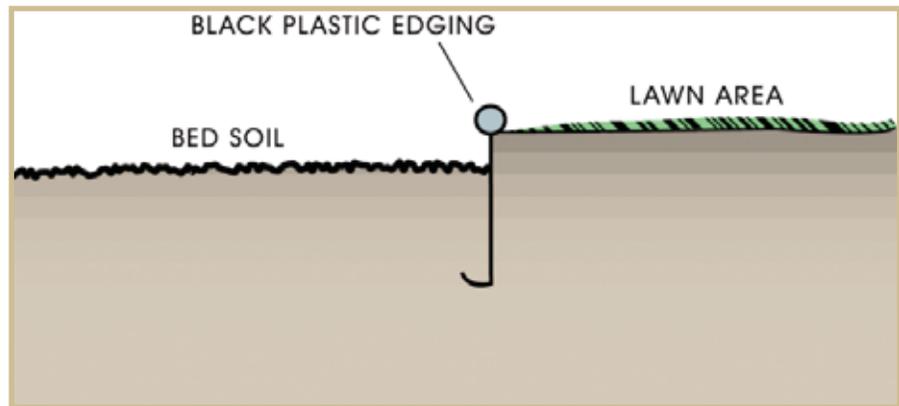
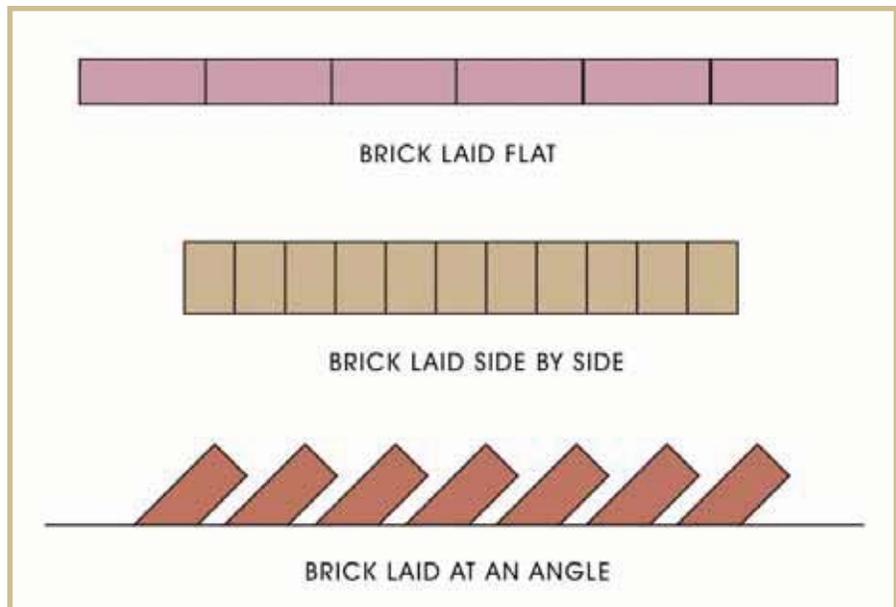


FIGURE 6—Many landscapers use black plastic edging.

Edging installed like this will prevent grass and weeds from growing into the bed. If you use black plastic stripping, which is very flexible, you can also shape the landscape bed.

Another kind of edging is bricks, which you can lay flat or end to end. You can use bricks like plastic strips to create a wide variety of shapes for the bed. The bricks themselves can be laid in several different ways (Figure 7).

FIGURE 7—When using bricks to form the edge of a landscape bed, you can lay the bricks flat, side by side, or at an angle.



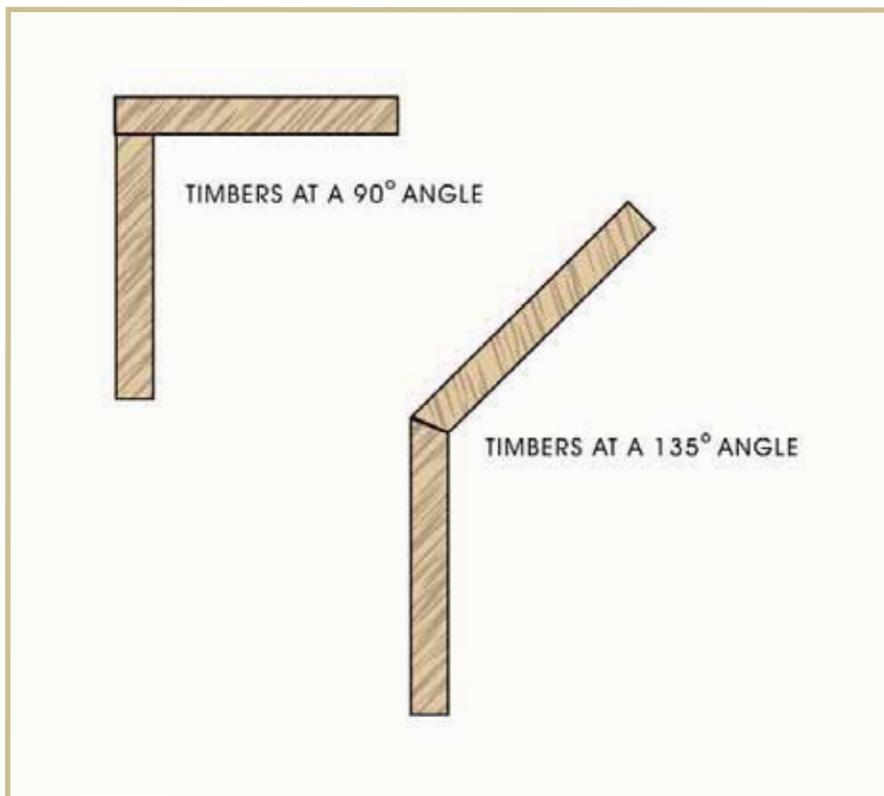
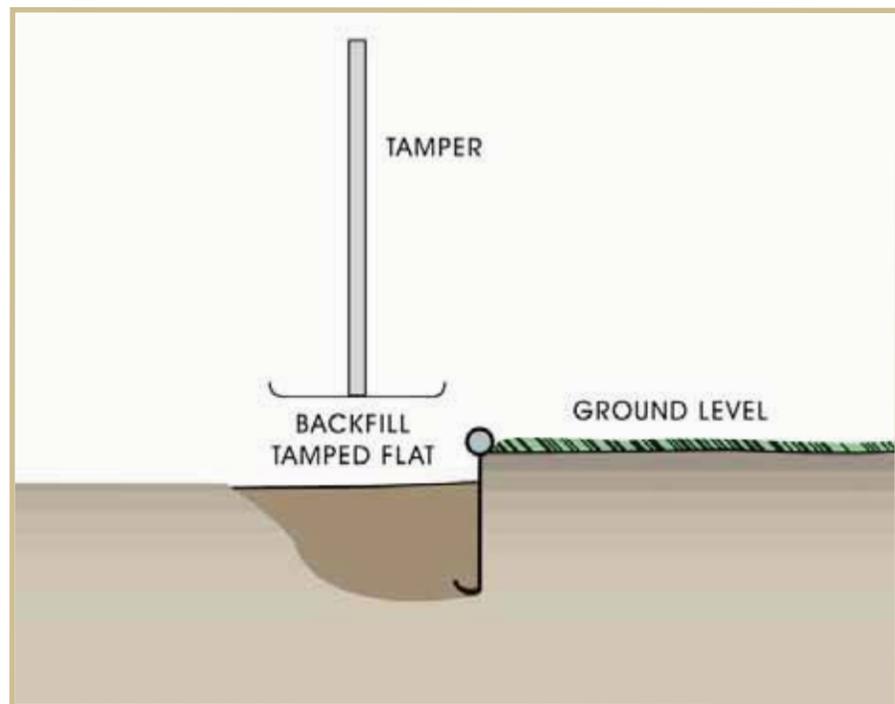


FIGURE 8—One big disadvantage of lumber edging is that you can't use it to form curves.

However, lumber is a more restrictive material because you have to work with straight lines. You can join the pieces at different angles (Figure 8), but of course you can't form curves. Lumber edging also doesn't last as long as plastic or bricks, and because you don't install it below the surface of the soil, lumber is more visible than plastic or bricks.

Once you get the edging in, you'll have to backfill the landscape area. Tamp black plastic edging with a sledgehammer or hand tamper to keep it in place (Figure 9). The fill should be two inches from the top of the lip, no matter what kind of edging you're using. If it's brick, leave the entire brick exposed. If it's black edging, leave two inches. If it's wood or sun timbers, leave two inches, because this is the lip that you'll use when you install the weed barrier. Once you've removed the sod and the edging is in place, you're ready to place the landscape components.

FIGURE 9—*When the edging is in place, backfill and tamp the area that abuts the edging.*



Weed Barriers

You'll have to install a ground cover to act as a weed barrier. The two most common kinds of ground covers are impervious black plastic and porous plastic. Water can't pass through the impervious polyethylene, sometimes called "poly," but porous plastic, sometimes called "linen," has holes in it that let the water through. If you're going to install living plants, you must use the porous material. Otherwise the plants won't get enough moisture and will die. To install either kind of weed barrier, use a utility knife or a pair of scissors to cut it to the size and shape of the landscape area. Make sure your cut isn't jagged.

Installing the Plants

Once you've installed the weed barrier, check your plans for the locations of the plants. Use a utility knife to cut a star or cross pattern at these spots (Figure 10). Now fold the flaps back so you have an open area of soil. Dig a hole large enough to hold the plant. Most plants come in pots. Trees may come from the nursery in buckets, or they may have their roots wrapped in burlap. Follow the same procedure with the other openings.

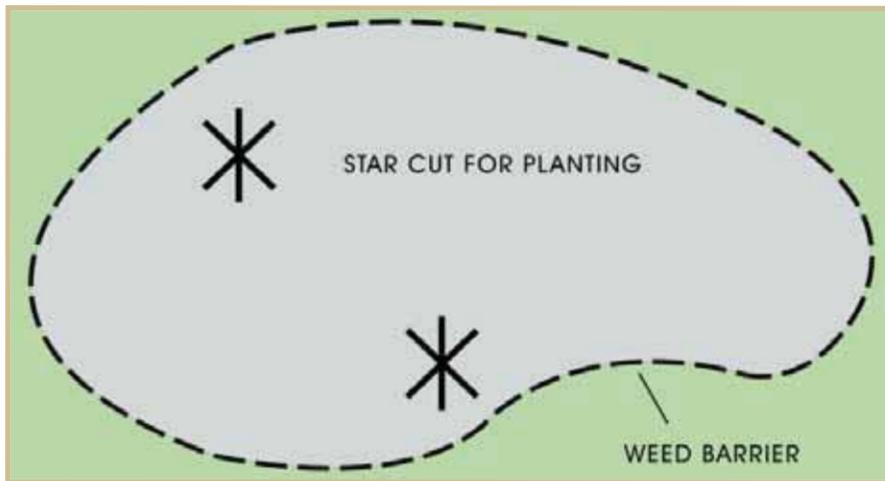


FIGURE 10—Use a utility knife to cut holes for your plants in the weed barrier.

Place the plants in the holes and fill them in with soil. Be sure there are no air pockets around the plants. Fill the holes carefully and completely with soil, but don't overpack them. Once you've completed this process, mound soil up around the bases of the plants to ensure that they don't get too much water (Figure 11).

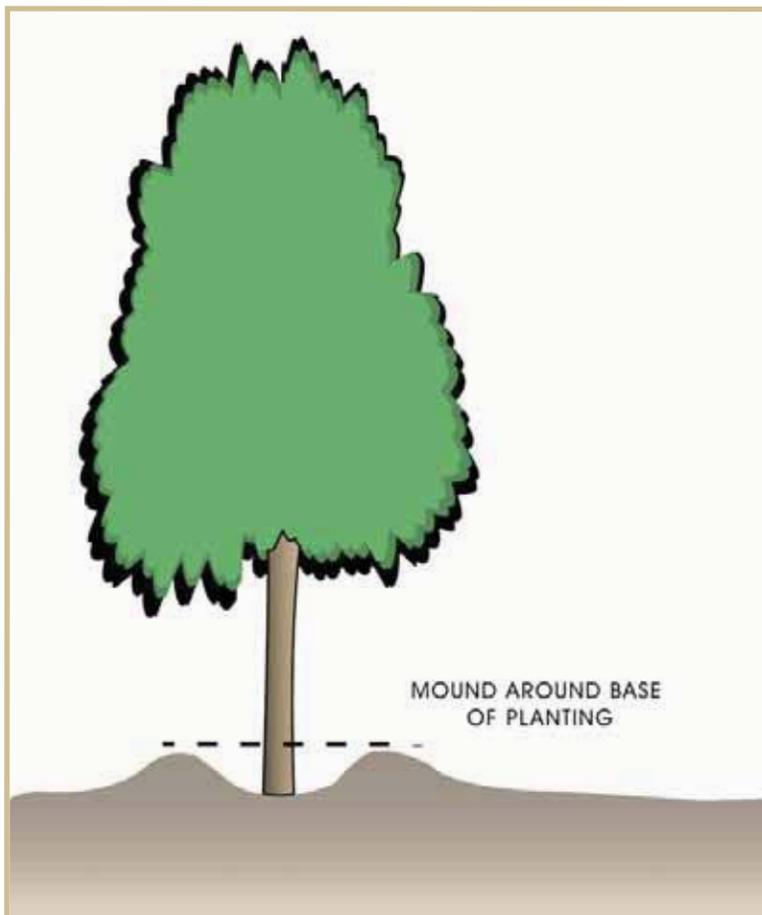


FIGURE 11—Mound soil up around the bases of trees and plants to ensure that they don't get too much water.

Now it's time to step back and make sure everything you've done is according to your plan. If there's anything wrong, this is the time to correct it. If you move a plant from one area to another, cover the old area so weeds won't grow there.

Mulching

The next step is to install the surface covering, called mulch. Landscapers use different kinds of prepared rocks and wood chips for this purpose. Check with your local supplier to find out what's available in your area. Whatever material you use, it's important that it be at least two inches (five centimeters) thick throughout the entire landscape bed.

You can use chipped rock, round rock, white rock, or lava rock, either black or red. Lay the rock down and wet it thoroughly. Be sure the rocks are completely clean so their colors will be highly visible. As you wash down the surface rocks, you'll also see if there are any areas with drainage problems, areas you'll have to repair, or areas where the rock is a little too thin.

If you use wood chips, there are several different kinds available in different parts of the country. Landscapers commonly use pine bark or cypress chips. Whatever kind of wood chips you use, lay them a little higher than the edging of the bed and slope the pile back down to the bed. If you want your wood chips or bark to be two inches deep, you'll initially have to apply them at least three to four inches deep to make allowance for settling. In fact, the chips will settle into a pretty compact layer, and that's just what you want them to do. This layer will keep weeds and grasses from getting into the bed and causing problems. If rain or traffic packs the mulch down tight, that's good, too, because it will stay in place in high wind or heavy rain. The appearance of the mulch is very important. Take a good hard look at it. Make sure it's flat, uniform, and pleasing to the eye.

Retaining Walls

To complete the installation of the landscape bed, you may have to put up a tier, or retaining wall. There are several different kinds of landscaping materials you can use. Currently the most common material is keystone (Figure 12), but landscapers also use pressure-treated lumber and brick. If you're doing only one tier, you should use capped keystone, which has no fill inside the block. Use a sledgehammer or a tamp to make sure the fill is solid. If you're working on a hill, keep the tiers level. The tiers should also be higher in the back than they are in the front to control water erosion. The wall should be as straight and even as you can make it. Use a backhoe to fill in the soil around the finished wall.

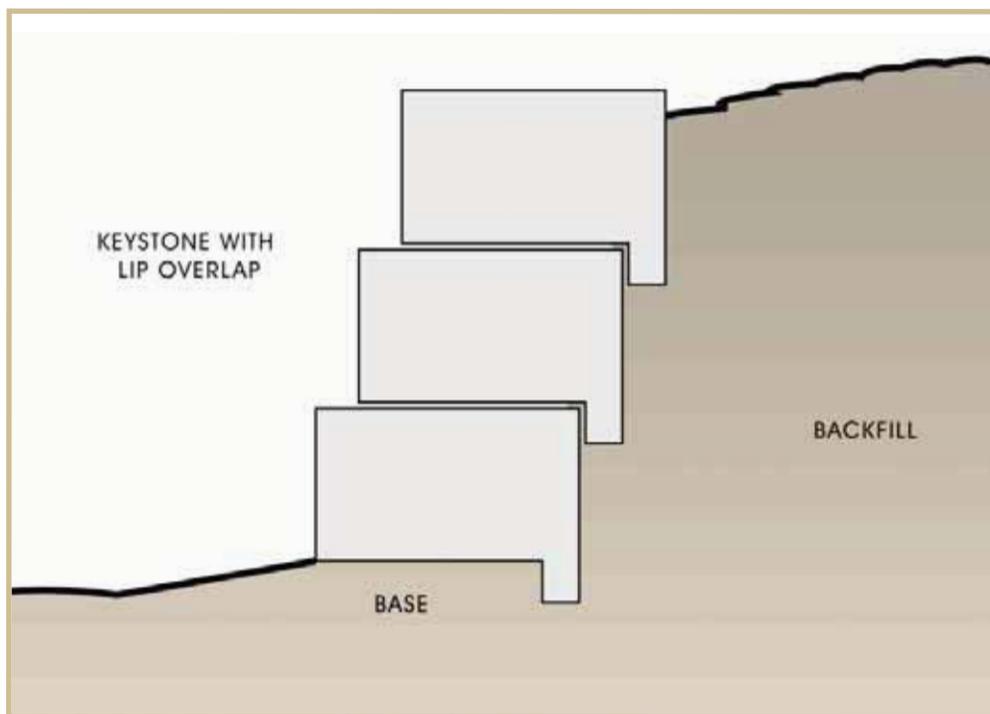


FIGURE 12—Keystone is currently the material most commonly used for retaining walls.

Maintenance

Professional landscapers perform maintenance in three areas: lawns, landscape beds, and plant materials.

Lawns

Lawn maintenance involves mowing, watering, and edging walks and drives. When you're mowing a lawn, be sure to cut the grass in both directions (Figure 13). A professionally groomed lawn shows alternating dark and light bands that result from this pattern of mowing. This method doesn't just make the lawn look good: it prevents matting.

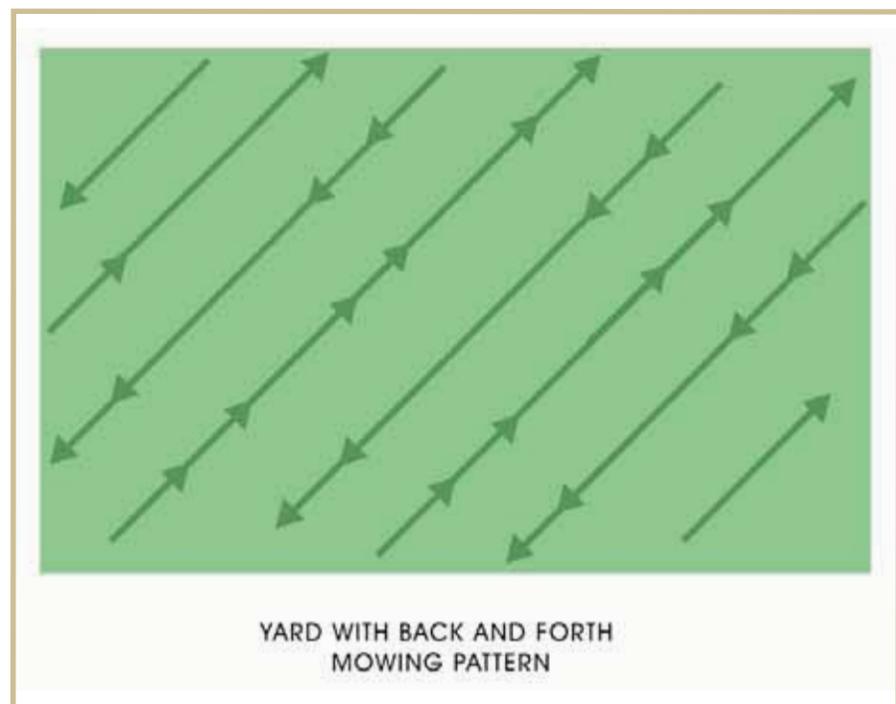


FIGURE 13—Always mow a lawn in both directions.

You should double-mow when the lawn has grown a lot since the last mowing. Even if you mow regularly, there can sometimes be unusually high growth between mowings due to excessive watering or an application of fertilizer. Double mowing gets rid of clumps of grass and improves the overall appearance of the lawn. If the surface of the lawn is uneven when you look across it after mowing, cut it again.

And keep the blades on your mower sharp at all times. Otherwise the blades will rip the grass out of the soil rather than cutting it, and the lawn will turn brown within a day or two. Aside from being unattractive, this browning will make the grass prone to disease. You can either bag the clippings or let them fall on the grass, where they'll become mulch.

String trimming is an important part of mowing. When you're using a string trimmer, don't run it at high speed around fixtures, buildings, and trees, because the string can cause damage. Also, hold the trimmer head level to avoid scalping the lawn. It's worth taking the time to practice these skills, if only because there are companies that specialize in landscape trimming.

When you're done mowing and string trimming, use a power blower to clean grass clippings and soil from walks and other exposed areas. There are two kinds of power blower: handheld and backpack models. Control the wind speed when you're clearing areas covered with bark mulch, because if you run the blower too high, you can blow the mulch all over the lawn.

Follow these guidelines to clear off an area:

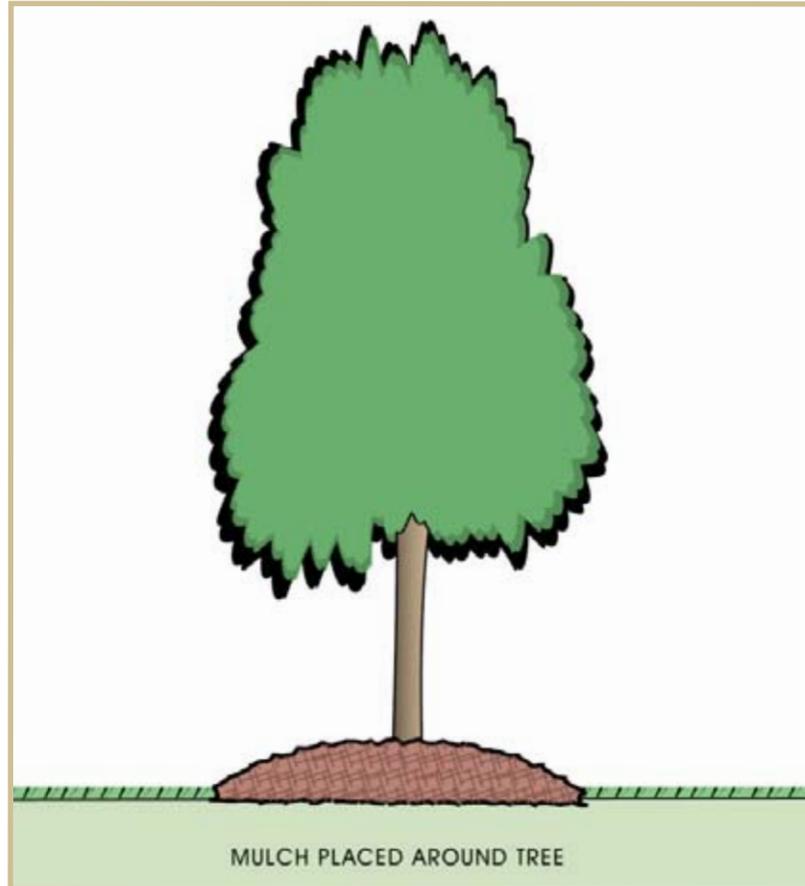
- Clear away the rubbish from all the structures and landscape beds on the property.
- Make sure all the sidewalks are completely clean.
- Clear off all driveways on residential properties.
- Clear off all parking lots on commercial properties.
- If you blow the grass onto the lawn, don't make piles of clippings.

Landscape Beds

To maintain a landscape bed, make sure it's free of all grass and weeds. Also be sure the surface of the bed is smooth and without hollows. If the surface needs repairs, make them. If there's a wall, check the back side for washed-out areas and fill them in if there are. Keep the surface grade low in the front and high in the back to ensure proper drainage. Rotate bark mulch every month or so to avoid sun bleaching and maintain an even color. If your trees have bark mulch or rock around their bases, remove any grass or rubbish from these

areas at least once a month. If the trees have soil around their bases, turn the soil every month or so to keep it from getting packed or mounded (Figure 14).

FIGURE 14—Turn the soil around tree bases once a month to prevent packing and mounding.



Trees and Shrubs

You have to prune your bushes, usually two or three times a season, to keep them at their proper height and shape. Wait until flowering bushes have fully flowered before you trim them the first time in a season. Don't trim your bushes if it's very hot; wait until early fall to trim them a second time. More mature bushes need less trimming, because they've already filled in and established a shape. Whether you're using power trimmers or are trimming by hand, be sure your equipment is sharp so it cuts cleanly. Dull blades will rip the branches and make the bush prone to disease and insects, and it will also lose a lot of water. A clean cut will scab over quickly. When you've trimmed the bush, clean up all the branches. Clean your landscaping beds by raking or hand picking, or use a blower.



Self-Check 1

At the end of each section of *Introduction to Landscaping*, you'll be asked to pause and check your understanding of what you've just read by completing a "self-check" exercise. Answering these questions will help you review what you've studied so far. Please complete *Self-Check 1* now.

1. When should you double-mow a lawn?

2. What material do landscapers usually use to build tiers?

3. What's the first thing you should think about when you're laying out your project?

Check your answers with those on page 79.

AREAS OF LANDSCAPING

Professional landscapers work in four main areas: lawn maintenance, installation, retaining walls, and chemical application.

Lawn Maintenance

Most of a landscaper's work is in the area of lawn maintenance. We've already talked about mowing and other kinds of routine lawn maintenance, but you should also know how to prepare a lawn in the spring. You start with spring cleanup. Get all the rubbish out of the area and make sure the lawn is clean all the way down to the soil. Remove most of the thatch base, which is the last season's stem growth, so the lawn can