

Selecting  
ornamentals

TOUGH SNOW EQUIPMENT

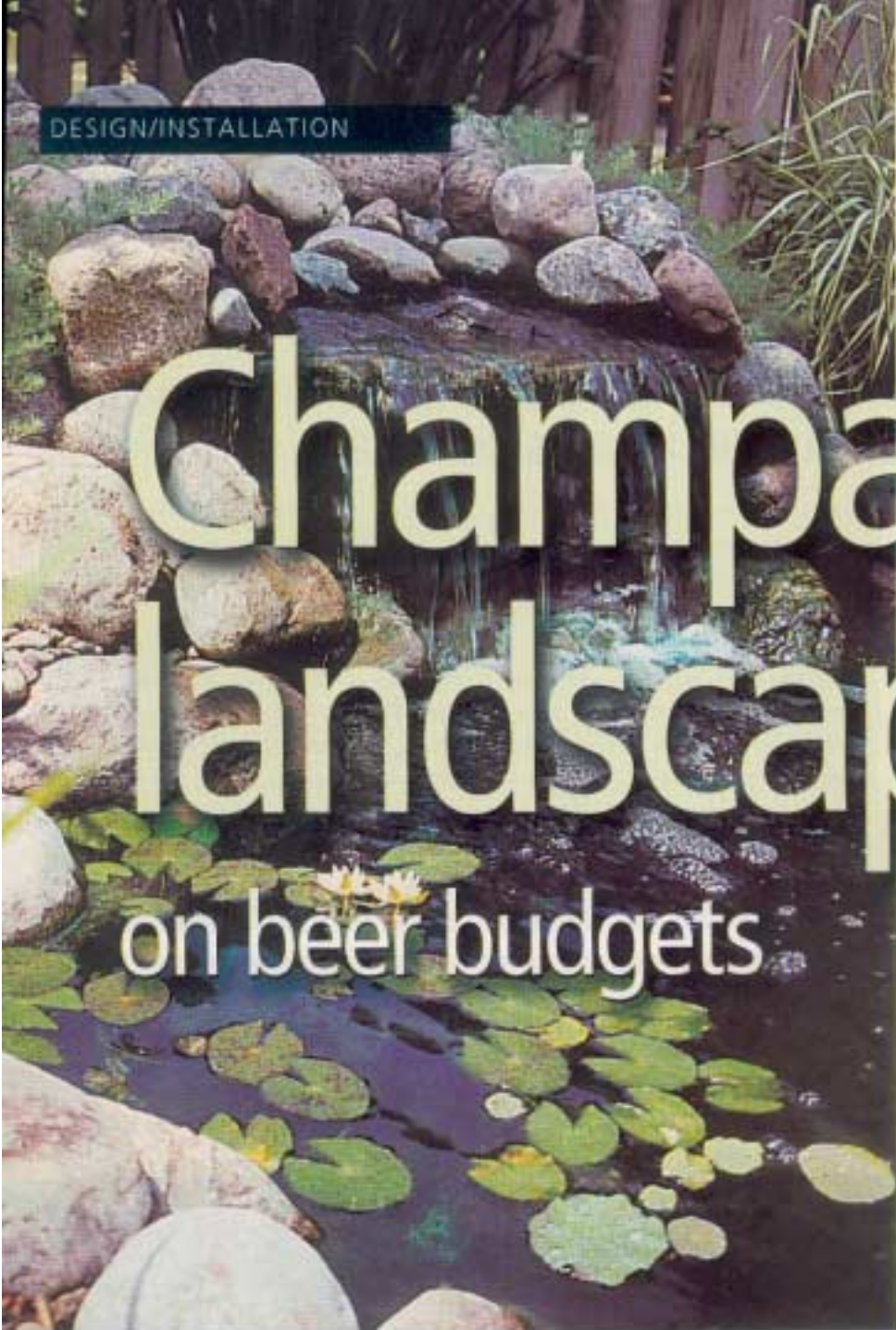
Low-budget  
wonders

SOLUTIONS FOR A GROWING INDUSTRY

# Landscape MANAGEMENT

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State of  
the Industry  
*2001*



# Champagne landscapes

## on beer budgets

**Give your  
customers the  
best possible  
landscapes at  
the least  
possible cost**

BY GEORGE WITTERSCHEIN/  
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

**T**

urning beer into champagne is the kind of miracle landscape contractors are frequently asked to perform. Many clients have high expectations but limited budgets. How do you cope?

Two experienced contractors who have been successful with this situation agreed to share their experiences and recommendations on making clients happy.

### Get close to the customer

David J. Frank is founder and president of David J. Frank Landscape, Germantown, WI, with branches in Madison and the Fox River Valley. The \$15 million, 300-strong company provides landscape architecture, athletic field care, design/build, commercial services, maintenance and irrigation. It also has an interior landscape department and a nursery.

In booming suburban northwestern New Jersey, Miles Kuperus's Farmside Landscape and Design is a \$2 million full-service landscape company with about 20 employees. Services include maintenance, turf care, plant health care and (mostly residential) design/build.

Kuperus's approach is based on a deeply-held personal philosophy of service. "We are Christians," he says, "and treating people with honesty and integrity is founded off our faith." His strong service mentality plays directly into his thoughts

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on quality landscaped environments.

"We stay very close to the customer right from the beginning," he says. "We get to know what the customer's dream really is, and we incorporate that into a design plan. From there, we phase the project out. We can then achieve the customer's ultimate goal on designs and installs over a number of years, thus making it possible to spread the expense out over time."

The approach has been successful for Kuperus and his customers. "It has allowed us to achieve a good rate-of-return customer for the ongoing projects," he says. "And each step of the way, it's not like a construction project on which you say 'thank you and goodbye' to the customer. Instead, we're



A landscape project will often get to the stage shown here, and a customer will decide it isn't anything like he or she originally wanted. In these cases, the "beer first, champagne later" approach would have been better.

looking to develop and maintain that reoccurring customer."

Staying close to the customer from the beginning means that when it's time to maintain the landscape, Farmside Landscape is in prime position to provide him or her with proper maintenance.

A similar mentality characterizes Dave Frank's approach to "beer and champagne."

#### **It's all about fun**

"I've been doing this for 43 years," Frank says, "and about 15 years ago, it stopped being work and started being fun."

One of the principal pleasures he derives from his profession is guiding a project from the beer stage to the champagne stage.

"For one thing, we find that our customers are much more sophisticated about landscape than they were 15 years ago. They are more knowledgeable, and the landscape they want for their dream home is more com-

plex, more beautiful — and more expensive," says Frank.

"The wish list is twice as long as it used to be. We find that people who talk about a terrace are not thinking about a concrete terrace; they want a terrace done in a paving material that complements the residence. It could be brick, natural stone, exposed aggregate or textured concrete — so instead of something based at \$3.50 or \$4 per square foot, we're in the \$20 to \$22 per square foot range or more. That means that if you have 800 feet of terraces and you're multiplying by \$24 per square foot, rather than \$4 per square foot, you now have a big-ticket item.

"At the same time," Frank continues, "the cost of construction has escalated over the last five years at about twice the rate of inflation or more in some places. We have seen instances where lumber has gone up 30% in a 30- or 60-day time frame. While we used to

think that a \$1 million home was a big deal, now the million dollar home out in the suburbs is an everyday thing."

The simultaneous increase in the cost of building that dream home, coupled with the dramatic growth in home construction costs, creates a squeeze for both the customer and the landscape contractor. How does Frank's company deal with that squeeze?

#### **Get involved early**

Like Farmside, they get close to the customer at an early stage. "We believe that the earlier we get involved, the better. We try to introduce ourselves early in the design/build process because it really becomes an educational process. There are two things we can do early on for a prospective client:

"At the mortgage negotiations stage, get them to talk to their banker about the value of home landscaping," says Frank. "We supply customers with data from the real estate industry about the value landscaping adds to a home, and we ask

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Farmside Landscape and Design co-owners Miles and Lisa Kuperus: "We stay very close to the customer right from the beginning."