

Will your landscaping pull in buyers or make them drive on by? Outdated or extreme styles, high-maintenance features and invasive or overgrown foliage can kill interest. Here are the experts' do's and don'ts.

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"Landscaping often makes the difference between a prospective buyer getting out of the car for a closer look at the house and simply driving on by," says Cynthia Bee, of Solscapes Landscape Design in Salt Lake City.

Indeed, agents say, good landscaping can provide more bang for your buck than almost any other home improvement -- provided it's done right.

A Few Do's -- and 6 Don'ts

Buyers today expect landscaping that's easy to take care of and water-wise, and offers benefits like shade or privacy, says Bruce Butterfield, research director for the National Gardening Association.

A pot of bright annuals by the front door isn't going to do it for most discriminating buyers.

"There's really a trend towards landscaping that is both functionally and environmentally correct," Butterfield says. "You want to have the right plants in the right place."

Here's a look at the top landscaping turnoffs for buyers and what homeowners can do to make sure their landscaping efforts enhance, rather than detract from the value of their home.

1. Your father's landscaping

Rounded junipers, squared-off boxwood and holly bushes, and topiary shrubs scream that the house is a throwback to the 1960s and '70s, agents say. People now want their landscaping to look natural, with more native plants and interesting, varied foliage. "Flat-top haircuts were big in the '50s," Butterfield jokes. Shrubs with poodlelike puffs are also out, landscapers say.

Big pine trees and other evergreens planted decades ago also can be a turnoff to buyers. These trees can get too big and must be continually hacked off at the top (a bad look) or taken out entirely to avoid roofs and power lines.

2. Gnomes gone wild

It should go without saying, but put the lawn ornaments away. Other buyers may not share your love of lawn globes, gnomes and plastic deer. The same rules for depersonalizing and de-cluttering inside your home apply to the outside, as well.

3. High-maintenance yards

While many buyers fancy themselves green-thumb gardeners, few want to invest serious time in pruning, spraying, mowing and fertilizing. Beds of non-disease-resistant plants such as hybrid tea roses can eat up a buyer's weekends with pruning and applying fungicide. "They may be beautiful when they are in flower, but it's a nightmare to keep them from getting sick," Butterfield says.

Jack Rhoads, an agent with Murney Associates Realtors of St. Louis, remembers one property he showed with an elaborate English country garden that dominated the backyard. A key inside the house mapped out the names of all of the manicured shrubs, roses and gardenias, as well as the contents of the adjoining vegetable garden. "People were just mesmerized," Rhoads says. "For a minute they would say 'I've always wanted a place like this.' Then they started talking about it and said this must take a long time to maintain every week." The house stayed on the market for quite a while, Rhoads says, specifically because of the rigors of its landscaping.

"What we are hearing from our customers is that they want more flower power with less maintenance," says Joe Stoffregen, owner of Homewood Nursery & Garden Center in Raleigh, N.C. That means fewer annuals with short bloom times and more native plants and hardy perennials. In his area, he recommends planting newer flower varieties with longer bloom times, such as continuous blooming hydrangeas; knockout roses, which flower abundantly and require little pruning or spraying; and some of the newer types of azaleas that bloom twice a year.

4. Over-the-top outdoor living spaces

The line between the indoors and outdoors has been blurring in recent years, with more homeowners building elaborate outdoor living spaces complete with fireplaces, kitchens, outdoor showers and custom stone work. In many parts of the country, these areas are a big selling point, making the house seem larger. But when the work gets too ornate or extensive, it can sometimes detract from the value of a home -- especially in colder climates.

Homeowners who put in these improvements should not expect to recoup their total investment at resale. One man's \$80,000 outdoor kitchen may only be worth an extra \$30,000 to another, says Orange County, Calif., appraiser Jeff Siler. "People have to remember that this is their own personal preference," he says. In essence, you're renting this lifestyle, he says, and you probably won't see the bulk of the money back.

Denver homemaker Wildrick, for one, found the huge amount of brickwork in that Denver house with the koi ponds to be distracting and overdone. "If you go overboard, you are going to limit the number of people interested in the property," says Joe Schnurr, an agent with Prudential Colorado in Denver.

5. Bad seeds

Some plants send up a red flag with many knowledgeable buyers because they are so invasive. High on the list are ficus trees, especially those planted too close to a driveway, house or patio. The fast-growing, shallow roots of the ficus crack pavement and can wreak havoc on foundations. Similarly, ivy and other vines can proliferate too quickly, posing a danger to other plants, as well as to windows and roofs. They also can attract bugs to the house.

Invasive trees such as the Callery pear can be beautiful when flowering, but dump a lot of litter on the lawn. The trees also are very brittle, making them susceptible to storm damage. And like some other fast-growing varieties, Callery pear trees have a relatively short life span of 25 years. This life span is something buyers should consider when buying a house with a mature tree that figures prominently, landscapers say.

Indeed, real-estate agent Sonia Corona of House2Home in Salt Lake City urges her clients to take pictures and leaf samples to a nursery to find out what to expect maintenance-wise. When Corona and her husband were house hunting a few years ago, she passed on a beautiful house with nine cottonwood trees surrounding the patio. Why? She feared the trees, with their huge roots, would have eventually ripped up the patio and surrounding stone work. Taking them out would have cost \$14,000, according to the estimates she received. And she was at least partially right: She later found out these trees wound up destroying part of the sprinkler system in the backyard.

6. Too much green?

Many people are asking for smaller expanses of grass so they spend less time pushing the lawn mower and running the sprinkler. "People don't want a yard that makes huge demands on their time," Butterfield says.

Sacramento landscape architect John Nicolaus plants grass for his clients in shadier ends of the lawn along with higher-water plants like azaleas or ferns. He groups drought-resistant specimens where the sun is most brutal. By sorting plants according to water need, he says, you waste less water and homeowners can spend less time wielding the hose. But, he notes, that doesn't mean buyers are ready to give up color. "You don't want everything to be a moonscape or desert garden," he says. "There are lots of . . . drought-resistant plants that are very lush-looking."

And just as important, consider the landscaping in relation to the house. Corona had a listing on a four-bedroom house with intricate xeriscape landscaping with cactus, gravel and walkways, instead of back and front yards. Since most of the people looking at the house had families and pets, it took a long time to sell, she says. "If you're going to have a four bedroom (house), you better have a yard," Corona says.

Most important, agents say, maintain whatever landscaping you have. Overgrown hedges, dying flowers and leggy bushes send the message that the inside of the house is ill-kept, as well. "Maintenance is key to maintaining your value," Rhoads says.