

Way to Grow in Orinda

Budgeting Your Landscape

Steve & Cathy Lambert



Spring fever has hit and people are itching to get some work done in their yards. However, with the current economic situation they're also looking for ways to afford and budget for these home improvements. Several homeowners we've talked to are investing the money they would normally spend on an expensive family vacation on home improvements instead. This way ultimately they'll see a return for their R&R dollars.

When looking at investing in your home's landscape, be sure to look beyond the basics. While seasonal plantings such as flowers can help sell a house, it won't increase the selling price. Installing landscape features, like patios and outdoor kitchens, offer visual impact and provide more functional space, and that adds value to your home. So if you were planning a home addition but feel you can't afford it now, why not add a considerably less expensive outdoor room?

The key to stretching your landscape budget is in carefully planning and phasing your project. To match your dream yard to your real-life budget, start with a complete list of wants and needs, including your wildest desires. Be willing to trim back some things and wait for others.

It's critical to get professional input on proper phasing of your landscape project. It can be upsetting and costly to start a phased project without good planning. All too often portions of landscape need to be torn out, and other elements need to be added, so you get stuck paying for tear-out and re-installation costs.

A licensed landscape professional who does both design and installation will have the best understanding of installation phasing requirements. He or she should provide a design and phased installation plan that fills your needs while meeting your budget.

A comprehensive phasing plan should not only provide you with a detailed construction schedule, but it should clearly define your payment schedule. This way, you have the flexibility to put a hold on

the project at defined intervals, should your budget requirements change. Life is full of unexpected expenses, and this type of installation plan will give you the peace of mind that, if your economic situation changes, you're not stuck in a contract that you can no longer afford. Because a phased project can often be stretched out over several years, it's good advice to choose a contractor who is well-established in your area and has been in business for a while. You don't want to have someone else finish a job that may not have the same vision or style as your original contractor.

Ways to Phase: Besides the obvious front yard, backyard phases, we usually recommend a complete yard clean-up and rough grading as phase one. If you're planning to re-landscape your front and back yard in separate phases, it would be more cost-effective to do the demo and grading of both at the same time. Unless you have kids or dogs, then you wouldn't want to spend months with a flat dirt lot in your back yard.

For sloped lots, the next phase often includes adding retaining walls. These require large equipment that may damage other landscape elements such as hardscape, irrigation and plants, so it's best done early in the project. Before starting the hardscape phase (patios, driveways, and other hard surfaces), the mainline irrigation and landscape lighting wires should be run. Although landscape lighting is important for safety and the enjoyment of your yard, the majority of this expense can be deferred. However, planning ahead by including lighting in your design and installing the main wiring before adding hard surfaces will save you tear-out dollars later. You can start with a few minimal fixtures for safety purposes, then later add more lighting for ambiance and effect.

Subsequent phases are usually based on your priorities. Is a play space for your children a priority over the outdoor kitchen? Is a patio or pool remodel more important than a new lawn? The planting

phase usually happens near the end of the project. However, we recommend putting in some trees and focal plants earlier, so you'll have some well-established plants when your job is complete.

By installing your landscape in phases, you'll be able to stretch the cost over a longer period. This method requires patience and planning but the end result, a beautiful new yard, will be achieved with much less stress.