



YARD ARTISTS

Iowa Retailer Grows Lawn & Garden Sales Through Landscape Design Service



Project: Nachtman Home

Landscaping for the four sides of this yard feature a variety of maple trees, ornamental grasses, shrub roses, a Fat Albert Spruce, assorted flowers and roughly 1,900 square feet of mulch.

Total Sales: \$3,660

Project Completion: 2006

While the team at Steve's Ace in Dubuque, Iowa, certainly knows its way around home improvement projects, when it comes to helping customers design beautiful backyards and gardens, they're kind of a big deal.

In fact, through both the store's broad selection of lawn and garden products and its unique landscape "coaching and design" services, Steve's Ace has emerged as the go-to place for gardeners in its community.

Since the store started promoting the service 10 years ago, it has increased its bottom line as customers started looking to reinvest in their homes and outdoor spaces. News quickly spread through word of mouth about the service and created a loyal customer following.

With more than 100 residential landscape consultations a year and a 48 to 50 percent margin for each project, landscape design rakes in an additional



\$300,000 to \$400,000 in annual sales at Steve's Ace, says Sara Carpenter, garden center manager.

"Now we're known as a destination garden center," she says, adding that 76 percent of the store's total sales come from its lawn and garden category.

On the following pages, we'll look more closely at how the service works, offer a few examples of projects Carpenter has worked on for customers, and share the sales generated by each project. We'll also offer some tips for how you can integrate a similar service at your store.

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LANDSCAPE DESIGN



Steve's Ace has 3,000 square feet of dedicated landscape retail space and 1,800 items in its live goods inventory (not including thousands of perennials, Carpenter says), but aside from the store's vast selection, it's the landscape design service that sets it apart.

"Not many businesses are passionate about residential landscape design in our area, so we saw an opportunity to help generate more sales by offering the design service," says Carpenter, who has degrees in horticulture and floriculture from Kirkwood Community College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

The process starts with Carpenter meeting with a customer to determine the end goal and budget of the landscape design project.

"I will meet with customers initially to determine how they use their space: Do they have children? When do they entertain? These factors affect what types of plants to include in the project," she says.

She then provides a scaled drawing of the property with the new design,

showing the project in stages, so the customer can choose what part of the design to complete first.

Carpenter charges a \$125 residential design consultation fee for the first side of the house and \$25 for each additional side that customers pay when they receive their plan; commercial fees are \$65 per side. Most small-scale residential projects generate, on average,

\$500 to \$1,000 in sales for the store and take four to six months to complete; a large project can generate \$20,000 in sales, she says.

To motivate customers to utilize the store's design service and products, the staff offers a 10 percent discount card for plant purchases.

The service also benefits local contractors. Carpenter works with contractors to bid on projects and pick up materials at the store.

"The landscape design service we offer benefits both us and the contractors," Carpenter says. "Contractors love getting referrals, and we don't have the added expense of hiring an installation crew."

Project: Blankenship Home

The design of this yard included colorful geraniums, daylilies and Knockout roses.

Heritage River Birch, Blue Globe Spruce and other trees were used to add height.

Total Sales: \$3,740

Project Completion: 2011

The key is having an employee who has good public speaking and multitasking skills and is comfortable working one-on-one with clients.



www.StevesAce.com

Steve's Ace owner **Steve Selchert** promotes the garden center in a TV commercial.

■ Bring it to your store

Even if you don't have a formal landscape design background or the resources to dedicate a full-time employee to the service, Carpenter says it's not difficult for an independent home improvement store to add an offshoot of the service to its offerings.

The key is having an employee who has good public speaking and multitasking skills and is comfortable working one-on-one with clients. If the employee can win over the customer throughout the design process, the customer will be more likely to make return trips to the store throughout all phases of the landscape process—and recommend your store and service to others.

Of course, a working knowledge of how plants mature and bloom after they've been planted in the ground helps, too. Consider investing in master gardener training for an employee with an interest in landscaping and plants, or send key employees to local garden shows to get ideas.

Carpenter makes a point to attend regional nursery and landscape associations' training sessions and workshops and the Independent Garden Show to learn about new landscape design trends.

Partnering with area gardening associations can also help spread the word about your consulting service.

"We've gained a lot of momentum by getting involved with our local nursery organization," Carpenter says. "Our store is now significant among area professionals."

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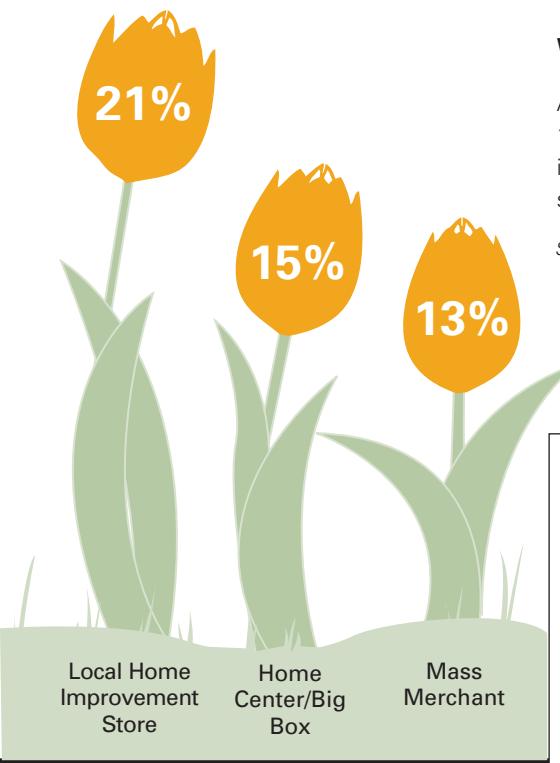
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Where Do People Shop?

According to the National Gardening Association, 18- to 34-year-olds shop their local home improvement stores for plants and gardening supplies for their yards.

Source: National Gardening Association

Keep Garden Sales Growing

According to the National Gardening Association, 18- to 34-year-olds cite their local home improvement stores as their preferred lawn and garden suppliers (21 percent of lawn and garden sales).

"For many in this age group, it's the first time they've had a yard or garden. They know they can get their questions answered at their local hardware stores," says Bruce Butterfield, National Garden Survey research director.

And while many of these consumers want to have well-designed gardens, they also want their lawn upkeep to be low-maintenance and low-cost. Anticipate what your customers will need to do to keep their lawns in top shape before they do.

Merchandise supplies together on an endcap based on common lawn maintenance projects throughout the season, such as weed and insect control and maintaining soil moisture. Or load up an iPad with lawn maintenance apps for employees to troubleshoot customer gardening questions.

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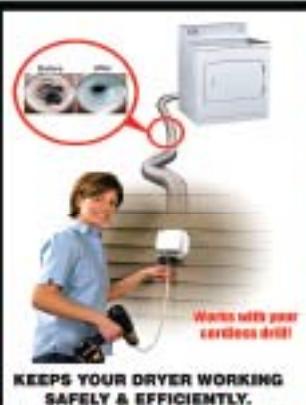
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Project: Smith Home

The homeowners consulted with Carpenter on the design, then self-installed Heritage River Birch, Japanese Maple, Blue Globe Spruce, Dwarf Korean Lilac and 24 packs of perennials purchased from the store's garden center.

Total Sales: approx. \$1,000

Project Completion: 2008

GARDEN COACHING

For customers who just need advice on a landscape or gardening project they're already working on, Steve's Ace also offers garden coaching.

"For \$50 an hour, I will meet with a customer at their home and talk shop," Carpenter says. This ranges from helping a customer's children learn how to plant a vegetable garden to teaching a customer the proper way to prune a shrub.

She also can review soil and light conditions, recommend plant selections for a site, help customers develop their garden style and more.

When Carpenter leaves a garden coaching session, she also leaves the customer with a list of suggested purchases for his project.

Many customers will also purchase a gift certificate for the service to give to new homeowners and garden enthusiasts. "We'll also donate hours for garden coaching and landscape design at local community events," she says.

■ Bring it to your store

Can't afford to send an employee to regular off-site consultations? Try offering one-on-ones at the store instead.

"I've had so many in-store customers who say, 'I wish I could take you home,' so I occasionally schedule back-to-back in-store consultations on a weekend," Carpenter says. "We charge \$25 for the service, but we give customers additional \$25 gift certificates to use in the store that day to encourage them to get started on their projects."

Looking for design inspiration? You can also link to design-oriented social media sites like Houzz.com or Pinterest.com on your store's website to encourage your customers to get creative with landscaping and to help your employees generate ideas to have on hand for customers coming to your store for landscape design advice.

To generate sales through this type of service, it's also all about how you present your department, Carpenter says.

"Surprise your customers by creating a beautiful-looking place in an ordinary area of your store. Creativity goes a long way: display merchandise on and sell attractive benching and high-quality shelving. You can create an area in the parking lot or side of a building with some potted plants, mulching and retaining wall blocks." □



"Surprise your customers by creating a beautiful-looking place in an ordinary area of your store."

—Sara Carpenter, Steve's Ace

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