

WAY TO GROW / CREEKS

Way to Grow in Orinda
Landscaping Pitfalls and How to Avoid Them.

Steve & Cathy Lambert



Recently, Steve gave a lecture to the Association of Professional Landscape Designers titled "The Good, The Bad and The Ugly." At the start of the lecture, Steve asked the 35 designers in attendance what they felt the percentage of quality landscapes were in our area. It didn't shock us to learn that these professionals rated the percentage of good Lamorinda landscapes to be only about 10-15 percent.

After some open floor discussion, we were able to attribute this dismal number to three common problems. The first problem mentioned was bad design or no design at all. The second issue was improper or sloppy installation techniques. The third reason given was bad maintenance or stewardship of the garden after installation.

This discussion was not based on matters of personal taste and style but on a true lack of proper execution. That's just wrong! As landscapers, designers, nursery, or pond center professionals, it's our responsibility to guide clients to make decisions that appeal to them visually and practically while following proper principles of installation, local city and county codes, and the physical limitations of the specific jobsite – not to mention making sure clients and/or their maintenance crews are informed of proper care instructions for all plant materials. Every day, we drive by jobs that just don't make any professional common sense.

Unfortunately, a lack of professional morals is widespread in the green industries. If someone advertises themselves to be an expert in their field, or even claims to be knowledgeable, prospective clients often just take their word for it and in turn, they get taken. The following are just a few unfortunate examples of some of the poor workmanship we have witnessed in our area.

Recently, Steve met with a homeowner who had just finished having some tree work done. Steve was sickened when he drove up to the home to see that several beautiful oak trees had been brutally topped like a military flat-top haircut — and all to achieve a better view. The client wanted the view but also loved the oaks and now, regrettably, they are ruined. The homeowners were happy with the results because (not being arborists) they didn't know any better. They were unaware that

pruning trees in this manner is like going in for a manicure and coming out with your hands cut off at the wrists. These trees should have been opened up and windowed out. This was not just a bad haircut that will eventually grow back. These trees will be forever handicapped. They will grow back in a way that will quickly re-block the view, overweight branches will crack, and thus allow a much greater risk for diseases to attack the tree. There are no "tree police" to protect homeowners from the unqualified charlatans out there who claim to know what they are doing when it comes to tree work.

Not too long ago we took over a job where the original landscaper had installed pop-up sprinklers standing 6 inches above the lawn. The same landscaper also planted right up against the driveway and walkways. This was not done in an effort to save the clients money. This homeowner was willing to pay for a quality job. This was simply a case of poor and unsafe installation techniques. There is no excuse for having any sprinklers standing where people can trip over them or plants overgrowing into walkways, unless you are looking for lawyers to come knocking.

Next door to a job we recently completed, we witnessed a contractor overplanting to a ridiculous level. Plants that grow 6 feet tall and wide were planted inches from plants that grow 5 feet tall by 15 feet wide! Real life gardens are not meant to be planted like a showplace garden that you might see at a home and garden show. Such show-place gardens are intentionally planted tightly to achieve a full, grown-in look for a five-day garden show. Sure, the client may have been happy with the "instant garden" look, and the installer happy about his fat wallet, but will the client be as happy one to two years from now when overcrowded plants die or have to be removed?

We are currently re-installing a pond installed by an unlicensed pond installer. This pond was a disaster. The water was green, the pump had to be cleaned every other day, the rocks on the top of the waterfall were completely different from those at the bottom, there was no filtration system, and the position of the pond was completely wrong for the shape and slope of the yard. This pond was installed by someone claiming to be a "greenwater" [SEE PONDS page 22]

Landslide Restoration Uses Locally Native Plants

By MAYA RAPPAPORT
Contributing Writer

Ellie Samimi, a resident on Sunrise Hill Road in Orinda, broke new ground this year when she restored a landslide in her backyard using locally native plants.

The landslide occurred during an especially rainy period in the winter of 2005-2006, when many long-dormant landslides throughout Orinda became active. This landslide began at the footings of her deck and extended the length of her large backyard. Samimi had the repairs completed in September 2006.

Her landslide also extended to the top of a small creek. Therefore, in addition to the usual city permits, she had to observe the requirements of the city's creek protection ordinance. This ordinance, adopted in 2000, aims to preserve, protect, and enhance Orinda's creeks. Any construction or landscaping in a watercourse setback, or buffer zone, must be evaluated to identify ways in which the project can best protect and enhance creek resources. Although many projects can be re-designed to avoid

"The city's biologist has so much knowledge of, and passion for locally native plants. She gave me a list," says Ellie Samimi.

the setback, Samimi had no choice.

The City of Orinda's planning department encourages "creek friendly" landscaping in the setback, including the use of locally native plant materials on the steep streambanks. Locally native plants have grown from seeds of plants actually growing in this area. These plants are well-



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO
Ellie Samimi stands beside some of the native plants she used to restore the banks along the creek in her back yard.

adapted to local soils and climate, and often require little water or other maintenance once established. They also provide other benefits such as wildlife habitat and genetic compatibility with nearby natural vegetation.

Samimi's landscape designer, Jill Salmon of Apache Gardens in Lafayette, worked with the city's biologist, Barbara Leitner, to develop a list of creek-friendly plant materials. Samimi loves colorful plantings, and the beautiful shapes of the native oaks. She chose coast live oaks, bunchgrasses, pink-flowering currants, California honeysuckle, and several others. Leitner said, "Mrs. Samimi is the first homeowner to landscape her setback entirely with locally native plant materials. As more of these materials become available, homeowners will have many options for creek-friendly plantings."

Samimi then worked with Friends of [SEE PLANTS page 22]

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CREEKS

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so well that we kept it for another year. Summer was the problem. We didn't like paying rent when we wouldn't be there, so we sublet for a comparable amount. Our furniture had to go into storage, and because the movers charged by the hour, the two of us carried everything out to the sidewalk. We awaited the truck among lamps, chairs, and beds to save precious minutes of charge time.

We had the energy and enterprise to plan a lot of fun events. Each year we held a professional women's breakfast for half a dozen faculty friends. Breakfast was served at 6 o'clock, and guests were requested to wear hats and gloves. We drank tomato juice from silver cocktail glasses and danced the hula before leaving for school. That apartment was also notable for a most romantic reason. A friend I was dating

wanted Helen to meet a friend of his, so we arranged a little dinner party. I awoke that morning with a case of bronchitis, so bad I had to see a doctor. He told me to go to bed and stay there, but I explained the importance of the evening. He shrugged and gave me medications that included Dexedrine to stay awake. I felt miserable, but the party was a success as Helen met the man she is still married to 51 years later.

Nice places to live became increasingly more available after that, and we lived in a little more luxury. I had a frightful shock when after our joyful years together, Helen abandoned me to get married. It all turned out happily, because I was married myself a few months later. Helen and her husband moved to Lafayette, and my spouse and I bought a home in Orinda, and even though we have our own lives and families, we keep in close touch and still laugh over our shared memories.

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expert." That's just wrong.

When the homeowner questioned the difference in rock materials used, they were told "the lower rocks are no longer available." Wrong! We were able to locate these stones at any of the four local rock yards. When they questioned the fact that their pond water was so green, they were told "it's natural and the way it should be." Wrong! A small amount of algae is fine, but no one wants a green, slimy, smelly pond in their yard and no one has to have one. There are great pond filtration systems and products available to keep your pond water clear. When the homeowner asked about a filtering system, they were told "that would cost thousands of additional dollars." Wrong, wrong, wrong. Many people are hesitant to install a pond because ponds are believed to have so many maintenance problems. However, the real problems begin with poor installation. When designed and installed properly with the correct filtration and pump systems, a pond can be enjoyed with very little maintenance.

We could give dozens of other examples of the horror stories we have come across in the business of landscaping, but we don't have enough time or space for that. What we will do is give you some information and ammunition to help you avoid the many common and costly pitfalls of landscape improvements.

Don't skimp on the design phase. Paying up front for a well-thought-out design will save you thousands of dollars and much heartache in the long run. Make sure you consider the size, shape, and style of your house when planning your landscape. Just yesterday we drove by a Tudor style home in Alamo planted with palm trees and a tropical style landscape. That's just wrong. A good designer will design with the style of your home in mind, picking up architectural details from your home, and repeating them in your landscape.

Shop for your contractor and/or designer by talking to their previous clients and viewing some of their work. Check references by phone, yes, but also ask to see one or more current jobs in the process of being installed. Talk to these clients to see if they are happy with the progress of the job. Look around to see if the job site is being kept clean. Talk to the neighbors, if possible, to see if they have been happy with the process. Also ask for client references who had their landscapes installed at least five or more years ago. These clients will be able to tell you how happy they are with the end result after the garden has grown in and they have lived with it for a few years. They may also be able to tell you about some things they would have done differently.

Don't get sticker shock. It's easy to

underestimate landscaping costs if you haven't priced them lately. If you have a friend or neighbor in your area who has recently completed a landscape project and you like what they've had done, ask for a ballpark of what they spent. Try to be realistic about the amount of money you can invest in your garden. Many well-established contractors will be willing to install a project in phases to make financing easier. Avoid the temptation to cut costs by cutting corners. Using poor quality materials in your garden almost always costs you more in replacement dollars. A perfect example, and one we see all too often, is the homeowners who think they are cutting costs by installing an inexpensive and, therefore, low quality, outdoor lighting system which within a few months needs to be replaced.

Never go with the low bidder unless you have been diligent about checking out the contractor or designer. In our experience, there is always a reason for one contractor bidding thousands of dollars less than another. Did they leave items out of their bid that will be added in later as "extras"? Are they using cut-rate materials? Is their field crew qualified and appropriately supervised in the field? Do they have the office personnel to handle your project?

Always check to make sure your potential contractor is properly licensed and insured. There are many unlicensed individuals out there who call themselves contractors. You can verify a license number by going to the State Licensing Board's website at www.cslb.ca.gov. On this website, you can also check to be sure that your contractor has a current workers compensation insurance policy in place. Be wary if you are told that they don't need workers comp insurance because "all of the crew on your project will be independent or sub-contractors." This is almost impossible to do on a large landscape job that requires many laborers, and it's usually a flat-out lie.

It is not a state requirement that your contractor has general liability insurance, but if they don't, you are taking a risk. You are completely within your rights to ask to see proof of insurance from a contractor. Just recently, an unlicensed contractor in Orinda drove one of his overloaded trucks into a house, causing 10's of thousands of dollars in damages. *If you have any questions about this topic or if you have a suggestion for a future topic for our "Way to Grow" column, email the Lamberts at gardenlights@comcast.net.*

Read
The Orinda News
online at
www.orindaassociatoin.org

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Orinda Creeks to locate sources of these plants. One plant she chose was a valley oak seedling whose mother is the beloved "Tree of Lights" in downtown Orinda.

Samimi was extremely pleased with the outcome of everyone's efforts to restore her landslide-ravaged yard. "The city's biologist has so much knowledge of, and passion for locally native plants. She gave me a list."

For more information about the creek protection ordinance, go to <http://municipal.codes.lexisnexis.com/codes/orinda/>, then click on Title 18 to review the requirements under Chapter 18.03 Watercourse Maintenance, Alteration and Protection.

Rappaport is president of Friends of Orinda Creeks. For more information about creek-friendly landscaping or other creek-related issues, contact Friends of Orinda Creeks at mayarapp@comcast.net.

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