Outdoor Living

The American Society of Landscape Architects quarterly business survey shows sustainable projects, alternative design elements are gaining popularity.

Demand rises for low maintenance outdoor living projects

By Nick Bajzek, Products Editor

The American Society of Landscape Architects’ Business Quarterly survey shows there’s more demand for sustainable outdoor-living projects. “It’s a bit of a mix of smarter projects. There’s a big lean toward more built-in sustainability,” says ASLA Executive Vice President and CEO Nancy Summerville. After all, she notes, the First Family recently planted a vegetable garden. “(Outdoor living) has gone mainstream. It’s stylish now, for example, to grow your own vegetables.” The survey found that more than 10 percent of contractors have been asked to clear spaces for gardens.

Demand for traditional turf grass or lawns on recently completed projects has dropped by almost 33 percent in favor of alternative design elements. The survey points to 58.7 percent of contractors who have been asked to plant regionally appropriate, non-invasive vegetation in place of grass expanses. Almost 38 percent of respondents reported incorporating water harvesting elements such as a rain garden; 35 percent indicated incorporating a variety of hardscapes, including permeable surfaces.

WHY THE TREND?
The reasons for these upticks, says Summerville, are varied. Almost half (46 percent) of contractors reported their clients were looking to lower the time and effort it takes to maintain expansive outdoor living areas. They also want to make the most of government rebates. “People are willing to pay a bit more for outdoor living projects, but most clients want a project that might help them receive government-backed stimulus or tax break money,” says Summerville.

Contractors and landscape architects notice more clients want sustainable elements as well. “We recommend, or are asked for, composite decking materials and railings, PVC materials, and basically anything that is rot-proof on our projects,” says Diane Kelly from Atlanta-based Mosaic Group Architects & Remodelers.

The company has already turned its attention toward energy efficiency of the outdoor living space by incorporating screened porches with skylights and solar lighting for patios. Kelly says her clients are still looking for other options for living spaces. “These buyers,” she stresses, “still want a transitional space, especially in Atlanta, where an outdoor room could conceivably be used more than nine months out of the year.”

John Mills Davises, director of design for San Diego-based Marrakezl Design & Remodeling, says that although sustainability has caught on, the big difference he’s noticed is that projects are scaled back. Davies says that his clients aren’t looking to cut corners; they just crave a better bang for the buck. “(Our) projects have changed with smarter design. We are making more efficient use of space and design features such as fire, water, heat and light,” he says.

The Green Act

The recently re-introduced Green Act, penned by Representative Ed Perlmutter (D-Co.) and part of bill HR 8899, the Comprehensive Energy Security and Consumer Protection Act, passed The U.S. House of Representatives in September 2008. The Senate, however, did not act on the bill before the end of the legislative body’s session.

The bill aims to allow more off-shore oil and natural gas drilling and more investments in alternative fuels and energy-efficient communities. Interestingly, it also includes a provision to require the Department of Housing and Urban Development to consult with the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA) to mandate smarter and more sustainable practices to outdoor living projects.

Streams, koi ponds and other water-based projects are also on the rise, says the American Society of Landscape Architects.