



Sod, mature trees and flower gardens come pre-planted in many new homes today. This home, landscaped by Hoffman Landscapes, is one example.

# Just add water

*Builders now offer turnkey landscaping with new homes*

By Jane K. Dove, Post Correspondent

Lush lawns, mature shade trees and colorful flowerbeds are no longer the sole province of established homes and estates. Instead, today's builders offer Greenwich buyers brand new luxury homes with completely landscaped grounds designed to enhance the aesthetic appeal of the main dwelling and add significantly to the overall value of the property.

"Builders in the \$5-million to \$10-million and up price category must now offer something more than just a massive house on a sparsely landscaped lot," said Michael Hoffman, founder and president of Hoffman Landscapes, which services Greenwich. "Their clients want, and expect, a lot more."

"Larger homes demand larger and more elaborate landscapes," said Skip Skiba, a licensed arborist and district sales manager in the Greenwich office of The Care of Trees, a full-service tree care company. "Trees are a major focal point and we are seeing more builders taking care to preserve mature specimen trees during construction and also install large new ones once building is complete. Mature specimens can cost tens of thousands of dollars each, but there is a growing demand."

## Landscaping makes the difference

Mr. Hoffman said he believes the change in the builders' approach to landscaping happened about two years ago and coincided with the softening of the real estate market.

"They wanted to present their new homes at their very best and realized that a 10,000-square-foot house on a relatively bare lot is just another big house," he said.

"But it becomes an estate with a beautiful setting and landscape elements."

Builders now start their landscaping at the street, starting with a gated driveway and not forgetting the all-important rear of the dwelling.

"Stone walls and gated entries draw attention as does a well-designed driveway with a courtyard and adequate parking," Mr. Hoffman added. "The appearance of all of these is enhanced with the proper landscaping."

Lawns are no longer a "work in progress" for the new owner to complete. Instead they are thick and green from Day One.

"We sod around the areas that are close to the house and within easy view," Mr. Hoffman said. "These include the driveway and parking areas, front and back lawns and pool and patio areas. Seed can be used for more distant areas."

Foundation plantings are now larger and more expensive.

"Builders plant according to a specific design, rather than just putting in rhododendrons from a garden center," he said.

And flowerbeds are also ready, waiting, and even blooming if the season is right.

"They are now mostly perennial because they require less maintenance," Mr. Hoffman said. "Annuals tend to be used in pots and planters on porches, patios, terraces and around the pool."

## Trees, beautiful trees

Nothing enhances the look of a large luxury home more than the timeless beauty of mature, healthy shade trees.

"Architects, designers and builders want things in scale," Mr. Skiba said.

"Larger houses simply demand larger trees so some new home builders, especially

those at the high end of the price range, say \$10 million and up, are willing to spend literally hundreds of thousands of dollars on large trees. They are also willing to take extra care with mature trees already in place on a piece of property under development."

Clear-cutting has definitely fallen out of favor with luxury builders. Mr. Skiba said more of them realize the importance of trees and tree preservation.

"Mature trees on a piece of property cannot easily be replaced," he said. "With many homes now built on a tear-down basis, 10 to 12 beautiful old trees on the site may need to be preserved."

Tree care companies can protect the trees with no-drive zones and fencing around the root zones to mitigate the effects of heavy equipment compacting soil and damaging roots.

"The key is to consult with an arborist before construction starts," Mr. Skiba said. "Preservation is not that expensive and it's certainly a bargain when compared to replacing several 50-foot trees."

Mr. Skiba said post-construction care is also important for existing trees.

"Things like mulching, soil aeration and tilling and fertilization will help trees survive the effects of construction and thrive afterwards," he said. "There is nothing worse than losing beautiful, mature trees that are important to the home landscape"

And when it comes to adding new large trees to a luxury home site, Mr. Skiba said builders are willing to pay as much as \$50,000 to \$100,000 for a single specimen.

"These big trees should harmonize with the house and draw attention to the design

and architecture," he said. "Proper positioning is very important."

Mr. Skiba said these extra-large trees are all dug to order.

"Developers use tree brokers to locate the trees, usually on private property," he said. "They then purchase them from the owner, hire a landscape or tree company to dig them up, transport them and install them on the new property. Some companies say there is no tree too large to be transplanted and survive as long as it gets proper care."

Planting techniques for super-large trees are all important, with some parts of the process done by hand and others with special mechanical equipment. Once the tree is in the ground at its new location it has to be supported with steel cables to stabilize it.

"And professional follow-up care is critical for the first two to three years," Mr. Skiba said.

He added, "These large trees are an enormous investment and should be monitored regularly for soil quality and moisture, insects and disease. Today's sophisticated homeowners know the value of their trees and landscaping and are willing to spend the money it takes to keep everything in optimum condition. It's a sound investment in the value of their property."

Mr. Skiba said oaks, maples, a variety of flowering ornamental trees native to our area and evergreens for privacy screens are good basic choices when planting mature trees because they are hardy and disease resistant.

For information about Hoffman Landscapes, call 834-9656. For information about The Care of Trees, call 863-0900.