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Wardrobe malfunction: Don't let it happen to your property's landscape

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Is your property making the right fashion statement with its landscape? You only have one chance to make a good first impression in an interview, and a bad wardrobe day speaks volumes. The well dressed candidate stands the best chance of serious consideration in interviews. Competing properties are no different. Properly dressed in-season, your property will show well, week after week. OK, true enough before the economic downturn, but what about the need to economize these days? Make the tough choice and slash the landscape? False economy! A competitive market is no time to curb your enthusiasm for landscape; indeed it may be the time to add curb appeal. Dollar for dollar, investing in an attractive landscape, sustainable design included, is the smartest property investment for this or any market. Managing your curb appeal, and managing it cost effectively...priceless.

As a landscape architect who spent time in both a commercial brokerage firm and a commercial development partnership, I would be hard pressed to think of a real estate project where a landscape architect's services won't pay for themselves many times over. Let me count the ways: coming up with the right look for the all-important arrival experience, parking area, and amenity areas for workers or residents, using sustainable design to reduce environmental impacts and save on energy, leading effective public outreach in the community, and participating enthusiastically on your marketing team.

Since our warm months are so precious, why squander them in anything less than a non-stop blaze of glory? April's forsythia, magnolias, and cherries, followed by May's flowering quince, flowering crabapples, dogwoods, lilacs, azaleas, wisteria and roses, June's daylilies, mountain laurel, viburnums, spireas, and more azaleas, rhododendrons, and roses, July/August's clematis, clethras, hardy hibiscus and hydrangea, September's Shrub Bush Clover. Let the April-September love affair begin. And these are just for starters. Completing the layers of landscape are perennials, which bloom for at least several weeks, some of them month after month. Don't overlook the staying power of Shasta daisies, bellflowers, marguerites, heliopsis, basketflower, coral-bells, phlox, and Peru Lily. Or the super-showiness of peonies, daylilies, and chrysanthemums, a perennial favorite if not a perennial. Even these so-called extravagances, in key focal areas, are prudent investments in tough times.

Not convinced? Imagine your property in a sea of low-cost asphalt, or strewn with weeds. It looks abandoned. Now try selling it. At the price you want. As they say, it's what's outside that counts. If you need a further reason to green your property, try saving on your energy costs, reducing solar gain in summer and cutting winter winds. Some studies put the annual savings at 10-20% of heating

and cooling costs, which can be as high as 30% of total operating costs. Green roofs may not add curb appeal, but they impress green-conscious consumers, and save on energy even more dramatically. That said, the real payback in a competitive environment is not measured in how few years to recoup through reduced operating costs, but how firm that asking price is when it is time to sell.

From its new offices in Boston's Bulfinch Triangle, AGER is currently assisting local clients as well as Chinese-based developers leading the trend in importing the New England landscape style...to China. In the new flat world that we are in, this kind of import-export thinking works both ways. As a landscape architect who spent a year in AGER's Shanghai office, I had driven home to me the double irony that

- (1) New England garden favorites are almost overwhelmingly species from China, and
- (2) we have more of their species available in our nurseries than do the Chinese themselves.

Maybe the flat world began with plants imported to North America from China two centuries ago. China has four times the species to pick from than North America (but was short on ginseng.) Botanists have observed that our plants and those of China are strikingly similar, like siblings separated at birth. Check out the hemisphere's premier collection of Chinese plants at the Arnold Arboretum—ginkgos, dawn redwoods and so much more. There are plenty of non-invasive species to adorn your landscape and live in harmony with the local plant community, helping make a more sustainable planet one property at a time, and avoiding a fashion misstatement.

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