



CURB APPEAL

‘SQUEAKY CLEAN,’ WITH STYLE



A home that looks great from the minute you pull up to the curb plays on a buyer's emotions. Plan for that kind of appeal even if your house isn't on the market right now. BY LIS KING



First impressions are all-important when you're selling your house, say realtors, and in New Jersey's suburbs, that means a lot more than the style of the front door. Here, it's the overall look of the property from the street that counts: the facade of the house, driveway, lawn, plantings, front walk and even the mailbox.

In the real estate business, says broker Frank Isoldi of Westfield, the operative words are "curb appeal," which often dictates how quickly a house sells and at what price. And, by the way, even if you won't be selling for years, it's smart to keep curb appeal in mind whenever you make home and garden improvements. For example, don't plant shrubs that will cover up the windows in just a few years. And make sure the color of your new flowering tree will complement the house when you repaint next spring.

"Many prospective buyers check out a property by driving by," he explains. "If they don't like what they see from the street, they probably won't look inside. On the other hand, if a house has curb appeal, buyers tend to overlook small things that might otherwise become stumbling blocks on the way to purchase."

"Curb appeal plays on a buyer's emotions," remarks Denise Meininger, a sales associate with Prominent Properties, Sotheby's International Realty, Saddle River. "And emotion counts as much as logic when you're buying a house."

WHERE TO START

The irony is that when you're the seller you've got to detach yourself from emotion.

"Walk up to your home as if you're a prospective buyer," advises Meininger. "What parts of the property are attractive? What repairs are needed? What improvements should be made? Jot it all down, and remember that even a tiny problem can act as a warning sign. Potential buyers will wonder about the condition of the rest of the property."

Tidying up should be the first step, say Isoldi and Meininger. Rake and mulch beds, mow the lawn, reseed bare areas, edge beds and walkways, and store garbage cans out of sight.

Next freshen up and polish. Clean gutters, wash windows, shine doorknobs, scrub dirt and mildew from steps and porches. Pressure-washing the exterior may save you a paint job.

Fix anything that can detract from the impression that your house is absolutely sound, such as loose roof shingles, broken windows, defective siding and rickety screens.



Courtesy of Cipriano Landscape Design

LESS IS MORE

Often, homeowners add too many details, thinking this will improve curb appeal. The opposite is usually the case, feels Greta Goss, an Upper Montclair designer whose clients rave about her space strategies and problem solutions.

"A few simple, strong silhouettes are always better than overstimulating the eye," she explains. "Recently I was asked to help a couple overhaul their entire house. In a few years, they said, they wanted to add a front porch to attract friends for

their children. But they already had an enormous deck in back, and the style of the house didn't lend itself to a porch, plus it would strain their budget.

"So I had the contractor remove the metal storm door, metal shutters and a black mailbox on the wall by the front door. I also had him cut off the long, junky stems of the post lights flanking the door. Then I recommended installing a pewter mail slot in the door and ordering some large dark pewter house numbers to hang above it.

"Finally, I suggested putting a bed of wildflowers and a couple of wooden Adirondack chairs on the front lawn to attract friends for the children as well as neighborly conversation. The homeowners were overjoyed with the results. The point is that within half an hour, I had proved the porch an unnecessary \$20,000 expense, and the curb appeal had been improved by removing, not adding."

COLOR COUNTS

If you're re-roofing, choose the most neutral shade, say the experts. Goss recommends dark gray: "It goes with any exterior color."

While Isoldi recommends using classic exterior colors, Doty Horn, Benjamin Moore Paints' director of color and design, favors a more variable color palette.

She explains that certain colors can make a small house seem larger, give a plain house panache, accentuate a home's best features while camouflaging its flaws, refresh a tired facade and make a house stand out in a neighborhood of look-alikes.

Horn offers a few color selection tips from a new Benjamin Moore book, "Exterior Style," which is entirely devoted to painting for maximum curb appeal.

"Select color swatches where they'll be used and at different times of day," she warns. "A dark green for a door may look fantastic at the store, but it could appear almost black in the shade

of the front porch. Conversely, a pale hue can bleach out in brilliant sunlight. Invest in a quart of the paint you're considering and paint a good-sized area of the house or a large sample board and view it in varying light conditions before making your final decision.

"If you want to judge a color in the store, place it against a black background to come close to the way it would look outside."

The location of your house matters, too, she says. For example, pastel pinks and aquas that are perfect for a house at the shore can look incongruous in an urban setting.

LANDSCAPING TIPS

A great garden will make any house look better, and realtors say that investing in landscaping is especially wise if your house has minimal curb appeal. "Homeowners almost always recoup such expenses," notes Meininger.

Chris Cipriano of Cipriano Landscape Design, Ramsey, agrees. An award-winning landscape designer, Cipriano has launched a new service staging outdoor settings to help homeowners achieve maximum curb appeal.

"Home staging is a technique usually done indoors to prepare a home for sale," he says. "But fixing up the outdoors is another vital aspect of the selling process."

Cipriano's garden staging process starts with removing overgrown or scraggly shrubs and trees. "They date the property, hint at lack of maintenance and are especially unsightly when they obscure windows or the front entry," he says.

He recommends setting out planters with colorful flowers along the walkway and by the front door, hanging flowering baskets from overhangs and porch ceilings, and adding window boxes. Planting annuals, which always provide instant impact, next to walks, driveways and the curb helps, too. A mailbox garden is another good idea, he says.

THE WOW FACTOR

Great layering is the secret behind maximum curb appeal, according to Cipriano.

"You accomplish this by staging plantings from the rear of a garden and working out toward the curbside view," he explains.

The basic principle behind layering is that the tallest plants form the background, and as the "rows" descend, so should the heights of the

plants and flowers. But be sure you know their growth habits. Often the plants we buy are young, and they may not stay the same height as when you first put them in the ground.

The layering can also include fences, gates, freestanding arbors and trellises, which should all interact harmoniously. This could get involved, so consider investing in a plan by a professional designer.

Playing into the layering scenario is the fact that expansive lawns are becoming a thing of the past, says Chris, adding that larger planting beds are a growing trend, both because they are more interesting than turf and because they save water.

Matching House and Garden

For true curb appeal, your garden should complement the architecture and details of your house.

- Go casual if your house is the farmhouse variety, be it Americana or Provencale. An English cottage garden look with old-fashioned flowers will be perfect.
 - Oriental landscaping with rocks, streams of pebbles and spare, spring-flowering trees and low spreading junipers suits the spare, straight-edged lines of contemporary homes.
 - Classic landscaping with tried-and-true shrubs, trees and flowers complements colonial homes.
- Think mountain laurel, holly, rhododendron, tulips and daffodils.
 - Boxwood-bordered beds, topiary trees and shrubs are perfect if you live in a Victorian house. Also consider old-fashioned roses, fancy arbors and hanging flowering plants.
 - Italianate villas call for formality. Think shaped shrubs in ornate urns, terraces, trellises, fountains and great drifts of Mediterranean-origin flowers.

For best results, don't use too many plant varieties. Beds look jumbled if you do. Repeat great clusters of the chosen plants throughout a bed. A single plant here and another one there will look anemic. You want the bed to look lush and cohesive.

FOUR-SEASON APPEAL

It's easy to have good-looking gardens in spring and summer, but what about curb appeal during fall and winter?

It isn't difficult to achieve, claims landscape designer Drew Madlinger of Landscape Aesthetics, Bernardsville. The variety of plant materials with four-season interest is enormous, starting with ornamental evergreens, ranging from trees to groundcovers. In addition, there are trees that bloom in spring, bear fruit in summer, turn stunning colors in fall and boast interesting bark in winter. There are also new varieties of shrubs, trees and flowers that bloom longer and more frequently than their old-fashioned relatives.

Some of Madlinger's favorites are day lilies, hydrangeas, river birches, the serviceberry tree and red-stemmed dogwood, while Cipriano singles out the Montgomery spruce and Merry Berry holly, lavender falls wisteria, which blooms twice in one season, and the Empress Wu hosta, a showy new perennial with great blue foliage.

HARDSCAPE ELEMENTS

Hardscaping performs all year round, so naturally it's part of the landscape designer's bag of tricks to create four-season curb appeal. The driveway, especially, is getting a lot of attention.

Isoldi says that while pavers are good choices for the driveways and walks of higher-end homes, he's seeing more and more crushed stone versions.

"I like it," he says. Goss agrees. "It's a very natural look...It's unpretentious and goes well with all plant materials."

However, Ira Vosper, director of operations for Rinox Pavers, points out that pavers offer more color, shape and size choices than

any other hardscape option as well as optimum durability and minimal maintenance.

"Quite simply, creating curb appeal should always begin with a solid hardscape foundation of driveway, walkways and retaining walls," he notes. "Unlike trees, shrubs and plants, the right hardscape elements resist climate change and maintain beauty throughout the year."

CREATIVE LIGHTING

Finally, there's evening curb appeal to consider. After all, some showings happen at dusk or after dark, remarks Meininger. Place lighting strategically along the driveway and walk, have good-looking light fixtures at the entry, and make sure that interior lighting is visible and welcoming from the outside.

"Use light to showcase eye-catching landscape features," adds Goss. "For example, think of placing up-lighting under a small tree with a lovely branching habit. Any potential buyer driving by after dark will be sure to return for a daytime look." 

RESOURCES

Benjamin Moore Paints
Montvale
www.benjaminmoore.com

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Prominent Properties
Sotheby's International Realty
Saddle River, 201.825.3600
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Cipriano Landscape Design
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