

CREATING LANDSCAPES OF DISTINCTION FOR TWENTY YEARS: LANDSCAPE DESIGN GROUP, INC.

by Derek Fell • featured in *Nouveau Magazine*



(l to r) Mike and Frank Montemuro, brothers and co-owners of Landscape Design Group, Inc.

Michael and Frank Montemuro are brothers and partners in one of Bucks County's longest established and most respected companies offering complete landscaping services, with the emphasis on *complete*. They are not only graduates of Penn State University and registered landscape architects, they can also follow through with the actual construction, using six construction crews.

“We can meet with a client, conduct a site analysis, put ideas on paper, establish budgets and, after approval of a master plan, we can move in with our heavy equipment to see the project completed, down to laying flagstone, building decks, and planting trees and gardens,” says Michael.

“And we've been doing it for twenty years,” Frank adds.

Unlike many design duos in which one person may be a construction expert and the other a plant expert, each



This stone patio, surrounded by terrace walls, was designed to offer privacy and an inviting backyard retreat.

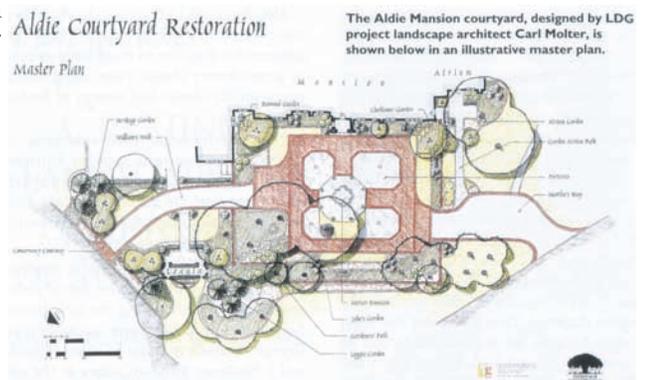
brother can manage a project from start to finish, and each has his own list of clients. They pride themselves on being equally knowledgeable about design, construction and plant selection. They tour other countries to see innovative designs firsthand, maintain a large library of landscape design books and visit progressive nurseries to stay up-to-date with the introduction of new plants.

“We like to think that a garden is an extension of the house, and generally it is the architectural style of the residence that influences our design, though we are always receptive to the ideas and opinions of the client, says Frank. Michael agrees: The first step in all projects is to develop a scope of work that addresses all the functional needs as well as the aesthetic likes and dislikes of the client.

They feel that the question of formal or casual design is a good starting point when clients aren't sure what they want, and

they explore from there. Often, Bucks County residents want an English garden because the English-cottage garden style is very popular, and Bucks County resembles England more than any other country they have visited.

The brothers like to work within an hour's drive of their premises east of Doylestown on Burnt House Hill Road, because they feel they service their clients best when they can get to a jobsite quickly. They like to design spaces with a balance of hardscape and softscape material. Hardscape elements like walls, arbors, terraces and decks help to establish the "bones" of a garden, while softscape elements like trees, shrubs and perennial plants help to flesh out the design and soften the hard lines of construction. Although ornamental grasses are generally popular, they've found that some homeowners do not want them at all; but they get little resistance to lots of flowering trees like the new pink-flowering Korean dogwoods, which are more disease-tolerant than the native dogwood. They like sweetbay magnolias because the sinuous limbs



Aldie Courtyard Restoration

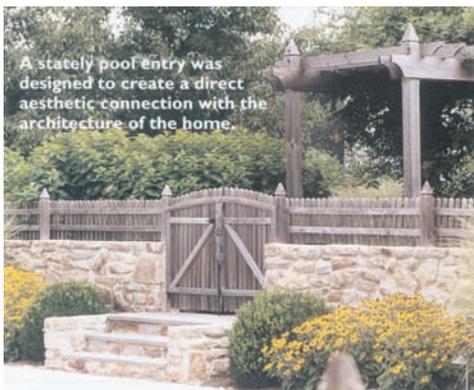
The Aldie Mansion courtyard, designed by LDG project landscape architect Carl Molter, is shown below in an illustrative master plan.

can be trimmed to create a sculptural effect and the flowers are so fragrant. The brothers also use Green Giant arborvitae, a product of Princeton Nurseries, because it is fast-growing and, unlike other arborvitae, the deer don't seem to like it. They admit that deer resistance is an important consideration for area gardens.

Also, foremost in their minds when they begin to design is easy maintenance. To achieve this they like to plant large sweeps of groundcover plants, even using hardy yucca on dry slopes and sweeps of hostas in the shade.

The brothers began their enterprise in their parents' basement, working fourteen hours a day, year after year, to establish their reputation for quality, spending days on jobsites and evenings at the drawing board and taking care of paperwork.

Though much of their work is residential, they have an impressive list of commercial clients, including the new Union Square project in New Hope, an innovative George Michaels complex of shops, offices, and a Michener Museum annex at the old Union Camp factory. Their landscaping at this site includes planting entryways and raised planters, establishing outdoor paved areas and creating walkways. Another large project of theirs is a historic restoration of the Aldie Mansion in Doylestown, which involves an expansive brick and bluestone courtyard and fountain. For this sensitive plan they received an Excellence of Design award from the Bucks County Chamber of Commerce and the Bucks County Chapter of the American Institute of Architects.



The brothers find that homeowners today are much more appreciative of professional landscaping than when they started their business. But even so, considering the amount of new housing in the area, they find that the number of people willing to spend generously for quality landscape design is relatively small, so the market is highly competitive. Most of their new business is acquired through word-of-mouth recommendations and a modest amount of advertising. For two years, in 1995 and 1996, they exhibited at the Philadelphia Flower Show and won awards for both designs, the first a Japanese-style garden and the second a beachfront garden similar to properties one might see on Cape Cod or at the Jersey shore.

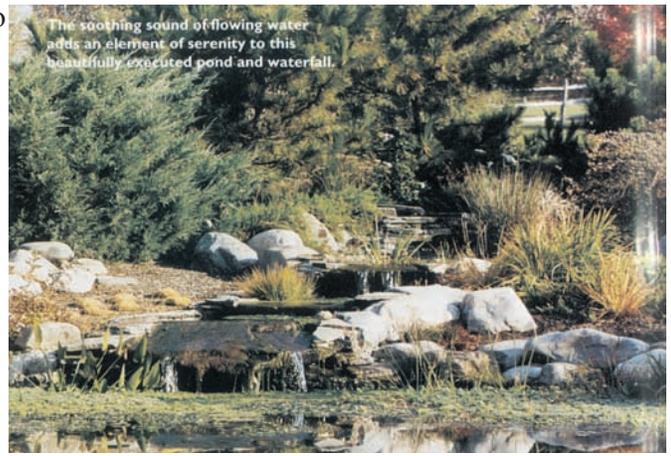
Water features are more popular than ever, from simple water lily pools with a few goldfish to wildlife ponds planted with native species and stocked with sunfish. Among flowering plants, homeowners are keen on fragrance, a requirement hardly ever mentioned when the brothers started business, and also on plants that attract hummingbirds and butterflies. Privacy is important and although the evergreen Green Spire arborvitae makes an excellent screening hedge, the brothers like European hornbeam for its distinctive look, close-knit interweaving branches and attractive bright-green serrated leaves.

Backyard master plans with swimming pools are more popular than ever. Mike and Frank believe it is part of a nationwide trend, as Americans rediscover the benefits of spending more time at home. Other decorative elements for the backyard, such as terraces, water features and pergolas, are also popular and can complete a master plan.

Rock gardens have never been as popular with American homeowners as they are with the British, probably because people associate them with a lot of maintenance, but retaining walls and terraces are very much in demand, the tops planted with cascading plants like Flower Carpet roses and cutleaf Japanese maples. Frank and Mike advocate lots of day lilies because they can be used as an effective slope cover and provide bold color at a time of year when color from other flowering plants can be scarce. Though the deer like the flower buds, these can be protected by deer repellent sprays. Sweeps of daffodils, on the other hand, are completely deerproof.

The brothers enjoy helping to make homes and businesses pleasant places to relax and work, and feel that good landscaping combining durable landscape features and low maintenance can considerably improve the value of a property.

When a homeowner decides to sell, "curb appeal" can be a significant sales factor, Mike points out. And both brothers agree that there are few places in North America more satisfying to work their beautification magic than the Delaware Valley. ♦



Derek Fell, Bucks County resident, cultivates a 24-acre garden at Cedaridge Farm, Tinticum Township, PA. His garden writing and photography have won numerous awards. Van Gogh's Gardens (Simon & Schuster) is his latest book.