

# The future can look bright with proper plant planning

Years ago, I helped a homeowner's association client improve the community's plantings, lighting, paving and irrigation. Budget concerns left improving considerable roadway frontage to the future.

The future has arrived. But it's not enough to simply "feel" the time is right. The landscape committee must defend its design decisions.

How does a community know when it's time to improve?

## SALES VELOCITY

The community has had comparatively slow sales and stagnant prices, even though it has a famous golf course and large lots.

Competition from similar communities means homeowners compete with developers, establishing and maintaining entry features and frontage plantings. Mistakes are very costly.

There is much to be learned by visiting the competition. Some of the newer communities have benefited from the talents of our local landscape architects and are clearly superior.

## A CLEAR CONCEPT?

A unified master planting plan brings a sense of order and is one of the most important features of our high-end communities.

Sometimes a community has an established improvement plan provided by the original developer, responsibly guarded over many years.

Sometimes well-meaning but ill-educated committees might not fully grasp the idea here, introducing plants or plant themes that are antithetical to any sort of master plan.

I've had many committees ask, "What did we do wrong?" They just don't know.



## HOW LONG HAS IT BEEN?

Even in the best cases where plants are properly specified, shrubs will reach a natural end of life.

Shrub life varies, but for many of the common landscape plants, five to seven years is typical. Shrubs start to become bare at the bottom, requiring more mulch, they lose form and often are trimmed overzealously.

Regrettably, funds for plant replacements are infrequently held in reserve.

## MULCH COSTS RISING?

Properly designed, your common areas will use less mulch, not more. And it's not only mulch: With time, it's also more difficult to control plant form, meaning more trimming. You probably also will see large mulch areas, too, where once you had plants. What is more ideal is mature plants in a tight bed, where only perimeter mulching is necessary. Search my blog for details about planting and mulch.

## IRRIGATION MODERN?

Remember previous years when we had months without rain, and the Southwest Florida Water Management District was rumbling about permanent water restrictions? Those in the industry know this: At some point, restrictions will become permanent, allowing watering only once per week.

"What's the big deal?" you might ask.

Many legacy systems can-

not deliver enough water in an eight-hour period. Pumps and pipe sizes likely were designed with a wide-open watering window. Sometimes, it is possible to increase pump size. More often, mainline and distribution lines are inadequate; that's when you must plan.

## HOW DOES IT FEEL?

Get a landscape architect to walk the property with you. The first thing to assess: Can you discern an overall plan, or theme? Have plant materials, paving and other street furniture been used in a way that provides direction and recognizable improvement at key areas? Or do you see dozens and dozens of different plant species?

Is there a calming sense? Are focal plantings in the right place? Do you see dead or struggling plants?

In older communities, the canopy-level material (trees and large palms) is often in good condition. Patio trees, larger accent shrubs and the smaller palms are often satisfactory. The biggest issue is shrubs.

Look at lighting: Is it safe? Are the poles standard-issue Florida Power & Light? Are conflict points and specialty plantings properly illuminated?

## UPGRADE?

Very often, my community clients want some upgrading, and this means adding major landscape elements. And why not? Many communities go this way as they mature and manage to aggregate the necessary funds.

Michael Spencer, ASLA, has been practicing landscape architecture since 1979 and is president of MSA Design Inc. Learn more at [www.msadesign.com](http://www.msadesign.com) or send email to [ms@msadesign.com](mailto:ms@msadesign.com).