

working

BY CONNIE GROSCH

PEOPLE TALK ABOUT THEIR JOBS



"A garden is living and changing," says landscape designer Andrew Grossman. "It's mysterious. If you walk into a beautiful home, it registers as a beautiful home, but when you walk into a beautiful garden it's a different experience entirely. It's magical." H2

Andrew Grossman, landscape designer

This is my newest project. I wanted to create something that would look like a natural pond, something like a farm pond. Everyone's into water features right now but I find so many of them look Disneyesque. I wanted something that would look believable, could conceivably have been here.

And this is a classic cottage garden. No harsh colors — just subtle pinks and yellows and blues. And this was my first garden. I have a color error at the moment: those foxgloves were mislabeled so they're the wrong color. Now this pond is not pretending to be a natural pond: it's a rectangle, it has a faucet. If you can't make it look natural, make it look manmade. Clients come to see my gardens, but what I have here isn't necessarily what I do for clients. As a designer, I'm not really there to impose my aesthetic on them, but rather to figure out what they want and how to give it to them. I can design in any style that I think is appropriate. If someone tells me they want colored gravel and pink flamingos I would probably say I'm not sure I'm the right designer. But I find that even people who seem to want something that I would consider 'not in good taste' just need to be pointed in the right direction to get what they want in a tasteful way.

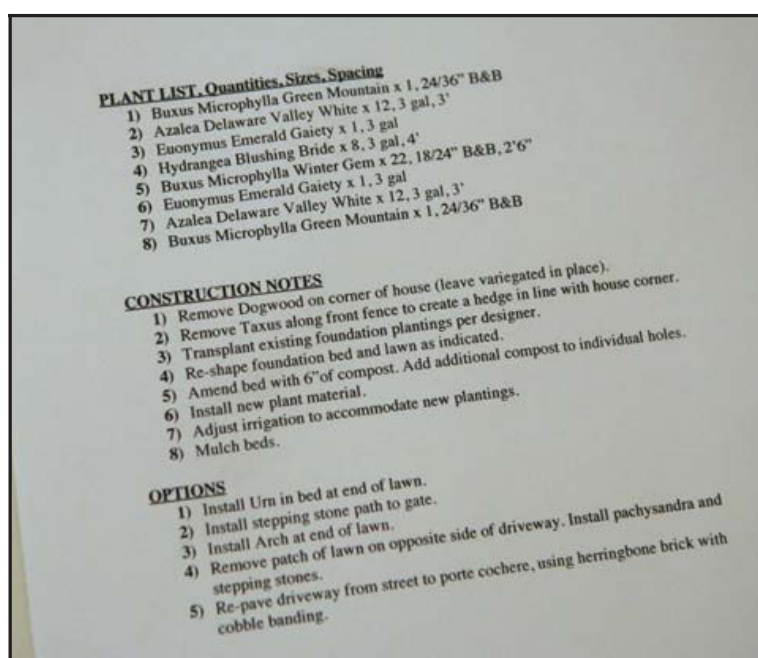
I present the client with a list of four questions to think about before we meet: What are the issues you want to address on your property? What's your budget? Desired maintenance level? And aesthetics: if you could have any style garden, what would that be?

I'm self-taught. I used to be a choreographer and a dancer but I was always interested in gardening, even as a kid. And I did gardening for other people to make extra money when I was dancing. I started the business in 1993 and have seen it evolve from taking care of people's gardens to designing and overseeing installation of relatively large projects.

One of the things that makes me different from someone who went to school for this is that I started from the ground up: I know how to make things grow. I don't think you can teach design anyway. You have a good sense of design or you don't. I'm always observing, and when I see something that works I try to figure out why it works.

The great thing about my profession is that it combines two fields: It's design and horticulture, and you can't be good at it unless you're good at both. You can't design a garden and then have none of the plants survive!

Design is about proportion: It's the relationship of



the plant material to the foundation beds, the width of the walkway to the front door, the height of the fence. Outdoor space is so completely different from indoor space in terms of how it reads. Inside, a 15x15 room is really pretty big. Outside, the same size square is really pretty small. You can't take what you know of inside space and project it outside and think that proportion works the same.

I measure the property or the portion we're working on, take digital pictures, then start drawing. I don't work on the computer. I work on a drafting table. A computer-generated drawing may look pretty but it isn't necessarily the best tool for working with contractors. I put all the plant material info on one drawing and all the construction info on another drawing. I want to make it easy for them to bid on the project.

I don't necessarily like the big projects more than the small. It's more about what I've made from what was there — it's the transformation that is so interesting.

And what's nice about designing a small city garden is that the changes read really quickly. You don't have to wait 15 years for the plants to mature — in six weeks you've created *something*.

The most difficult thing about my job? Coordinating with contractors. It's like herding cats! But I've pulled together a stable of really fine contractors that I can usually count on.

Their performance reflects well or badly on me. I'm the one the client calls — not the fence company or the irrigation company.

And, of course, the weather. I'm dealing with something perishable. During a heat wave you can't delay having plants delivered, but then you have to make sure they get in the ground and get plenty of water. People always say, 'Oh, your job must be such fun!' And it is, but it *is* a job. I'm working with people who are spending a lot of money and they have expectations and they're going on the basis of a drawing with a bunch of circles and squares and lines on it and that's a big leap of faith.

A garden is living and changing. It's mysterious. If you walk into a beautiful home, it registers as a beautiful home, but when you walk into a beautiful garden it's a different experience entirely. It's magical. You would never walk into someone's living room and say, 'Oh, this is magical.'

What I do makes people happy and my clients associate that happiness with me. I've made a little magic happen in a way they couldn't have done themselves, and in a way that is different than having their kitchen redone.

A monthly column featuring Rhode Islanders talking about their jobs.

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