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DIGGING IN

New homeowners weigh DIY landscaping vs. paying the pros **c8**

ELIZABETH SAGARIN



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LANDSCAPING: DIY OR DON'T?

BY LIZA N. BURBY
Special to Newsday

Weighing monetary, time costs and whether to hire pros

When Kim Lamiroult and her fiancé, Michael Garguilo, moved into their home in December, the quarter-acre property was overgrown with privet, Chinese holly and burning bush — popular ornamentals from the 1970s when the house was built but now considered invasive species.

They didn't bother to get an estimate for a professional landscaper because they knew they wanted to do it themselves. And, at roughly \$50 a week to simply mow a lawn, they couldn't afford it.

"If money was no issue, I wouldn't mind hiring someone," said Lamiroult, 32. She and Garguilo purchased the Miller Place Cape for \$530,000 when mortgage rates were at their highest, so money was already tight. "For me, to hire a landscaper would mean I'd end up working more hours to pay them."

So, the couple spends roughly three hours of their free time most weeks on maintenance — when they're not both working two jobs. Lamiroult, an environmental analyst and a veterinary assistant, said they could take up to six hours when they're tackling larger projects like shrub removal, weeding and new plantings.

New homeowners like the couple are facing their first official growing seasons — which are getting longer and longer with climate change, experts say. For those who have the time and knowledge to do it themselves, it can be a way to save hundreds — or thousands — of dollars per year. Others hire professionals so they don't have to worry about fitting many hours of yard work every week into their schedules. Some homeowners do a combination of both options.

For Lamiroult, the work is worth it, because the home met their priorities — a neighborhood they liked and property large enough to set up a native plant pollinator garden.

"Houses can be updated, landscaping can be changed," said Lamiroult. "But you can't add more property or change your neighbors."



New homeowners Kim Lamiroult and Michael Garguilo are doing the landscaping themselves on their Miller Place property.

GET TO KNOW YOUR PROPERTY

But even before deciding who will do the work, homeowners first need to get a lay of their land, experts say. While someone who has owned a home before has an idea of where to start, most first-timers have never taken care of an outdoor landscape, especially if they're coming from an apartment or a townhouse, said Frank Rossi, the New York State Extension turfgrass specialist at Cornell University in Ithaca, who supports the Nassau and Suffolk Extension offices.

"It's best to think about how you'll use your new outdoor

space," said Rossi, 61. "Once you learn what you have, then think about what you want to create and how to maintain it."

Take it slow, said Nick Menchyk, 39, a professor at Farmingdale State College in the department of urban horticulture and design.

"Allow that landscape to do its thing for a year and get a better understanding of what plants are performing well, what plants are not looking so healthy," he said. "Then think about planting, designing or doing renovations in the next growing season."

At that point, he added, you can contact landscapers for suggestions and estimates

or reach out to the Cornell Cooperative Extensions with questions regarding your landscape issues.

Then you can make decisions about who will do either general maintenance or a makeover.

"It's just like any home renovation where you can save money by doing it yourself when maybe you don't have the skill set or you can spend money for a more qualified and knowledgeable person to do it," Menchyk said. Some common tasks homeowners can get wrong include choosing a plant that isn't adapted to the site or can get too big, improper watering, fertilizing and pruning.

HIRE PROFESSIONALS

If you have the money, hiring professionals can be a good choice because they have the necessary equipment and know-how. Note there's a difference between lawn care services and landscaping, according to Carol Isles, a representative of Long Island Nursery & Landscape Association in Sayville, which represents more than 100 member companies and other professionals working in the horticultural field.

"Lawn care focuses on maintaining grass, lawns and plants, whereas landscaping is more about the design of a property and how all the elements fit



RICK KOPSTEIN

Lindsay Dannenberg, who works at Planting Fields Foundation in Oyster Bay, specializes in native plants, which can often save time and money and help the soil.

together," she said. "Landscaping typically involves designing a plan for a site, the selection and planting trees and shrubs."

She said it can also involve installing irrigation systems, hardscaping, like putting in a patio and walkways, outdoor lighting or constructing outdoor structures like a gazebo. Arboriculture services should also be considered to care for trees on the property.

Isles said the costs for lawn care services are typically based on the size of the property and the scope of work. Services might include mowing lawns; trimming hedges and bushes; weeding; mulching beds; raking leaves and removing debris (in the fall and spring); aerating and thatching; and plant health care, like applying fertilizer, pesticides and herbicides.

For a 50-by-100-foot property (about an $\frac{1}{8}$ acre), a full-service monthly fee for all these jobs can range from \$100 to \$400, experts agreed. Just cutting the lawn weekly is between \$35 and \$50.

"If a buyer has little to no experience with this kind of property ownership, it might be wise to contact a reputable professional that is licensed and insured and ask for a quote," Isles said, adding that homeowners should be specific about which services they want the quote to cover.

Ask for recommendations from neighbors. Organizations

like the Long Island Landscape Contractors Association in Brightwaters can also provide the names of members.

TIME COMMITMENT

Determining if you'll hire a professional can come down to your schedule. According to Fred Losh, 64, owner of FL Landscaping Inc. in Northport, lawns need to be cut about 30 times a year; bushes and hedges need to be trimmed two or three times; and beds should be weeded a few times a season.

"You have to keep on top of the maintenance because if you don't do it now, it's going to create more work later," he said.

Your time investment can also change seasonally. Vincent Drzewucki, 65, the horticulture and urban forestry educator for Cornell Cooperative Extension in East Meadow, said in the spring you may need to cut the lawn once a week or more while growth is fast. But during hot, dry weather grass growth slows so you can cut back to every other week.

"For the average property on the Island, you need to dedicate at least an hour or two hours every week," Drzewucki said.

With climate change, the period homeowners need to care for their property is extended, Drzewucki added.

"Our seasons are a bit longer than they used to be," he said. "So we have fall weather that stays warmer into late Decem-

ber, which means you can be doing your leaves that late, too."

GOING IT ALONE

If you're interested in doing it yourself, Drzewucki recommended taking gardening classes like those offered for free at local libraries by the county Cornell Cooperative Extensions, which also have free fact sheets on their websites. They also have courses for fees. For example, CCE Suffolk offers Spring Gardening School, \$75 for five gardening sessions and CCE Nassau has a pruning workshop in the spring for \$10.

Visit your local garden center or nursery for advice. Joseph Strippolioli, 64, manager of Sam's B.C. Nurseries in Brentwood, suggested taking photos of the areas you're working on and showing salespeople who can advise you.

Then invest in tools. Lamiroult and Garguilo, 38, a sales consultant and baker, own an electric lawn mower and electric weed whacker and have power tools on their registry for their November wedding.

"We've also been borrowing from friends and family, but a lot of it's just been gloves and shovels," Lamiroult said.

Menchyk recommended a battery-powered mower rather

ON THE COVER Kim Lamiroult, center, her fiancé, Michael Garguilo, right, and dad, Randy Lamiroult, work in their yard.



ELIZABETH SAGARIN

The Steigers — from left, mom Amber, Carlin, Grant, Ellis and dad Daniel — mix and match doing landscaping themselves and with the help of professionals.

than a gas-powered mower, which requires upkeep like oil changes. Both start at about \$500 on sites like Home Depot, Lowe's and Amazon. Other handy tools include an edger (\$200), a weed trimmer (\$300) and small blowers (\$300). "In addition, manual pruners and hedge clippers are sufficient for most pruning, and a spade, garden rake and a wheelbarrow are enough for your basic gardening and lawn care," he said.

SPLITTING THE DIFFERENCE

Or maybe you just want to focus on a favorite task. Losh said homeowners can hire professionals for some jobs and do the rest yourself. "We've had customers where we cut the lawn every week or every other week but they do all the trimming and other specialty needs."

This works for Amber and Daniel Steiger, of Melville, who bought her mother's house a year ago. They've been making the quarter-acre property their own with some help, hiring professionals to do the fall cleanup and a recent spring cleanup at \$450 a visit.

"They did an aeration and a fertilizer, cleaning up the leaves, trimming and the first mowing of the year," said Amber Steiger, 37, director of graduate admissions at St. John's University. "It's a timing issue. We both work full time and have three kids 5 and under. Paying some-

body to spend three or four hours doing something that would probably take us a whole weekend is worth it."

But she and Daniel, 34, who works for New York City, are doing the rest. "He does all the mowing and the trimming and I do everything related to the gardening. Doing this ourselves is partly to save money," Steiger said. "But my husband likes the mowing — it gives him 45 minutes of alone time — and I really enjoy the gardening; it's relaxing."

Whatever choice you make, give yourself a trial period, maybe a season or two to see how you like it, Drzewucki said.

Another option is to purposefully replace plants and the lawn with native varieties, many of which don't need additional maintenance steps, said Lindsey Dannenberg, 28, who does native plant landscaping and is a grounds operation gardener at Planting Fields Foundation in Oyster Bay. The Northport resident said that in addition to adding native plants to flower beds, you can replace a grass lawn with a more native species like Dutchman clover and yarrow.

"It's going to improve the health of your soil because it's a nitrogen fixer, so you can move away from fertilizers," she said. "These native lawns are much more attractive — and they only have to be mowed twice a season."