



CHANGING WITH THE TIMES



HOW LANDSCAPING TRENDS DIFFER
FROM ONE GENERATION TO THE NEXT

BY KARINA SINCLAIR

Baby boomers. Millennials. Gen-Z: These demographic labels get thrown around a lot. They define the span of years in which people were born and you'll find avid nature lovers and gardening enthusiasts in all. But from one generation to the next, people may have very different perspectives, budgets and priorities. Understanding this can help green professionals promote the right services and materials to the right target market, and foster a love of landscapes from the twenty-something homeowning hopeful to the downsizing retiree.

Experts in the landscape contractor, turf management, grower and garden centre sectors have observed distinctly different habits and trends between baby boomers (born between 1946 and 1965) and millennials (born 1981-1996 and also known as generation Y). These two generations are the most populous and have the most spending power. Gen-X (born between 1966 and 1980) is also a key generation, but it's a much smaller cohort that bridges the differences between their parents' and childrens' generations.

Because of their distinct generational characteristics, preferences and current life stages, these cohorts have different priorities. If you're selling supplies or services, identifying these differences may provide an opportunity to diversify and expand to meet their needs.

HOMEOWNERSHIP

Many baby boomers have had decades of wealth accumulation and with this, have had the benefit of upscaling their homes over the years. This generation of more than eight million Canadians is now at or reaching retirement and most will be considered senior citizens within this decade.

According to Statistics Canada, Canadians 85 years and older have the highest homeownership rates, and you'll most often find them residing in suburbs or rural areas. Canadians are also living longer;

celebrating a 100th birthday isn't so rare anymore. Where better to host a centenarian birthday party with all the great-great-grandkids than in a beautiful, accessible backyard?

"Boomers are still entertaining at home and they still want that space to be well received and curated," said Valerie Kristjanson, marketing and media manager at Ontario-based Connon Nurseries. Kristjanson has been in the landscape and horticulture profession for over 30 years and has noticed the purchasing habits of her longtime customers are still going strong. "Lifestyle plays a big part of it. If they're travelling a ton then it probably changes how much they're investing in their landscape itself, but I feel like the outdoor living and entertainment factor is still huge. Plants really play a big part of that for them."

Other seniors may be downsizing but still want to retain a relationship with greenery, Kristjanson notes. "You see them trying to incorporate that plant life back into their space, whether it's a planter or herbs on the balcony or a potted plant on the windowsill."

The recent surge of borrowing costs has handcuffed younger generations, pushing the dream of buying a house (with even a postage-stamp sized property) further down the road for many. As a result, millennials are more likely to rent a condo or apartment. The 2021 Canadian Housing Survey reported the growth in renter households (+21.5 per cent) is more than double that in owner households (+8.4 per cent).

SMALL SCALE LANDSCAPING

Do these younger Canadians have any interest in landscaping and plants? Kristjanson says absolutely. "Our demographic used to really sit in the 45 to 65 range. Even 50 and up. But during and after the pandemic, we really saw that stretch to age 25. Gen-Xers, gen-Y and gen-Z (born between 1998 and 2012), they're all there now," she said.

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"We saw university students in late August and September showing up, sometimes with their parents, sometimes with friends, and grabbing a plant or two for their dorm space." This early appreciation for green is a hopeful sign that landscaping will be a priority for the next wave of homeowners.

Since it's becoming increasingly more expensive to get into the housing market, Kristjanson wonders if we might be more likely to see multigenerational living. "Maybe that's what will keep it alive for these people because if your parents or grandparents garden, you might garden alongside them," she offers. Even in tighter spaces, Kristjanson thinks people will still make room for green. "If housing stays the way it is right now, you hope that everybody will still want to have a house plant or two. The positive benefits of plants on mental health and well-being will still play a role. It'll just be the scale in which that changes."

Art Vanden Enden, a horticultural advisor with over 44 years of experience in the garden centre sector, says his 30-something daughter manages to indulge her green thumb while living in a townhouse. "She gets great joy out of container gardening, whereas the generation before that was more about in-ground gardening," said Vanden Enden. "Eventually, when these folks get their own piece of property, I think they're going to be excited about being able to garden and bringing nature into their property naturally."

Since it's taking longer to save up for a down payment on a house, it might take a few years after a home purchase before millennials

can afford to look for landscaping services.

"Sometimes first-time homeowners, they're limited on budget," says landscape architect María del Sol Galdón. "So landscaping is the last thing to get completed." Del Sol Galdón has also observed that young families with children tend to focus on play space, like an open lawn or room for a trampoline. These clients might appreciate phased designs that ease them into landscaping and mature with their family's changing needs.

DIY VS DIFM

Right now, millennials may be more inclined to tackle landscape projects by themselves, but as they get older, this will likely change. StatsCan's population projection suggests millennials will become the largest generation in the country by 2029, outnumbering baby boomers. That's approximately 8,616,900 adults who will eventually (fingers crossed) purchase a home with some property and be financially stable enough to shift from DIY to Do It For Me (DIFM).

Vanden Enden says boomers used to be more interested in DIY. "When I started working as a landscape designer, there was an expectation that you did these things yourself," he said. "Eventually people recognized how valuable their time was and how much easier it was to have somebody do it for them without having to worry about failing."

Now retired, Vanden Enden cites himself as an example. "The first time I built patios and decks, I did them myself. But after 20 years when they needed to be replaced, I chose

to have them done professionally. I was personally more experienced the second time around, but I did not want to do it. I wanted to have a lot of say in what it was going to look like, yeah, but I didn't want to sacrifice my few days off [by being] away from my family doing something like that either."

Del Sol Galdón has noticed the same trend. Her design/build company, Planta Landscape in Calgary, Alta., specializes in high-end projects, often for clients who are closer to retirement age and are planning their dream house. "Usually budget is not a concern, especially if they're building a brand new custom home. They're going to spend five to 10 million dollars on the home, so spending 500,000, a million even, on landscaping is not a concern. They want it done 100 per cent. They don't want hassle."

Retirees are also more inclined to invest in lawn care and maintenance services. Dr. Sara Stricker, communications and outreach coordinator for Guelph Turfgrass Institute, points to a United States Consumers' Landscaping Expenditures study that reveals the higher the median household income, the more likely an owner will spend money on lawn care — especially when owners are 55 years and older. This trend has remained steady over the last decade.

Sometimes, the desire to hire isn't motivated by saving time or money, but rather a sense of community. "Older clients might say, 'I don't want to shovel my driveway so we're going to heat trace it. I don't care how much it costs,'" said del Sol Galdón. "Whereas the younger generation, when they can afford it, might say 'I'd rather pay somebody to do it because I'm helping out the economy.'"

ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE AWARENESS

The award-winning landscape architect acknowledges there's a wide spectrum of opinions through the age ranges, but observed that her younger clients are more interested in preserving old materials even if the budget allows for new. "They'll say, 'We have these pavers, can we do something cool with them?' If there's no way of reusing the materials, the younger generation is willing to post them online in case someone else could make use of them. They're all about the climate and environmental preservation where possible."

While younger generations may seem more in tune with biodiversity and climate change, Dr. Stricker feels older demographics care



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FUTURE TRENDS TO WATCH

VEGETABLE GARDENS

The garden-to-table trend is on the rise. Inflation and the pandemic are partially responsible for this, but people of all ages find joy in pulling fresh food from the soil to feed their body and soul. Landscape designers can delight clients by thoughtfully incorporating these functional spaces within an ornamental landscape. Valerie Kristjanson says Connon Nurseries has expanded their selection of herbs, fruits and vegetables due to customer demand and suggests this could be a niche worth specializing in as millennials and younger generations eventually become homeowners. "They've been embracing this ideology along the way. When they go to landscape their property, it's going to be an important factor for them. They're not going to just give up on that."

GATEWAYS TO BIGGER GARDENS

Garden centres will continue to be a source of discovery and education for all ages, so providing no-fail options that suit new plant parents choosing greenery for their first apartment could help set them up as repeat customers for life.

"Our indoor houseplant selection has increased to meet a surging demand," said Kristjanson. "The benefits of plants indoors and out is being recognized by the changing demographic and this is welcomed and embraced by our teams." Art Vanden Enden added, "That whole trend of rare and exotic plant collecting hooked a whole generation on gardening and I see houseplant gardening as a gateway to bigger gardens."

FUTURE-MINDED FUNCTION

Dr. Sara Stricker from Guelph Turfgrass Institute senses a shift in aesthetics. "I would predict that the landscaping future will focus on local/green/ethical/functional green spaces as opposed to ornamental," she said. This may be due to millennials now at the young family stage of life, who value playgrounds, play spaces and having access to nature within urban centres. There's also better appreciation for the effect green spaces have on mental and physical well-being. See Nadina Galle's column on page 50 to learn more.

NATURALIZATION AND WILDSKAPING

Dr. Stricker also points to a University of Guelph study that examined non-traditional lawns in Kingston, Ont. The study revealed a positive trend toward embracing lawn alternatives, such as messy wildscaping, even in upscale enclave neighbourhoods. Landscapers with a strong understanding of native plants could help support pollinator habitats by designing and maintaining naturalized gardens that fit the locale.

ANNUALS

Trending annuals have moved away from traditional bedding plants, such as impatiens and petunias. Kristjanson has observed that if a plant lover starts with indoor houseplants, that look will likely be mimicked outdoors. "The annuals that we see growing in trend are foliage plants, leafy stuff like really big, vibrant elephant ears and ornamental grasses that'll give them big plumes. High impact stuff. That's the move from the indoors to outdoors."

about these issues too. "Millennials have been brought up being told that the Earth is burning and it's all our fault, but baby boomers are the original 'flower children.'"

Kristjanson has also noticed that boomers and millennials share many environmental concerns, such as whether a plant will play nicely in their landscape, but each approach it from different perspectives. "For example, some of our older customers would say, 'Is this going to spread really far?' Whereas somebody in their 30s or 40s would ask, 'Is this invasive?' They're saying the same things; they just have different language and terms associated with it."

Vanden Enden agrees — and says concerns about the environment present an opportunity for landscape professionals to make a difference for clients and climate. "The industry is shifting towards healthier biodiversity. And it's not happening fast enough for some people. There are people who are so passionate about it that they get frustrated. We need to put people on a path where their gardening journey is fun."

PICKY PLANT OWNERS

Vanden Enden has noticed another trend in younger customers: the expectation of a well performing plant is getting higher. "Some people are more accepting that plants look different at different times of the year. But now we also have a huge generation of people for whom gardening is not an activity but a thing," Vanden Enden said.

This could affect garden centres and nurseries, as customers expect warranties and the option to swap out a languishing plant for a fresh one. "Sometimes people don't account for their own actions on what happens," Vanden Enden said. "There are people who just think plants are possessions. It's much less about the journey of the plant as it is to enjoy it when it's in bloom and then be done with it."

This sense of instant gratification can be an opportunity. "We used to sell the majority of our tulips and daffodils in the fall as bulbs, but now people buy these in the spring as forced potted plants and enjoy them indoors or plant them directly outdoors. They don't want to plant it in the fall and wait till the spring," Vanden Enden said. "I don't think that's a bad thing for our industry because not everybody's going to be a gardener. So what can we provide them that makes them happy?"

THE DIGITAL AGE

Vanden Enden feels hopeful about the more diverse, up-and-coming generation of plant parents. "There are a lot of younger people who are really interested in plants and soil biology. There are more highly educated consumers now than there were 30 years ago," he explained.

In the past, customers would turn to landscapers and garden centre staff for selection and plant care advice. Perhaps they'd attend an in-store workshop or pick up a pamphlet. Now, customers are more likely to look online for information and inspiration. Kristjanson recalled, for example, a sudden spike of interest in succulents a few years ago sparked by social media influencers.

"Succulents were all over the place and our [boomer] parents likely never had succulents other than a jade plant, so it definitely broke out of the box," Kristjanson said. Once influencers felt they had covered succulents, they began looking for other plants to get excited about.

This trend led to breeders introducing cultivars with new colours and foliage, as well as old favourites, like spider plants and philodendrons. "I think it started as 'Let's be different from what our parents may have



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had! Then it circled back to 'We've covered succulents. What else is out there?' So nostalgia probably does play a big part of it, and I think vintage will always have a role in every generation."

SHIFT IN PROFESSIONAL PERCEPTION

One trend that's very heartening for green trade professionals is an improved appreciation for their skills and knowledge. "I think there's a greater need and respect for what we do now as an industry compared to 30 or 40 years ago. We're being seen as experts and caregivers of plants and nature. That's really exciting because people who are interested in landscaping will see it now as a more viable career path," Vanden Enden said.

"It's on us as educators who are training the next landscape architects who are going to be working with the next generation of clients," del Sol Galdón said. "When I teach [at the University of Calgary], I always tell my students if you want to be good at what you do, you have to be passionate about it. Go out and dig the garden. Smell the roots. Prune a tree. Really get your hands dirty and get immersed in it."

Del Sol Galdón finds that having employees from different generations, including former students, brings in lots of fresh knowledge and helps her team keep up with trends. As a registered landscape architect, she also finds there's more respect for her profession from other sectors than there used to be.

"We work with a lot of architects and builders and they bring us into the project right away. That's changed a lot." Del Sol Galdón added 10 years ago, landscapers wouldn't have been brought in until the house was already built and then only to add some grass and a few trees. "Now more value is given to our profession as landscape architects and landscapers. It's something that's new for our profession."

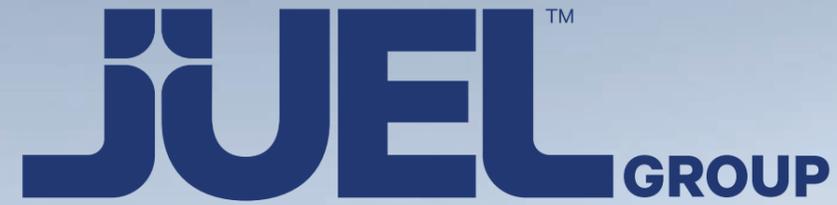
BRINGING ALL AGES TOGETHER

Landscape and horticulture professionals in all sectors can continue to promote the value of green spaces, plants, sustainability and biodiversity for all ages. As the large millennial cohort comes into greater income growth and homeownership, landscape professionals will have even more opportunities to design, install and maintain green spaces for this maturing generation.

And the next generation won't be far behind. Wise landscape professionals will look to the future to imagine the most meaningful (and lucrative) services they might provide to gen-Z, the alpha generation (born between 2013 and 2021) and beyond, to foster the love of green, from the simple potted spider plant to the upscale estate and everything in between.

Championing public and collaborative green spaces are opportunities for landscapers to instill a broader love and appreciation of plants across all generations. "I think about our own community garden — it runs the gamut of demographics," Kristjanson said. "There are older retirees who don't have the space but still want to garden. There are young families who maybe aren't in their forever home right now and in a townhome and they're there gardening with their kids. It's kind of cyclical; this person has been gardening this entire time and now has a different space to do it, and this person is starting their journey in the space that this person's finishing in."

In the end, perhaps what matters most isn't the differences between generations, but cultivating shared landscapes that bring them together. **LT**



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