

THE DESIGNER

Landscape Ontario
DESIGNERS SECTOR

Winter/Spring 2026
Quarterly Newsletter



Vaast Design Studio



Welcome to the first edition of *The Designer*!

As landscape designers, we shape more than outdoor spaces — we shape experiences, communities and the way people live outside. This **quarterly newsletter connects landscape designers across Canada**, creating space to share ideas, spark inspiration and celebrate the creativity and expertise within our industry.

I'd like to give a big thank-you to the newsletter committee: Haig Seferian, CLD; John Bright, CLD; and Daniel Mazur — for all your energy, creative ideas and dedication in making this first issue happen. We truly couldn't have done it without you.

We want *The Designer* to be a platform for **your voice**. Do you have a feature project, insight, lesson learned or hot take to share? Feel free to reach out if you're interested in contributing an article to a future edition; I'd love to chat and hear your ideas!

If you're enjoying this newsletter, [be sure to subscribe](#) so you won't miss upcoming issues, events, insights and inspiration.

We're just getting started. Let's grow this together.

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THE DESIGNER

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The Designer is an initiative of Landscape Ontario's Landscape Designers Sector Group — comprised of member volunteers who promote and advocate the expertise and services of those within the sector and provide education, networking and learning opportunities to both members and non-members with the goal of elevating the profession. Learn more about this and other Designer Sector Group initiatives and events [online](#).

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Client Focus

Paul Brydges: Planning for the future

By Lexi Dearborn, CLD

Having a solid plan is key to bringing a client's vision to life.

“Without having a comprehensive plan, projects rarely finish on time, on budget and with enough flexibility for future plans,” says award-winning landscape architect Paul Brydges. “The project quality can be compromised and important elements could be missed.”



Paul's point about future plans is particularly important and one we as designers don't consider enough: the future. It isn't easy to put in new design concepts, buildings and plant life after the fact. Based on budgets and timelines, a client may have a wish list for the future, and if we, the designer, don't address these early in the planning process, it can lead to a backward, costly battle later on.

When starting a planning process, it's key to ask the client to think through three questions beforehand: needs, wants and wishes.

Needs might include practical elements like proper drainage, using high-quality soils so the plants and trees can thrive and the “science of the design.” While it is not the most exciting part of the process, it is an absolutely essential step for a design to succeed.

Wants in the landscape plan generate enthusiasm and it's where the client discusses what they want to see and how they will use their new spaces. This is where the client talks about the colours they prefer, whether they want an entertaining space, a covered area for bad weather or shade — all the elements they want to see to fulfill their “immediate” landscape needs.

Wishes are where the client visualizes the future. Some clients might want to include a pool, a hot tub or even a structure, and as designers, we need to plan to make these features achievable. These future design elements need to be positioned properly to ensure they integrate smoothly into the existing plan, so everything feels like part of the original design. The environment interacts with each other rather than against each other.

To achieve stunning results, if a design is well planned, it's easy to execute. A successful plan fulfills all the client's needs and wants, and prepares the project to be ready for their wishes.

Certification

Achieve new accreditation through the Certified Landscape Designer program



While the journey to becoming a Certified Landscape Designer (CLD) may feel lengthy, recent updates to the Canadian Nursery Landscape Association (CNLA) landscape designer certification program make the process more rewarding than ever. Design candidates can now earn accredited mini designations as they progress through the regular path — celebrating milestones and recognizing expertise along the way.

CNLA's accreditation is a nationally recognized, industry-developed program that establishes and upholds standards for the Canadian landscape industry.

Are you ready to take the next step? Let's get started!

New! Certified Garden Designer (GD)

The Garden Designer (GD) path is the first step in the program. To qualify for this new designation, candidates must have successfully completed a minimum of one year of post-secondary education in a landscape design-related program, or possess equivalent work-related experience that may be considered in lieu of formal education. The application process is simple: complete the online form and pay a one-time fee. Earning the Garden Designer (GD) designation not only boosts your professional standing but also allows you to use a recognized logo on your work, on social media and in communications, demonstrating your expertise to clients and peers.

[Click here to start earning your Garden Designer \(GD\) designation](#)

New! Certified Garden Design Professional (GD Pro)

Congratulations to all our recent outstanding GD Pro exam achievers! By scoring 70 per cent or higher on all sections of the CLD exam, these accomplished designers have earned the nationally recognized Garden Design Professional (GD Pro) designation. This accreditation not only showcases a dedication to excellence in design but also marks a significant milestone in a designer's professional journey. This achievement is a testament to the hard work and passion required for creating beautiful

outdoor spaces, and is worth celebrating.

Are you ready to take the leap to GD Pro? The written exams are available through CNLA via Mettl, an online exam system with live proctoring, covering six sections, including communications, landscape construction, design, grading and drainage, horticulture and practice. Don't forget to grab your CLD Study Manual to prepare like a pro.

[Click here to order the CLD Study Manual](#)

Become a Certified Landscape Designer through the Regular Path

A CLD combines creativity, technical skill and problem-solving abilities in every project. This collaborative method helps provide thoughtful, site-specific advice that effectively tackles each unique design challenge.

> *Continued*

		Combined work and education experience 6 years +	Combined work and education experience 12 years +
	Combined work and education experience 1-4 years	Written test Successful completion	Written test Not required
	Written test Successful completion	Portfolio Review Successful completion	Portfolio Review Successful completion
Combined work and education experience 1 year +	Written test Not required		
Written test Not required	Portfolio Review Not required		
Portfolio Review Not required			
GD GARDEN DESIGNER	GD PRO GARDEN DESIGNER PROFESSIONAL	CLD REGULAR PATH	CLD LEGACY PATH

The last step to obtain the CLD credential is submitting a professional portfolio. To qualify, candidates must have six years of relevant education and design experience and pass the CLD exam. Their portfolio should feature three projects in which they served as the principal designer or led the design process.

CLD candidates are encouraged to submit one landscape design project initially and use the feedback to refine their work before completing and submitting the remaining projects. The portfolio review process is intentionally iterative rather than one-time only, providing candidates with constructive feedback and opportunities to revise and resubmit. This approach supports professional growth and allows candidates to clearly demonstrate their design knowledge, skills and competency.

[Click here for more information on the regular path requirements to become a CLD](#)

Become a Certified Landscape Designer through the Legacy Provision

The Legacy Provision pathway celebrates experience and expertise. Candidates must have at least 12 years of combined education and hands-on experience in landscape design to apply. To complete the journey, applicants submit three professional portfolio pieces that showcase their role as a principal designer or in a leading position. These projects are thoughtfully reviewed by the provincial or regional portfolio review committee — giving your work the recognition it truly deserves!

New! Emeritus Status

Emeritus status allows CLDs to retain their title after retirement. It's a lovely way for them to continue feeling appreciated and proud of the work they've done in design. Certified individuals may request emeritus status if they are:

- Aged 60 or above,
- Retiring from the green industry,
- Actively certified for at least six years before retirement.

Certified individuals who wish to remain active in the green industry — whether as consultants or lecturers — are not considered retired and are therefore ineligible for emeritus status. If an individual granted emeritus status later returns to professional practice, their emeritus designation will be revoked and they must complete the Legacy Program to regain full certification.

CLDs awarded emeritus status will also receive a new certificate reflecting their retired status, honouring their contributions to the design profession.

Embrace new challenges this year

The designer program is here to support you every step of the way. Achieving a national designation is a wonderful way to showcase your skills and reach a recognized standard of excellence in landscape design. These credentials help you confidently share your expertise and qualifications with clients, making your professional journey even more rewarding.



Feature

Bridging vision with reality: Life in design-build construction

By Chris Lamer

When you've spent over three decades in the construction industry, you quickly realize that design-build-maintain is more than just a business model — it's a mindset. It's about bridging vision and reality every single day.

I got started in maintenance and construction at 12 years old, long before CAD programs or 3D renderings were part of the conversation. Today, as the owner of a family-run design-build company, I still find the most rewarding part of this work is taking an idea from concept to completion — and seeing a client's face light up when it all comes together exactly as planned.

Design is only the beginning

The design process is where the magic starts. It's where we listen, interpret, sketch and dream. For many of us, it's also where we get to collaborate with talented designers, whether in-house or independent, to turn a client's vision into something real. Every line on paper represents a thousand small decisions waiting to happen — from grade transitions to drainage, base preparation and the logistics of getting materials onto a tight site.

What I've learned over the years is that the ability to visualize the finished space while standing in the mud is one of the most valuable skills in our industry. You're not just imagining beauty; you're engineering longevity. The best designs, whether built by the designer's own team or by a trusted partner, anticipate how a site will behave in a downpour, a freeze-thaw cycle or years down the road when a client adds something new.



Reality on the jobsite

Reality has its own set of rules. The weather doesn't care about deadlines. Soil conditions change the moment you start digging. Equipment breaks, deliveries run late and even the best plans need to adapt.

That's the beauty — and the challenge — of this profession. You're not just managing a project, you're managing adaptation. You have to think like a designer but react like a builder. It's one thing to plan a stunning outdoor living space on a screen — it's another to make it drain properly, stay within budget and stand the test of time through Canadian winters. Those lessons don't come from textbooks; they come from years in the field — boots covered in mud, tape measure in hand and problem-solving in real time.

The power of integration

What makes design-build work so rewarding is the seamless integration between planning and execution. When the same team designs and builds, continuity carries through every phase. There's no disconnect — just one shared goal: to bring the design to life exactly as intended. That unity reduces surprises, strengthens accountability and gives clients confidence.

As a family-run business, that accountability runs even deeper. Every project carries our name, our reputation and our pride. We don't hand off responsibility — we stand behind everything we build. That personal investment keeps our standards high and reminds us that





the relationships we build are just as important as the landscapes we create.

Collaboration and communication

Whether you're in design, construction, maintenance (or a combination of these), the constant thread that connects us all is collaboration. A good designer listens to the client. A great one also listens to the crew. I've learned that some of the best field feedback comes from the people running the shovels and saws. They see how designs perform in real-world conditions — how water flows, how pavers settle and how clients actually use their spaces long after the project is complete.

That feedback loop is invaluable. It shapes how we detail drawings, choose materials and plan future projects. It's not theory — it's continuous improvement. And when everyone involved, from designer to installer, shares that sense of ownership, the end result always shows.

Challenges that make us better

Let's be honest: this industry isn't easy. The workload is heavy, margins are tight and client expectations continue to rise. But that's also what keeps it exciting. The constant

push to innovate, adapt and deliver better results forces growth — not just as a company, but as professionals.

You learn that leadership matters more than perfection. You learn to build teams that care as much about the finished product as you do. And you realize that landscaping — whether you're designing, building or maintaining — is ultimately about relationships. When a client tells you years later that their backyard still looks as good as the day it was built, that's the kind of feedback that reminds you why you do it.

Looking ahead

The future of design and construction is strong. Technology continues to make design faster, more visual and more precise, but it will never replace experience — the kind that comes from being on-site, reading a site's conditions and solving problems in real time.

For anyone new to this industry, my advice is simple: don't just draw it — learn how it's built. The field will teach you what no classroom or software ever can. Stay curious, stay humble and take pride in the details. That's what turns a good designer into a great collaborator — and a great design-builder.

Over the coming years, I plan to pursue my CLD designation to continue sharpening my design skills and contributing to the professionalism of our industry. Because no matter how long you've been doing this, there's always something new to learn — and always another opportunity to raise the bar for our craft.

Chris Lamer is owner of Lamer Landscaping & Snowplowing Ltd., a family-run design-build-maintain firm based in Belleville, Ont. With more than 30 years in construction and design, his company focuses on delivering complete landscape design, construction and maintenance services across the Bay of Quinte region.

Finding my path

A journey of creativity, travel and inspiration

By Haig Seferian, CLD, APLD, OALA, FCCLA, FASLA, IFLA

The moment I discovered Landscape Architecture, I didn't just find a career — I found a calling. In my final year of high school, long before Google or Wi-Fi, my world consisted of thick, intimidating university syllabi. Most of it was forgettable — until a single page lit a spark. Design, construction, drawing, being outdoors, collaborating with people — everything I loved could live in one profession. That was it. That was the path I didn't know existed until that day, and from that moment, I was hooked.

Creativity ran in my family, though not in the way you might expect. My father was a gardener and a master shoemaker; my mother, a seamstress. Watching their artistry unfold taught me that creativity thrives in many forms. For me, it found its ultimate outlet in landscape design — a field where artistry meets function, and imagination meets reality.

Travel and mentorship shaped me as much as education did. A transformative year at California Polytechnic Institute immersed me in Southwestern architecture and lifestyle. I met the very pioneers whose projects I had studied, learning firsthand how design could shape lives and communities. Returning to Canada, I brought with me a love for outdoor living and entertaining spaces — long before these ideas became mainstream.

Europe further broadened my vision. Walking through historic gardens, bustling plazas and quiet courtyards, I learned how people interact with spaces, as well as how culture, lifestyle and climate inform design. Every trip taught me something new: a planting idea in Italy, a stone layout in France, a colour palette in Spain. Those experiences still echo through my work today, blending international inspiration with Canadian practicality. Each project I take on tells its own story. From concept to construction, the process is meticulous and collaborative. Most of our clients come through referrals — a testament



to trust built over decades. From schematic design to detailed drawings, construction oversight and final reveal, every step is intentional, ensuring both beauty and function.

Some projects are dream projects from the start; others grow into them. Take the Monet Gardens I completed in 2022 at the Pillar and Post Inn & Spa in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ont. Inspired by Claude Monet's gardens in Giverny, France, this project transformed a six-acre parking lot into lush, multi-use gardens over seven years. More than 26,000 shrubs and 300 large-caliper trees later, the gardens host events year-round, offering serenity, beauty and a living legacy for visitors and the community alike. Projects like these remind me that landscape design isn't just about

aesthetics — it's about creating spaces that endure, inspire and become part of people's lives.

Could I design anywhere in the world? Europe tempts me with its history and mild climate, but Canada is my canvas. The changing seasons here challenge me to think creatively and technically, to design landscapes that thrive in all conditions. There's something exhilarating about shaping spaces that are beautiful in summer, resilient in winter and inspiring all year long.

Landscape design has become more than a profession — it's a lens through which I experience the world. From that first discovery in a university syllabus to transforming landscapes into living works of art, my journey has been guided by curiosity, mentorship, travel and a relentless pursuit of excellence. Every project, every garden, every client is a story — and for me, that story is far from finished.

Haig Seferian, CLD, APLD, OALA, FCCLA, FASLA, IFLA, is the principal landscape architect at SDG Landscape Architects, and his journey into landscape design has been anything but linear.

Horticulture Therapy

Nature nourishes:

Viewing landscape design through the therapeutic lens

By Lynn Leach, HTR

As landscape designers, we are committed to delivering the most aesthetically pleasing outdoor spaces to our clients, carefully considering all aspects of form and function. If we do our job well, we will take this one step further, envisioning how our clients will enjoy and live in their outdoor space following the completion of our work. It is a “tall order” to meet the inevitable challenges of each site and to deliver on the unique wish list that each client has, all within the confines of budget. In navigating this balancing act, we may miss the opportunity to consider our role in fostering a love of nature and providing our clients with the many documented health benefits associated with time outdoors.

As a designer whose niche is in therapeutic landscape design, I believe we have the capacity within our scope of work to have a significant impact on the well-being of our clients. And that there is value in shifting our focus from purely aesthetic outcomes to creating spaces that also invite meaningful engagement with the natural world. Biophilia is the innate tendency of humans to seek

connections with nature. Biophilic design is widely used by architects and interior designers to bring natural elements, such as sunlight, plants, water and natural materials into the indoor space, to support this basic human need. Hortophilia, a term attributed to neurologist and author Oliver Sacks, describes the psychological need of people to interact with, manage and tend to plants and nature. This includes simple garden tasks, such as watering a plant that looks wilted or pruning back spent blossoms. Hortophilia is closely connected to the modality of horticultural therapy, a complementary therapy that has been used around the world for thousands of years, to support the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health of people of all ages and circumstances.

One of the easiest ways to make our designs more therapeutic is through sensory engagement. Engaging our senses (passively or actively) offers a range of health benefits that include reduction of feelings of anxiety or apathy, improved focus and attention, and an interruption to the racing cycles of our mind. Scent, in particular,



*The unbridled celebration of life in the therapeutic garden at Stedman Community Hospice, Brantford, Ont.
(Photo credit: Ernie Wearn)*

is a powerful link to memory, often vividly connecting someone to another place, person and time of life — a phenomenon known as the “Proustian moment.” By thoughtfully and intentionally including features and plants that offer this to our clients, in a way that invites engagement, we can provide deeper enjoyment and a sense of well-being for them. Consider old-fashioned favourites, such as lilac, peony and roses — choosing such cultivars is not just based on beauty, but on their olfactory appeal.

Reflect on how the views from inside may entice your client to abandon their screens and head outdoors. A carefully placed tree with a bench beneath may invite someone to read outdoors for an hour. A romantic nook tucked just out of sight may invite your client to meander out with their morning cup of coffee. Include a private and sensory-filled space for meditative activities such as yoga or tai chi. And use plants such as *thymus* or moss along the walkway to enhance the entire sensory experience.

Increase the diversity of your plantings to improve the ecological significance of the property. By including native species that invite wildlife to the garden, particularly pollinators, we create moments of joy that deepen the spiritual connection to a place. Using native trees, such as *Cornus* or *Amelanchier*, will fill the garden with movement and birdsong — a widely recognized way to support good mental health — and reduce the stress hormone cortisol.

This perspective calls for us to deepen our relationship with the client, to understand them more clearly to meet their needs. But this more personal conversation is incredibly worthwhile. Designing through this therapeutic lens allows us to deliver that elusive *je ne sais quoi* or indelible magic of a space that your client may not be able to articulate but will certainly remember. The small shift from creating an outdoor space that looks good as well as feels good will result in happier clients and more successful project outcomes.

In my own work, designing spaces for those who are living their last few days here on Earth has illustrated the power of intentionally providing these special experiences. It is certainly these small nuances of landscape design that deliver the most meaning — tasting a strawberry growing along the walkway, watching a hummingbird hover for just a moment or inhaling the heady scent of lilacs on the breeze.

Lynn Leach is a registered horticultural therapist and the owner of Bird's Foot Design Studio. Her company offers therapeutic landscape designs in the education and healthcare realms, specializing in creating meaningful and joyful spaces for hospice and palliative care facilities. For more information about horticultural therapy, please contact the Canadian Horticultural Therapy Association at chta.ca or birdsfoot.ca.



Click the video to learn more about the many career benefits of industry certification

Award-Winning Projects

Landscape Ontario announces design award winners

Winners of Landscape Ontario’s annual Awards of Excellence program (entered in 2025) were announced during a live, sold-out ceremony held Jan. 6, 2026 at the Delta Hotels by Marriott Toronto Airport. Congratulations to the following winners in the Design program!

Neil Vanderkruk Award for Excellence in Design

This award goes to the most outstanding and highest overall scoring project in the design categories.

Vaast Design Studio

For: Camp Canook
Private Residential Design
- 5,000 sq. ft. or more.

Awards of Excellence Winners

Projects scoring between 90-100%.

Jay McKinnon Company

For: Sunken Treasure
Private Residential Design
– 2,500 to 5,000 sq. ft.

Vaast Design Studio

For: Camp Canook
Private Residential Design
– 5,000 sq. ft. or more



Wentworth Landscapes

For: The Gathering Meadow: A Legacy of Nature, Culture and Discovery
Commercial Design

Awards of Merit Winners

Projects scoring between 80-89%.

Plantenance Landscape Group

For: Downtown Serenity
Private Residential Design
– Under 2,500 sq. ft.

Pro-Land Landscape Construction Inc

For: Eden Place
Private Residential Design
– 5,000 sq. ft. or more

Green Stamp Winners

Design projects that exemplify green practices, using quality construction, maintenance and design, in sustainable landscapes (such as use of permeable paving, native plantings, water conservation strategies, green roof technology) are awarded “Green Stamps” by the judges.

Vaast Design Studio

For: Camp Canook
Private Residential Design
– 5,000 sq. ft. or more

Wentworth Landscapes

For: The Gathering Meadow: A Legacy of Nature, Culture and Discovery
Commercial Design

[Click here to see all winners](#)



Upcoming Events

FREE VIRTUAL EVENT

Mentor Moments: Making the Grade
Thursday, March 26, 2026 from Noon - 1 p.m.

David Wright, CLD, OALA, CLSA, LICM, GOM

Join Dave Wright to learn the importance of grading and drainage to keep landscapes safe, dry and healthy, and how to make it a top priority in your landscape designs. 45-minute presentation followed by a 15-minute Q&A session.



FREE VIRTUAL EVENT

Mentor Moments: The Perfect Portfolio
Thursday, April 2, 2026 at 10 a.m.

Beth Edney, CLD

Join Beth Edney for a virtual session to learn the top 10 mistakes designers commonly make when submitting a portfolio for the CLD review. Take the guesswork out of the portfolio review process and get tips for success.



IN-PERSON EVENT

Georgian Lakelands Chapter: Designers Morning
Thursday, April 9, 2026 from 8:30 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.

Wasaga Beach Arena, Rotary Room, 544 River Road W, Wasaga Beach

Guest speakers Ernest Williams from Aquascape and Kelita Reid from Permacon will discuss topics of interest to landscape designers at the next installment of the Designers Morning hosted by the Georgian Lakelands Chapter of Landscape Ontario. RSVP online to attend this free event.



IN-PERSON EVENT

CLD Examination Workshops:
Tuesday, April 21, 2026 at Fanshawe College
Wednesday, April 29, 2026 at Landscape Ontario

Haig Seferian, CLD

Join Haig Seferian for a morning exam workshop designed to answer your questions before challenging the CLD examination in the afternoon. Workshops are offered in two locations and dates and run from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m.



FREE VIRTUAL EVENT

Mentor Moments: Think Permeable!
Wednesday, May 6, 2026 from Noon - 1 p.m.

Terry Childs, FLP, CHMA Instructor

Expect practical tips, real-world examples and plenty of “why didn’t we do this sooner?” moments as you learn how permeable pavers function and how they add value to projects. 30-minute presentation followed by a 30-minute Q&A session.



In our next issue:

Watch for our Spring/Summer 2026 edition in your inbox and online in mid-May.

- AI in estimating
- Re-using materials in the landscape
- Meaningful, impactful design
- Design, process and style

We're looking for stories, ideas and voices from across Canada. If you have a story idea or want to contribute to a future edition, reach out to Lexi Dearborn at lexi@dearborndesigns.com

Pass it on!

Do you know a fellow designer, contractor, student or apprentice who would find the information in this newsletter useful?



Send them a link to this edition or to [subscribe online](#).

Ontario Student CLD Bursary Program

To remove financial barriers for recent graduates, Landscape Ontario's Designer Sector Group has dedicated \$3,000 annually to support the cost of the Certified Landscape Designer (CLD) examination for graduating students or recent post-secondary graduates from a landscape design or related program within Ontario.

Eligible students can receive a **one-time award of \$325** to help cover the cost of the Canadian Nursery Landscape Association (CNLA) Certified Landscape Designer (CLD) examination.

The bursary is open to Landscape Technicians and Horticulture Technicians with a background in design.

**Application deadline:
March 31, 2026**

**Click here to
APPLY NOW!**

In addition to the various criteria, all students must register with the CNLA for the certification process at cnlagetcertified.ca

