THE DESIGNER

Landscape Ontario
DESIGNERS SECTOR

Issue 4
Fall/Winter 2026





Welcome to the fourth edition of *The Designer*!

As we move forward together, the strength of our profession is not measured solely by the projects we design or the businesses we build. It is also measured by our willingness to share knowledge, support one another, mentor emerging professionals and continually raise the standards of our industry.

As we move into 2027, the Landscape Ontario Designers Sector Group and the Certified Landscape Designers invite you to participate, contribute and become part of these initiatives.

Attend the Landscape Designers Conference on Jan. 11, 2027. Join the discussion on the LIVE Stage at Congress (Jan. 12-14), and participate in our monthly online Mentor Moments sessions. Help us build strong connections with students and educators to foster a stronger, more vibrant profession.

Most importantly, continue investing in yourself and in the future of landscape design.

I look forward to seeing you at Congress in January!

Haig Seferian, CLD
LO Designers Sector Group

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The Designer is an initiative of Landscape Ontario's Landscape Designers Sector Group, which is made up of member volunteers. The group promotes the expertise and services of professionals in the sector, advocates on their behalf and provides education, networking and learning opportunities for members and non-members. Its goal is to elevate the landscape design profession. Learn more about Designer Sector Group initiatives and events online.

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Sector Group Update

Initiatives to propel you and your profession forward

By Haig Seferian, CLD

The landscape design profession continues to evolve. Our industry is being challenged by changing client expectations, new technologies, environmental considerations, rising construction costs and an increasingly competitive marketplace. While these challenges require us to continually adapt, they also present tremendous opportunities to strengthen our profession, expand our knowledge and create meaningful connections with others who share our passion for landscape design.

As we look ahead to 2027, the Landscape Ontario (LO) Designers Sector Group and the Certified Landscape Designers (CLD) are committed to making professional development, education, mentorship and industry engagement more accessible and valuable to landscape designers across Ontario and beyond. There are several exciting initiatives on the horizon, and we encourage you to get involved.

Student Connects: Investing in the next generation

One of our most important initiatives is Student Connects, an effort by the LO Designers Sector Group to strengthen the relationship between landscape design education and professional practice.

We recognize that students entering the industry need more than classroom instruction. They need opportunities to meet professionals, understand the realities of the business, develop practical skills and establish relationships that can help guide their careers.

Through Student Connects, we are working with educational institutions and students to provide access to industry knowledge and professional resources. This includes Mentor Moments and student-focused discussions, Coffee Morning Presentations, information about CLD certification and student membership opportunities, co-op placements, site experiences, portfolio guidance, plant knowledge initiatives and awareness of industry awards and bursaries.

Our message to educators is simple: let's work together. We bring professional insights, industry connections and an understanding of what students will encounter when they enter the workforce. By connecting education with real-world experience, we can help students build the confidence, knowledge and relationships needed to succeed.

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Ultimately, the future of our profession depends on the people entering it today. We have a responsibility to support them, share our experiences and create opportunities for the next generation of landscape professionals.

Landscape Designers Conference

One of the highlights of the upcoming year is the Landscape Designers Conference on Jan. 11, 2027, at a new location: the Toronto Congress Centre. This is a dedicated day of learning for designers — an opportunity to step away from the day-to-day demands of running a design practice and dedicate time to learning, sharing ideas and investing in your professional development.



Whether you are an established landscape designer, a Certified Landscape Designer, an emerging professional or someone considering a career in landscape design, this conference is intended to offer something of value.

Our objective is to bring designers together to gain practical knowledge that can be applied directly to their businesses and projects. Beyond the presentations themselves, the opportunity to establish new professional relationships with industry colleagues is equally important.

We believe that education should not end when we leave the classroom or complete our certification. A successful design professional is one who remains curious, continues learning and is willing to challenge established practices.

Make plans to attend the conference — it's your opportunity to invest in yourself and your profession.

Congress LIVE Stage: Why aren't you charging enough?



Fees are something that affects virtually every landscape design business. One of the most common challenges facing landscape designers is determining the true value of their services and having the confidence to charge accordingly. Too often, designers underestimate the time, expertise, creativity and professional responsibility required to deliver a successful project.

The LO Designers Sector Group will tackle this subject in a LIVE Stage presentation at Congress titled "Why Aren't You Charging Enough?" Beth Edney, CLD, Lexi Dearborn, CLD, and John Bright, CLD, will lead the one-hour session, which will be presented at various times each day of the trade show.

This is a conversation every designer should be having. Are you accounting for all your time? Are your fees reflective of your experience and expertise? Are you charging appropriately for the value you bring to your clients?

The discussion will explore the realities of professional fees, business practices, profitability and the importance of recognizing the value of design services. Our goal is to encourage designers to rethink their approach to pricing, challenge industry habits and develop greater confidence in how they present and defend their fees.

Mentor Moments: Continuing the conversations in 2027

MENTOR MOMENTS:
Student Edition
December 1, 2026
REGISTER

Education and professional development should be ongoing. Our online Mentor Moments sessions will continue in 2027, providing opportunities for landscape designers to connect with experienced professionals through engaging virtual presentations and discussions.

These one-hour sessions are designed to share practical knowledge, insights and lessons learned by professionals. They offer an opportunity to ask questions, explore challenges and discover real-world wisdom not always found in textbooks or design manuals.

Our 2027 presentation topics are currently being developed. We want to ensure the subjects reflect the interests and needs of today's landscape design community. Whether the discussion involves design, horticulture, construction, business management, client relationships or professional practice, our intention is to deliver relevant information that helps designers grow.

We also want to hear from you! Help shape the 2027 Mentor Moments program by sending us your ideas for presentation topics that reflect what landscape designers really want and need to know. What knowledge would you like to gain? What challenges are you facing in your design practice? What industry experts, business topics or technical subjects would you like to learn more about?

Send your Mentor Moments ideas or topics to lexi@dearborndesigns.com

Feature

Beyond the property line

An argument for modernizing Ontario's shared property laws

By Ron Koudys, CLD, BLA, MEd, DDES, OALA, FCSLA, FASLA, RLA

Ontario's boundary tree legislation was created for a sound purpose: to protect trees that are jointly owned by adjoining landowners from unilateral removal. However, the way the legislation operates in today's urban environment can create significant and sometimes unintended consequences for landscape designers, landscape architects, planners, developers and property owners.

The issue is becoming increasingly important as municipalities encourage intensification, infill development and more efficient use of existing urban land. A tree growing on a property line can effectively become jointly owned, giving both owners an interest in decisions affecting it. Yet there is no simple mechanism for resolving a disagreement when removal is necessary to accommodate otherwise reasonable development. The result can be a stalemate even after considerable effort has been made to redesign a project around the tree.

How did the tree get there?

One aspect of the boundary tree discussion deserves considerably more attention: many boundary trees were never intentionally planted as boundary trees at all. Ontario's legislation has its roots in nineteenth-century agricultural conditions, when shelterbelts and boundary plantings were important landscape features. The statutory concept has changed relatively little even though Ontario has become increasingly urbanized.

In contemporary urban and suburban landscapes, property lines are often among the least actively managed portions of a site. They may occur behind garages, along old fences, between commercial properties or at the edges of parking lots and industrial lands. Seeds establish in these neglected strips and, if left undisturbed for long enough, volunteer trees can become substantial specimens. In many cases these are not trees that anyone deliberately selected, purchased or planted. They are simply the survivors of



years or decades of benign neglect.

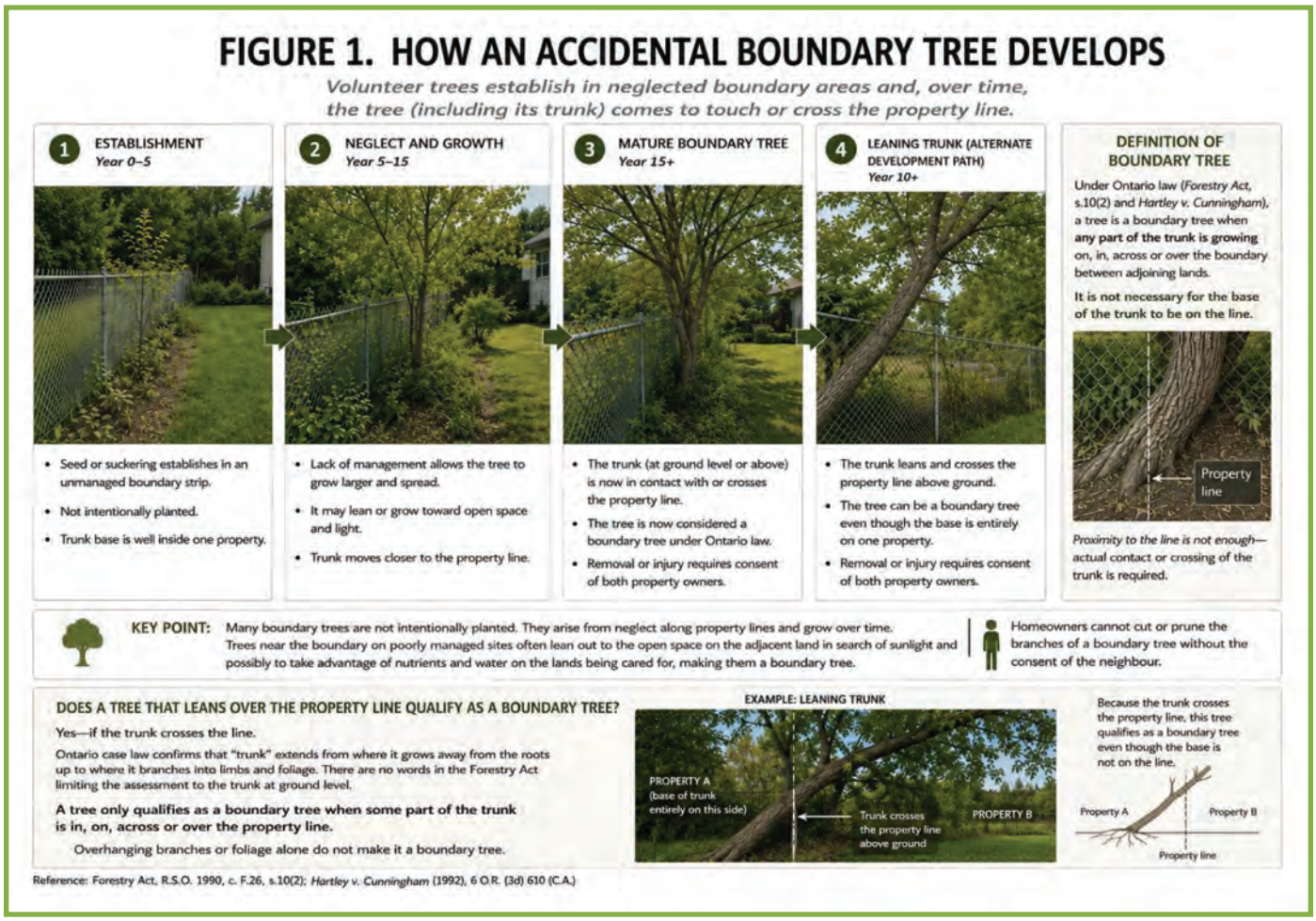
The species involved frequently reflect this origin. Siberian elm, buckthorn, mulberry, Manitoba maple, poplar, tree-of-heaven and other aggressive or opportunistic species readily colonize fence lines, disturbed ground and unmanaged edges. Some may have limited longevity, weak structure, invasive characteristics or relatively modest landscape value compared with intentionally selected and maintained trees. Yet once the trunk of such a tree grows across the property line, its accidental origin may become largely irrelevant from a property-rights perspective. A volunteer tree that neither owner planted, and which might have been readily removed when it was a seedling, can eventually become a significant constraint on both properties.

That distinction is important: not every large tree is necessarily a high-value tree and not every boundary tree represents an intentional shared landscape asset.

The designer's dilemma

Landscape designers increasingly encounter boundary trees when working on additions, infill housing, redevelopment, accessibility improvements, parking changes, grading and servicing projects. When a boundary tree is encountered, substantial resources can be spent relocating utilities, adjusting foundations and protecting

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roots, only to determine that removal is ultimately unavoidable.

The challenge becomes particularly difficult where the tree is of questionable quality.

Consider a mature Manitoba maple growing through an old fence. It may have multiple stems and a relatively short remaining useful life expectancy. It may be located precisely where a driveway, building addition or required servicing must go. Neither property owner planted it, and its location may be the consequence of decades of inadequate maintenance.

Nevertheless, its legal status may provide it with substantially greater protection than a superior specimen of the same size located a metre away entirely on one property. From a landscape-design perspective, that is difficult to rationalize.

The legislation essentially establishes ownership based upon location, while good landscape and arboricultural decision-making considers a much broader range of factors: species, condition, structure, longevity, ecological contribution, landscape significance, replacement potential and the feasibility of preservation.

When protection becomes leverage

Most neighbours approach these situations reasonably. Boundary trees can often be retained through thoughtful design, root-sensitive construction or mutually agreeable replacement planting. The difficulty arises when agreement cannot be reached. Because there is no inexpensive independent mechanism for determining whether consent is being reasonably withheld, one neighbour can potentially exercise considerable leverage over the other. In practice, consent can become connected to unrelated issues involving fencing, grading, design changes or financial compensation. This creates an unusual imbalance. A municipality may approve a development. A building permit may be available. The proposed work may comply with zoning and planning policy. An arborist may conclude that preservation is impractical. The owner may offer substantial replacement planting. Yet the project can still be prevented from proceeding because agreement regarding a single boundary tree cannot be reached.

Ontario courts have generally maintained protection for healthy boundary trees even where they interfere with proposed development. For designers, this means that a seemingly minor vegetation issue discovered late in the design process can become a major project constraint.

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We need to talk about tree value

The solution is not to weaken tree protection. Mature urban trees provide enormous environmental, aesthetic and social benefits; and good designers should always investigate reasonable opportunities for preservation. But tree protection should also involve tree evaluation.

A 70-year-old sugar maple in good condition is not equivalent to a deteriorating Manitoba maple of the same diameter. A deliberately planted oak contributing to a streetscape is not necessarily equivalent to a volunteer Siberian elm that established beside a neglected fence. A healthy native canopy tree with another 75 years of potential life is different from a short-lived or structurally compromised non-native tree nearing the end of its life.

A rational system should therefore consider species, condition, useful life-expectancy, ecological value, neighbourhood contribution and replacement potential alongside ownership. It should also recognize the opportunity to improve the urban forest. In some circumstances, removing a poor-quality volunteer tree and replacing it with an appropriately selected, long-lived tree may produce a better long-term canopy outcome than preserving the existing specimen at virtually any cost.

A better approach

Ontario does not necessarily need to abandon the principle of shared ownership. Instead, it needs a mechanism for resolving genuine conflicts. Other jurisdictions provide examples of systems in which an independent decision-maker can consider hardship, amenity value and reasonable use of property, rather than treating disagreement as an absolute veto. A modern approach for Ontario could require preservation to be considered first, but allow an independent tribunal or similar process to authorize removal where appropriate.

Factors could include:

- Species, size, condition and expected longevity;
- Whether the tree was intentionally planted or appears to be volunteer growth;
- Ecological and landscape significance;
- Whether reasonable design alternatives have been investigated;
- The degree to which preservation restricts reasonable use of the property;
- Municipal planning and development approvals;
- Replacement planting and opportunities for improved canopy;
- Compensation where appropriate; and
- Whether either party is acting unreasonably.

Such an approach would not create an automatic right to remove boundary trees. It would create something that is currently missing: a reasonable process for deciding when preservation is justified and when removal, mitigation and replacement represent the better overall outcome.

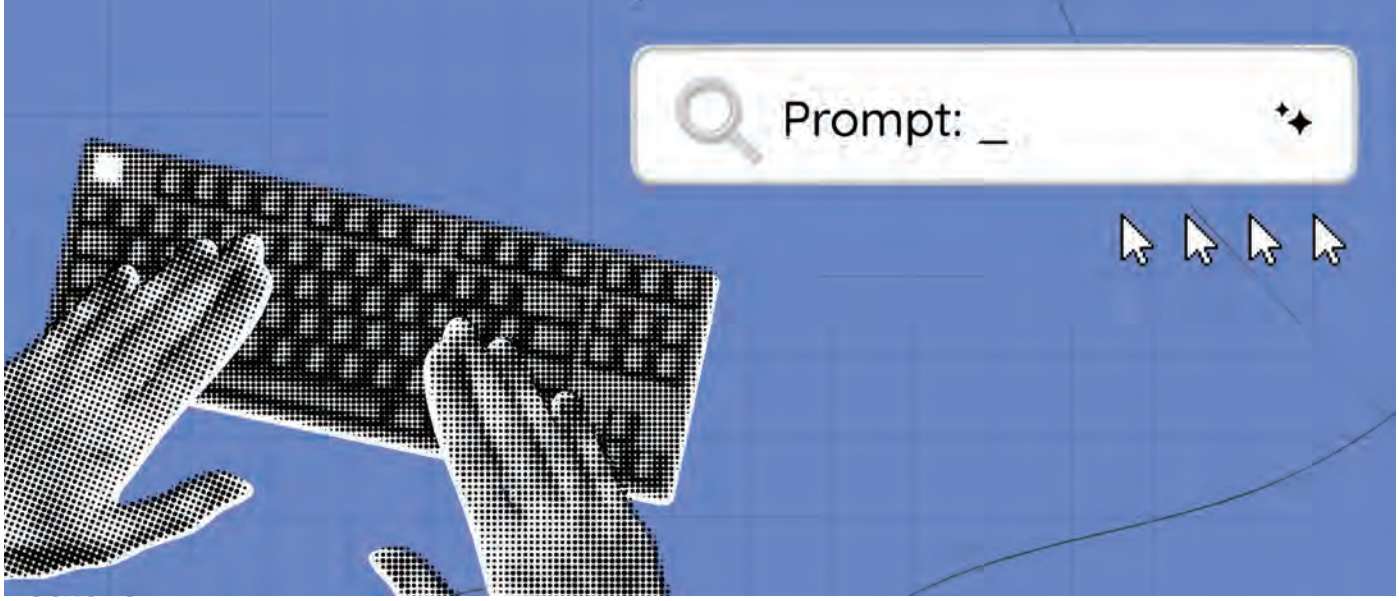
An important issue for landscape designers

Landscape designers are particularly well-positioned to contribute to this discussion because we routinely work at the intersection of vegetation, buildings, grading, servicing and property boundaries. We also understand something that can be lost in purely legal discussions about trees: landscapes change. Trees grow, decline and die. Volunteer species colonize neglected spaces. Buildings are renovated. Families need accessible entrances. Housing needs change. Infrastructure requires replacement. Urban land becomes more intensively used. Good landscape planning accommodates that change while maintaining and improving the urban forest.

Ontario's boundary tree legislation embodies an important principle of shared stewardship, but legislation written around historical property conditions should be reconsidered in the context of contemporary urban development. The objective should remain the preservation of valuable trees wherever reasonably possible, not the preservation of every tree simply because, intentionally or accidentally, its trunk happens to cross a survey line.

For landscape designers, perhaps the most useful principle is also the simplest: **Protect good trees. Evaluate questionable trees. Replace what must be removed. And make decisions based on the long-term quality of the landscape rather than location alone.**

Over a 43-year career, Dr. Ron Koudys, CLD, has advanced landscape architecture through teaching, industry involvement, lectures, publications, volunteer efforts and mentoring.



How AI can cut the busy work for landscape designers

By Kevin Post

I didn't start using artificial intelligence (AI) because I wanted a shortcut to creating good designs. I started because I was tired of how much time disappears into the invisible work of being a landscape designer: rewriting emails, clarifying scope, tightening quotes, chasing decisions and doing final drawing reviews when mental energy is already low. The design wasn't the bottleneck, workflow friction was.

That matters in my practice because we focus on complex properties — turning constrained sites into approval-ready, build-ready landscape designs. Much of my work involves steep grades, mature trees, tight setbacks, drainage issues and sensitive site conditions. I lean on site-true 3D scans and a three-dimensional workflow to reduce unknowns before construction begins. Because my core values are stewardship, artistry with precision, clarity and buildability, I've always been cautious about adopting tools that create "noise" instead of better decisions.

The shift came when I stopped expecting AI to "know things" and started using it as an assistant: quick, helpful and occasionally wrong, unless I'm very specific and I verify the output.

Where AI fits in my real workflow

AI first helped me in the unglamorous parts of practice — the work that eats time without improving a design. Most days, it starts right after a site visit. My notes are a mash-up of measurements, constraints, quick sketches and client comments. So instead of spending an hour turning that chaos into clear, actionable reports and plans, I run them through AI to organize the essentials, pull out the open questions, create checklists for next actions and draft my site visit reports and change orders.

From there, AI helps me translate intent into language clients actually understand — why a path shifts, why grades soften in one area, why a material matters or why we're protecting a particular tree. When people understand the "why," decisions come faster and revision loops shrink. That same clarity matters in my consulting arborist work, where I often explain risk and limits related to root zones and construction impacts. AI helps polish the wording so it stays calm, professional and defensible.

It's also become my quiet reviewer on the business side — flagging scope gaps in Requests for Proposal, tightening proposal language and spotting assumption-prone phrases in quotes before they turn into scope creep. Even planting design goes faster when AI turns constraints — light, moisture, salt exposure, rabbit/deer pressure, mature height and maintenance levels — into criteria and shortlists I can validate and build from.

The learning curves and hardships

Early on, I hit three big hurdles.
First, AI can sound confident even when it's wrong or making assumptions. In our world, that's dangerous.
I learned to avoid asking it for "facts" and instead asking it to improve what I already know, organize what I already decided or propose options I can evaluate.

Even when it writes a great letter, it can misinterpret my

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direction. I've had it say an item was completed and ready for review when, in reality, that item still needed to be selected — so I am careful to specify what is decided, what is pending and what the output should (and should not) claim.

Second, prompting is a real skill. If I am vague, I get generic output. If I am specific about audience, constraints, tone, deliverable format and risk boundaries, the quality of the response improves.

Third, confidentiality and liability are not optional. I do not paste sensitive client data or proprietary drawings into general tools. I also do not let AI invent requirements. If something touches code, municipal standards or safety, I verify independently.

What to watch out for

- Do not outsource professional judgment. Use AI to draft, not to decide.
- Watch for scope creep in your own drafts. AI will often "helpfully" add services you do not offer.
- Use AI for upsell ideas — intentionally. Ask it to suggest optional add-ons as a separate list, then choose only the ones you truly want to offer and price.
- Keep a repeatable prompt library. Your best results come from refining prompts over time.
- Always do a technical pass. Read the output like you would review a junior staff deliverable.

Time savings and productivity gains

The biggest gain is not that AI does my design work. The gain is that it protects my deep work time. I spend less time writing emails, tightening scope language,

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Email clarity prompt

"Review the following and make a recommendation for improvement. Let me decide before inserting. **<paste email to review>**"

Scope and liability prompt

"Review this scope of services as if you're trying to prevent scope creep. Identify vague language, unbounded revisions, hidden coordination obligations and anything that increases liability. Propose tightened wording, plus a short list of clarifying questions I should ask the client. Keep it aligned with landscape design-build realities. **<paste scope>**"

Tightening up technical notes prompt

"Shorten the note below by 30% while keeping every enforceable requirement. Maintain a construction-ready tone.
Rules: Don't introduce new specs, standards or numbers. If something is ambiguous, keep it as-is and flag it. **<paste note>**"

Prompt-builder prompt

"Act as a prompt engineer for landscape designers. Create a reusable, copy/paste-ready prompt I can use for **<insert task>**.

Include:

- Role the AI should play
- Required inputs (with placeholders)
- Output format (headings, bullet list or table)
- Quality checklist (5-8 items)
- Guardrails: don't invent facts, don't add commitments, flag uncertainties

Return the finished prompt in a single code block."

Plant sub prompt

"Help me build a planting shortlist and substitutions for an Ontario project using **<plant nursery website such as NVK>** as the first filter and only suggest plants that are available there.

- Site + design constraints:
- Location: **<City, Ont.>** (hardiness zone if known: **<zone>**)
- Light: **<full sun / part shade / shade>**
- Soil: **<sandy / loam / clay>** and moisture: **<dry / average / wet>**
- Irrigation: **<yes/no>**
- Exposure: **<salt / wind / heat / pool splash>**
- Wildlife pressure: **<rabbits / deer / both / none>**
- Mature height/width target: **<x>**
- Maintenance level: **<low/medium/high>**
- Style intent: **<naturalistic / formal / modern / etc.>**
- Colour/season goals: **<colour + bloom season>**
- Native preference: **<include at least 2 natives / no preference>**
- Toxicity/edible requirements: **<avoid toxic / ok / edible preferred>**
- Existing trees nearby: **<oaks / walnuts / evergreens / none>**

Deliverable: Provide five primary picks + three substitution options.
Output format: Table with columns: Botanical name, Common name, Native (Y/N), Size at maturity, Light, Moisture, Key strengths, Watch-outs, Best use on site.
Rules: Don't invent availability or guarantee nursery stock. If any key detail is missing, make a reasonable assumption and list it under 'Assumptions.'"



formatting reports and reorganizing notes. Over a typical week, that adds up to several hours I can reallocate to modelling, detailing, coordination and making higher-value decisions. It also reduces the mental drag of "starting friction" because I can quickly get a clean first draft and then refine it with my expertise.

At the end of the day, AI hasn't replaced my judgment — or my muddy boots. It can help me write faster, organize chaos and catch the odd blind spot, but it still can't feel a soft, wet spot in a lawn, or explain to a client why the "simple little change" is actually three drawings and several hours of work. For me, AI is best as a backstage helper: it keeps the admin friction down so I can spend more time doing the work we all got into this industry for — designing great landscapes that actually get built.

Kevin Post is the owner of Beyond The POST, a landscape architecture and consulting arborist practice based in Ontario. Through design, tree consulting and 3D scanning, Kevin helps clients, architects and builders better understand complex sites and make more informed design decisions. His work focuses on creating clear, buildable, approval-ready landscapes where nature and lifestyle converge.

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Designing for climate resilience in everyday residential landscapes

By Sam Benvie

Over the past few years, many of us have heard the same statement more than once: "It's never done that before." A client describing unexpected flooding. Patio stones that shifted after a freeze-thaw cycle. A garden bed that struggled through back-to-back dry spells. These aren't isolated incidents anymore; they're part of our working reality.

Climate resilience at the residential scale doesn't require dramatic gestures. It requires disciplined ones.

Resilience, in practical terms, means a landscape can tolerate variability beyond the ordinary, recover without major replacement and avoid depending on constant correction. It ages without becoming vulnerable and performs reliably under stress. Importantly, it can still be beautiful.

Start with water

Water variability is now a primary design variable. Not average rainfall, but extremes: intense downpours, extended dry periods, rapid snowmelt and salt-laden runoff.

While we are used to designing for normal seasons, there are fewer and fewer of these, and more with unexpected extremes of some kind.

Resilient residential design begins below the ground surface. Soil depth and especially quality are not luxuries; they are performance infrastructure. Rootable volume for trees and shrubs determines whether they endure drought or decline after two difficult summers. Subtle grading decisions determine whether water infiltrates, sheds or overwhelms.

Even on smaller urban properties, modest infiltration thinking — slightly wider beds, connected planting zones, attention to reducing compaction and holding moisture more effectively — can make a measurable difference. When soil performs well, everything above it performs better.

Diversify without losing clarity

Residential design values visual legibility. Clients appreciate cohesion and clean composition. Designing for climate resilience does not require abandoning that clarity.

It does, however, require reducing structural vulnerability.

Large monocultural drifts — even of reliable favourites — create synchronized risk. A pest event, disease pressure or weather anomaly can take down an entire visual field at once, even if some plants survive. Subtle diversification — mixing compatible species or cultivars, drawing from diverse genetic stock, varying root architectures, avoiding over-reliance on a single "signature plant" — spreads that risk without altering aesthetic intent.

Resilience rarely announces itself visually. It shows up years later when a garden still holds together after stress.

Design for regular recovery, not static perfection

Under climate stress, some irregularity is not failure — it is adaptation.

We are seeing longer seasonal and early dormancy, partial dieback and variable bloom cycles. A planting that

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pulls back during heat or shuts down during drought may be protecting itself. A lawn that thins in August but recovers in September is not necessarily poorly maintained.

As designers, we can shift expectations slightly. A resilient garden may not look perfect every week but it knows how to recover.

This shift also affects how we speak with clients. If we frame landscapes as static compositions that must always appear at peak performance, starting in the first season, we invite frustration. If instead we describe landscapes as living systems that respond to conditions and rebound with proper support, we build understanding.

Think long-term performance

Many residential projects are built in phases. Others evolve as budgets allow. Climate resilience asks us to think one layer deeper:

- How will this planting perform after three hot summers?
- How will this tree respond to restricted soil volume in 10 years?
- What happens when salt accumulates near the driveway edge?

Sometimes, resilience is simply about resisting short-term visual temptation in favour of long-term stability. Slightly fewer plants, better soil preparation. Slightly more diversity, slightly less repetition. More nuanced maintenance programs. Small choices compound over time.

Residential landscapes collectively represent a significant portion of managed land. The decisions we make in backyards, courtyards and front entries scale up across communities.

The designer's role

In this context, the designer becomes more than a stylist. We become translators of risk and possibility.

Clients may not initially ask for climate resilience. They ask for beauty, usability and value. But resilience supports all three. Fewer replacements mean lower lifecycle cost. Healthy soil means stronger plant performance when conditions turn difficult. Diversity means fewer large-scale failures.

When we explain why soil depth matters, why certain species mixes or genetic diversity offer insurance, or why drainage details deserve attention, we are not adding complexity; we are protecting the project.

Climate resilience is not a new aesthetic movement. It is a quiet shift in discipline.

We do not need to redesign every yard from scratch. We need to refine how we think about performance under climate variability. The most resilient residential landscapes may look familiar at first glance. The difference is that they endure.

The good news is that we are not working in isolation. Research, professional development programs, industry associations and peer networks offer growing guidance for resilience-informed design decisions.

And in the coming decades, endurance will matter.

Sam Benvie is an ecological landscape designer and educator, and academic coordinator of the Landscape Design for Climate Resilience Certificate at Toronto Metropolitan University. His work explores plant selection, ecological resilience and the relationship between horticulture, landscape ecology and design practice.



Feature

Designing landscapes for winter

By Stephanie LeBlanc



With winter weather on our doorstep, our landscapes are about to perform harder for us than in any other season. As landscape designers, our work must shine beyond the warmer seasons. The real test of a well-designed landscape is how it behaves under snow load, freeze-thaw cycles and harsh winter winds.

For this winter edition of *The Designer*, I'm sharing my pro tips for setting up a landscape to succeed year-round. Being intentional about winter performance from the beginning stages of a project is the key.

More than simply "getting through the cold, snow and ice," it's about designing landscapes that remain functional, beautiful and structurally sound throughout winter.

Winter design deserves more attention

Throughout most of Canada, we contend with repeated freezing and thawing in winter. These cycles put pressure on walkways, retaining walls, driveways, plants and drainage systems. When winter design isn't part of the early planning phase, we see predictable problems: crushed beds, cracked paving, winter burn, pooling meltwater and plow damage.

Windbreaks and winter winds

Winter winds shape the microclimates of landscapes. Well-designed and strategically placed windbreaks reduce wind speed and redirect drifting snow. Around perimeters and along driveways on larger or rural properties, using layered and staggered plantings are helpful:

- Taller evergreens (spruce, pine) on the interior.
- Lower shrubs (juniper, cedar) in front.
  *Space rows 10 to 15 feet apart

Designing for snow storage

Snow is unavoidable in our climate, so if we don't plan for it, it ends up piled in the wrong places. Snow storage will preserve the landscape and protect the plants that give it life. Watch out for perennials, small shrubs or corners of the garden not designed to withstand its weight, a volume of meltwater or salt that might accumulate.

Tips:

- Create designated snow storage zones adjacent to driveways and walkways.
- Plant hardier species along snow-dumping edges (mugo pine, winterberry, dogwood).
- Avoid delicate perennials where plows or shovels push snow.
- Use stakes to identify lawn edges and protect hidden features.

On smaller, urban properties, create both windbreak and privacy from neighbours by using smaller trees. Vulnerable species like yews, columnar cedars or rhododendrons may need to be wrapped in burlap to prevent winter wind burn.

Designing for drainage through freeze-thaw cycles

Freeze-thaw cycles can be devastating to hardscapes. Avoid large areas of poured concrete or asphalt. Instead use permeable materials that tolerate movement and allow for better drainage.

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Best-performing materials:

- Permeable pavers.
- Natural stone like flagstone set in pea gravel.
- Resin-bound aggregates, like PurePave.
- For all paving materials, use jointing materials that allow for drainage.

Walkways and patios should always slope zero to two per cent away from the home to prevent water from freezing or pooling. In heavy runoff areas, French drains, rain gardens and infiltration galleries add beauty and resilience and keep water away from structures.

Planting for structure and interest

A winter garden can feel alive in winter. Use deciduous trees for their interesting architecture or bark, evergreens for structure and colour, and spent perennials for texture at varied heights. Plants punctuate a focal point, drawing your eye into the landscape. Hardier plants can hold snow and frost, creating a glistening winter wonderland. Berries on shrubs like winterberry or cotoneaster support wildlife when food is scarce.



Reliable winter performers:

- **Evergreens:** spruce, pine, juniper, hemlock.
- **Broadleaf evergreens:** Euonymus, inkberry holly.
- **Deciduous trees:** Paperbark maple, river birch, columnar trees.
- **Shrubs:** Dogwood, cotoneaster, cold-hardy roses.
- **Perennials:** Artemisia, heuchera, astilbe, coneflowers.
- **Grasses:** Leave them standing for sound and frost sparkle.

Added elements to make your landscape pop

Material selection makes or breaks the beauty, longevity and function of a landscape.

Consider:

- Natural stone weathers beautifully.
- Composite decking resists moisture.
- Stone walls define spaces.
- Art or beautifully decorated pots add character and seasonal interest.
- Fire features, outdoor heaters and covered pergolas extend usage year-round.

Thoughtful design choices will make a meaningful difference to the function and beauty of your landscape as well as the surrounding environment. Be sure to consider where snow will be stored, how to create windbreaks for both urban and rural spaces, how to manage water flow through freeze-thaw cycles and how to pick plants that stay sturdy and visually interesting all year long.

Stephanie LeBlanc is the owner of Master in the Field Landscape Design in Toronto, Ont. She is a graduate of Toronto Metropolitan University's School of Landscape Design, a member of Landscape Ontario, a CLD candidate and FLP certified. She specializes in creating intimate, high-functioning spaces that change how people live outdoors.

Certification

Winning strategies for CLD portfolio submission

This season, move your career forward by preparing your Certified Landscape Designer (CLD) portfolio submission. Review your recent projects and choose one that best represents your skills, even if you haven't yet finished all the drawings required for submission. You can finish the remaining drawings and details before submitting your portfolio. The most important thing is to use your current work to get started.

A successful portfolio submission comes down to three key points:

1. Have you included all required drawings, information and documents from the portfolio checklist?
2. Can this project be built from the drawings?
3. Have you communicated your design intent through the drawing process?

Think of it as levelling up your design game. Earning the CLD designation is a structured process that fosters professional development and design excellence. A key part of this process, whether through the **Regular Path** or the **Legacy Provision**, is the **portfolio submission**.

The process is designed with flexibility in mind. Candidates may choose to submit all three projects at once or take an incremental approach by submitting one project at a time. This phased option allows candidates to receive valuable feedback from the review committee and apply the insights to strengthen their remaining submissions.

The portfolio submission checklist

Using the portfolio submission checklist isn't just about ticking boxes — it's about setting yourself up for a smoother, stronger and more successful submission.

Preparing a portfolio involves multiple drawings, details and supporting information. The checklist acts as a roadmap, guiding you through what's needed so you can build your submission with clarity instead of second-guessing. Think of the checklist as your final review before submission — it helps you catch gaps, inconsistencies or missing details that might weaken your presentation.

In short, the checklist isn't just administrative — it's a tool that helps you present your design skills clearly, professionally and to their full potential.

Click here to access the CLD Portfolio Checklist

Your portfolio submission

Many candidates have successfully submitted their CLD portfolios — and you can too! Although the process might seem daunting at first, it's a

> Continued



Advice from seasoned professionals

"If you start to feel overwhelmed, ask for advice. Take a break and recharge when needed. Don't expect to pass on your first go-around, don't submit all three projects at once and be open to feedback. The review panel isn't there to fail you — they're there to help you grow."

– John Bright, CLD

"Pursuing certification pushed me to grow in ways I didn't anticipate. The requirements were both highly specific and deeply demanding, which meant I couldn't simply rely on the skills I was already comfortable with. Instead, I had to take an honest look at the areas where I was weaker and intentionally strengthen them. The process became more than a credential — it became a catalyst for real improvement in my craft."

– Audriana VanderWerf, CLD

"My advice to designers is this: after you think you've included everything, step away. Go for a walk or call it a day, then return with fresh eyes and ask yourself, "Could this be built exactly as shown if I weren't there to explain it?" That single question may reveal a missing detail or measurement and save the day."

– Lexi Dearborn, CLD

"As part of the certification process, candidates are required to submit three representative drawings demonstrating professional competence in landscape design. Many candidates practice within design-build environments where detailed construction documentation is not routinely prepared. The review committee recognizes this reality. However, the ability to produce clear, accurate and technically sound drawings remains essential to professional designation. These submissions provide the most objective method available to evaluate a candidate's design competency, technical knowledge and professional judgment. Certification is not based solely on years of experience. It requires evidence that the candidate can responsibly communicate design intent and understand how landscapes are constructed."

– Dr. Ron Koudys, CLD

great opportunity to showcase your skills and gain national recognition.

Read the requirements carefully
If anything is unclear, ask for clarification before you dive in. It will save you time and frustration later.

Study the portfolio examples
Pay attention to how they're structured. Review the plans to understand the expected drawing quality, organization and page layout. There's no need to reinvent the wheel — model your submission on successful examples.

Choose projects wisely
Don't pick something overly complicated just to impress. Select projects that clearly demonstrate your understanding of the site and your design process. Showing competency in grading, construction logic, buildability and overall design sense will take you far.

Print off the portfolio submission checklist
Take time to highlight each item to ensure all required details are included in your submission.

Include written details for all photographs.

Final thoughts

The review process is intended to be fair, consistent and competency-based. Drawings are assessed for evidence of: professional skill, technical understanding, clear communication and responsible design judgment. Perfection is not required. Demonstrated competence is required.

Completing your CLD portfolio isn't just a step; it's your chance to shine. Show off your skills, tell your design story and prove to yourself (and the review committee) that you're ready.

It's challenging, but totally doable — and honestly, once you dive in, you'll wonder why you waited. You've got this, and your next big design milestone is just a portfolio away.

Finding My Path

From student to professional

My journey as a landscape designer

By Gabriel Roballo

I remember walking past the landscape architecture building every day on my way to my biochemistry class. The small roof over the front doors had some grass growing on it — this really caught my eye because no other building on the University of Guelph campus had that. I always loved being in nature, but I never thought about how to blend the natural world with our built environment.



Fast forward a year, and I nearly flunked out of my animal science program at U of G. I have always had a love for animals in addition to my love for nature and the outdoors. I researched the landscape architecture program and loved what it had to offer. I was sold on a new goal — to become a landscape architect.

I asked my guidance counselor, "Tell me how it is, please don't sugarcoat it."

"Well, Gabe, your grades are horrible and you don't even have a portfolio; there is no way you are getting into the landscape architecture program here."

She did, however, offer me an alternative — an articulation, if you will. Go to Fanshawe College for three years for the advanced diploma in landscape design, then transfer back to U of G in the third year to complete the bachelor of landscape architecture (BLA) program. My journey was set.

Finding a mentor

The journey from student to professional is rarely a straight line, but for me, the most critical stretch was my apprenticeship while working for a landscape company in Guelph. I was the first to create the landscape designer position within the company and was incredibly lucky to be mentored by the owner of the company.

He answered my millions of questions and helped me understand the mechanics of the industry: managing employees and navigating client psychology. Most importantly, he taught me how to solve daily problems with a cool head. Working alongside him for six years wasn't just a job; it was a masterclass in how a business actually functions.

Technical skills at the university level

Fanshawe provided the technical "how-to" the industry demands: AutoCAD, SketchUp, Lumion and the Adobe Suite. When I transferred to U of G, the difference in backgrounds of students became apparent.

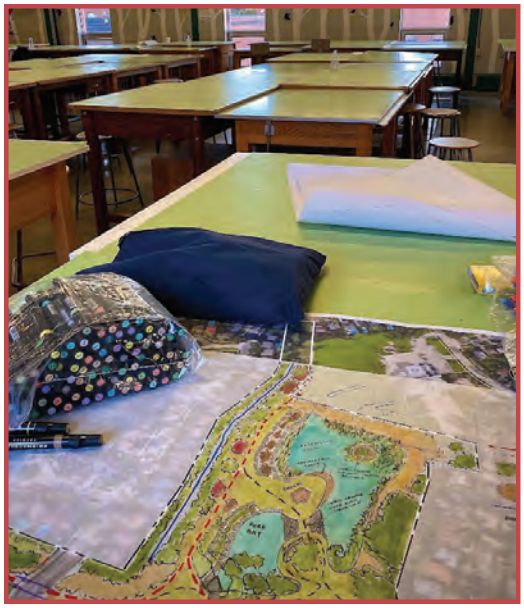
I remember pulling out my trace paper and markers in the studio one day to start a conceptual drawing. Soon, I had a crowd of students surrounding me, asking about my design procedure and what I had learned at Fanshawe. While they had the abstract theory, we five transfer students had already acquired practical skills. We became a resource for peers who wanted help on how to use the design software or how to execute an effective hand-drawn rendering with markers.

Professors often pushed us toward the impossible — like challenging us to design a fence made of cats and dogs. While it encouraged "out of the box" thinking, it clashed with my professional reality. Working in the field taught me the true cost, time and materials required to build. I saw beautiful student designs that would almost never make it past the red tape or budget cuts of the real world. It was very hard for me to excel in this part of my schooling.

Finding my rhythm

During my time at Guelph, I completed a four-month internship at a landscape architecture firm. It was a great look into a pure design environment focused on high-level conceptualizing. However, I remember sitting in the studio

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on a warm spring day, hearing the distant sound of saws cutting wood outside, and feeling a literal itch to get out there.

I realized then that, to be the best designer I can be, I need to be where the action is. While the office-only approach works for many, I thrive when I can use all five senses to visualize the before, during and after of a project. I love the design-build model because it provides direct feedback on my evolving skillset and aesthetic style. While it's important to explore what you want to do, it's even more important to find out what you like to do best.

The road ahead

Having both college and university experience made getting hired significantly easier; employers saw a well-rounded designer who knew both the "why" and the "how."

Today, I work as a landscape designer and project manager. I am constantly challenged and stimulated, creating and building on both the design and build aspects of landscape construction. However, my journey isn't over yet. I am currently navigating a two-year period of supervised practice required to officially become a licensed landscape architect.

This stage is the final bridge, demanding a commitment to continued learning and high-level project management. Even after five years of school and years in the field, I continue to grow. The journey from a struggling science student to a licensed professional is long, but every muddy job site and late-night studio session has been worth it. I am on my way and I wouldn't change a single step.



CERTIFIED LANDSCAPE DESIGNER

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

Upcoming Events

FREE VIRTUAL EVENT

Mentor Moments Student Edition: Ask Us Anything!
Tuesday, December 1, 2026 from 7- 8 p.m. ET

Panel Discussion

Join experienced landscape designers for an open conversation about the world of design and how to turn your education into a career. From design skills and plant knowledge to working with clients, landing your first job and building your portfolio — get answers from designers who've been there.



IN-PERSON EVENT

Landscape Designers Conference 2027
Monday, January 11, 2027 from 8:30 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. ET

Toronto Congress Centre, 650 Dixon Road, Toronto, Ontario

This annual event for landscape designers, architects, contractors and horticultural professionals at all stages of their career provides a full day of practical insights, fresh ideas and inspiration to kick off the Congress week. Registration includes admission to the Congress Trade Show (January 12-14) and more!



IN-PERSON EVENT

Congress Trade Show & Conference
January 12-14, 2027

Toronto Congress Centre, 650 Dixon Road, Toronto, Ontario

Three days, hundreds of exhibitors, dozens of educational sessions and thousands of industry professionals — join Canada's green industry community at the event where ideas grow, businesses connect and the next season begins. Use the promo code **LO2027** for free admission to the trade show.



Landscape Ontario
DESIGNERS SECTOR

The Designer is an initiative of the Landscape Ontario Designers Sector Group.

Watch for our Spring/Summer 2027 edition in your inbox and online in mid-May.

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!

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