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# Nipping projects in the bud

## Local landscapers see cutbacks in spring jobs

By [KATIE ARCIERI, Staff Writer](#) Published 04/28/09



Springtime has always been a time of extra cash flow for local landscapers.

Colleen Dugan - The Capital Kara Crissey, owner of Good Earth Gardeners in Annapolis, picks weeds from a garden filled with bleeding hearts.

But with the recession creating cutbacks in consumer spending, area businesses are seeing fewer jobs overall, less elaborate gardens and have noticed consumers saying no to higher-dollar projects.

Kara Crissey, owner of Good Earth Gardeners in Annapolis, said she's still seeing demand for spring clean-up jobs. But some requests tend to be "bare-bones," with just straight out mulching and weeding and plans to forgo the removal of invasive plants, she said.

"They are just trying to keep their budgets as low as possible," she said.

In the past, Crissey would line up landscape design jobs for an entire property, with herb gardens and designs for the front and backyards.

Now she's seeing some of her clientele opt for smaller proposals, requesting Crissey to do one part of the job now and another part in the fall.

"I attribute that to people having less disposable income," she said.

And more than ever before, Crissey said she's received more requests for native plants such as dogwood.

"The survival rate is better; the maintenance is lower," she said. "They are also interested in restoring habitat."

Craig Hudson, owner of the Evergreen Gene's garden center in Glen Burnie, also said he's noticed cutbacks in consumer spending. While he's seen a 25 percent increase in basic spring maintenance jobs, it's the higher-priced jobs - patios, walks and walls - that are "just not coming in the door," he said.

"I normally have a crew working on that full-time, five days a week," Hudson said. "I've had like two jobs this year."

Tim Hamilton, marketing director for Homestead Gardens in Davidsonville, said the business is still getting requests that amount to \$20,000 and \$30,000, but the "six-figure jobs" are drying up.

"People still want the jobs done, but they are hesitant," he said. "If you're looking at the average guy, they are probably toning them down, they are taking some of the frills off."

Meanwhile, the Davidsonville retail store is doing well as customers buy plants to install themselves, he said.

"People are going to be doing more themselves to save some money," Hamilton said.

The landscaping industry has been driven over the past 10 to 15 years by housing and commercial development, said Jonathan Bardzik, director of industry relations for the American Nursery and Landscape Association in Washington, D.C.

"That work is drying up quickly right now," he said.

Now, he said he's hearing a lot of "mixed reports" from landscapers all over the country. Some firms are ahead of last year in sales while others are "under pressure" in the recession, he said.

"It's certainly been suggested by some people that the stock-market performance may have some impact on that," he said.

In some instances, landscaping businesses are diversifying business plans to keep revenue flowing, he said. He pointed to one business in Connecticut that bought into an organic lawn-care franchise and "is seeing business from that emerging market."

Steve Watkins is the owner of Himmel's Farm and Garden in Pasadena, which sells a variety of nursery stock. He said businesses that provide general maintenance and trimming services are still in business, but it's the contractors for major "hardscape" jobs that are hurting.

At Himmel's, Watkins said he has noticed customers scaling back. They aren't buying as many of the higher-priced nursery items such as fountains and large trees.

"They'll buy more of the smaller pieces," he said.

While the local landscaping industry has certainly been affected, Watkins said his sales are dictated by the weather, not the economy.

"If we get some good weekends in May and June, we'll be great," he said.