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Into the Sun

AS A LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT, SHERI SANZONE IS SOWING SUSTAINABLE PRINCIPLES, CULTIVATING CONTEMPORARY DESIGNS AND REAPING THE REWARDS.

By Colleen Ringer



DON'T TELL SHERI SANZONE that contemporary landscapes are a trend. When she started her Aspen, Colo.-based landscape architecture firm, Bluegreen, in 2001, there weren't very many clients to be had, she admits; but oh, how things have changed. "The interest in contemporary architecture and landscape has really grown," Sanzone says. "[I think there's] a greater comfort with this style. I hope it's a reflection of how people like to live today, and I hope it's a design that's not going to go out of style."

The effervescent outdoor pro feels that her *modus operandi* is perfect for Aspen's mountainous environs, one of the reasons being that the high elevation leaves a pretty

limited palette of plants to work with—not a huge problem when you're applying a less-is-more philosophy. Using native grasses, clusters of Colorado spruces and, of course, aspens, among other native plants, Sanzone and her Bluegreen team sculpt alfresco spaces that are an extension of a home's architectural aesthetic. And that's definitely by design, rather than luck. "We like to work with the client, architect and other team members from the very beginning," says Sanzone, who is a registered landscape architect in Colorado and Utah. "Getting everyone together at the table is the best way to make a client's wish list come true. Sometimes we get calls to be involved in a project, and we find out the house has





SHERI SANZONE *of...*

HER FAVORITE PLANT

Sedums. In minimalist gardens, they provide strong architectural form, especially planted in mass. Although not truly native to our area, they are exceptionally hardy and do very well in low-water consumptive and drought-tolerant landscapes. An added bonus is that they are virtually maintenance-free.

HER FAVORITE LANDSCAPE TO WORK WITH

Damaged or heavily disturbed landscapes. Restoring landscapes that have suffered destruction through poor land management practices or previous development are especially challenging. Recreating natural systems—soil structure, water patterns, plant communities and wildlife habitat—to a condition as good as or better than the predisturbance conditions is especially gratifying.

BEST LANDSCAPING TIP

Engage a landscape architect at the start of a residential design project. By doing so, the architect and landscape architect can collaborate to create the best indoor-outdoor relationships.

MOST OVERRATED ELEMENT IN LANDSCAPE DESIGN

What is certainly not overrated is the use of sustainable design principles, technology and materials to create landscapes that are functional and resource-efficient as well as beautiful.

WHAT SHE LOVES MOST ABOUT LIVING IN ASPEN

The opportunity to be in a small, historic mountain town with easy access to some of the most beautiful wilderness areas, combined with extensive exposure to world-class art and cultural events makes Aspen so special.



already been designed. Those projects don't appeal to us because there were so many opportunities that were lost."

One opportunity Sanzone is sure that isn't lost: green design, particularly water use. "It's kind of a puzzle," says the LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) accredited professional. "How do you use the water once, twice, three times before it's gone and makes it down the chain?" Sanzone looks at everything from the way a site is graded to areas that can forgo irrigation and rely on natural rainfall. Perhaps these aren't the most complex concepts, she says, but the value they bring to a project is priceless.

It wasn't too long ago, though, that Sanzone approached her projects from a different place—one that wasn't as directly connected with the land. Holding a master's degree in city planning and urban design from the University of Pennsylvania, she tackled her undertakings from an architect's point of view. But once she began working for a Colorado firm that dealt with the same types of ventures from a landscape architect's perspective, she knew she had to make a switch. "It was much more closely tied to the site and to nature," Sanzone says. Today Bluegreen's client portfolio is almost evenly split between residential and public-sector clients, giving Sanzone and her team variety to drive their creativity. "We can work on

developing a detail for a water feature in the morning and look at a whole system of parks in the afternoon. Both of those types of work inform each other."

Away from the office, Sanzone's pursuits are as varied as her clients. Recently, she was able to combine two of her passions—sustainable design and affordable housing—when Bluegreen designed the award-winning Burlingame Ranch Affordable Housing project, which incorporates a pedestrian-friendly layout and eco-conscious wastewater treatment. (Sanzone also serves as the chairperson of the Aspen-Pitkin County Housing Authority.)

Another place you'll often find her is in her own backyard. "It's the place where a lot of [plants] get tested," she says. "I have a boulder wall that has southern exposure and is probably one of the most brutal microclimates in town." Here, in this space that she says is "messy" and "a work in progress," Sanzone discovers which flora will fail and which will flourish in the high altitude setting—and if the plants can survive with minimal irrigation (or none at all), even better. **EW**

to learn more

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