

Image update

After two decades, the Arboretum undergoes a landscaping makeover

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Anyone over 20 years old understands there comes a time for an image update. The same principle applies to retail centers.

That's why the people who lease and manage the Arboretum, which turned 20 in late 2005, say it was due for some sprucing up. And with new retail centers popping up nearby — namely The Domain and The Shops at Arbor Walk — the Arboretum has even more reason to keep up with the times.

To assist with the Arboretum's makeover, Sheila McHargue and Diane Sweeney turned to local landscaping companies for inspiration.

McHargue, vice president of property management for Trammell Crow Co. in Austin, is responsible for all of the common areas shared by 12 different entities, each with an ownership stake in the Arboretum. Those owners formed the Arboretum Association.

Sweeney is a property manager with Simon Property Group Inc., which owns and leases the retail space in the Arboretum.

Together, McHargue and Sweeney interviewed three to four contenders before selecting Austin-based Landscape Resources Inc. for the job.

"It was just time for new ideas," Sweeney says.

Since the project is landlocked, Sweeney says improving through an expansion isn't an option, but that doesn't mean there isn't room for improvement.

All of the proposals were good, Sweeney says, but Landscape Resources had boards made up that exhibited a cutting-edge approach.

Simon's section, called the Arboretum at Great Hills, has about 205,000 square feet of retail space that's 90 percent leased. There are more than 40 tenants, including Barnes & Noble, The Cheesecake Factory and Salon 505-The Day Spa.

"You look at other things you can do; landscaping is one," Sweeney says. "I think it keeps your project an 'A' project."

McHargue agrees, adding that landscaping upgrades, completed in 2003 and 2004 to the office buildings in the Arboretum project, were a big boost.

A few years ago when the property was losing its main tenant and looking for new ones, a real estate expert told McHargue the property was in danger of being downgraded to Class B. Tenants like the pristine, well-manicured look, the expert said — words that were taken to heart and resulted in action.

Part of the reason why the upgrades can have such an impact is because projects can call for far more than a few new plants.

For the common retail areas, a three-year plan was created with a total budget of around \$500,000.

The first phase tackled one of the most high-profile gathering spots in Northwest Austin, the area just west of an Amy's Ice Creams store that includes open space and the famous cow sculptures.

In addition to extensive landscaping, the once bright-

blue-lined fountain was sandblasted and refinished with a more neutral color. All of the concrete tables were replaced.

Phase I was wrapped up in the nick of time for the holiday shopping season that started the day after Thanksgiving.

Other phases will include more landscaping and a new sculpture.

McHargue says the goal was to create something that enhanced the classic, timeless feel of the Arboretum, where people would continue to feel welcome to use



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Zach Armstrong, project manager with Landscape Resources Inc., says enhancing the Arboretum's natural setting was a focus during renovation.

the area as a park.

"Austin treats this like their backyard. It's very personal. We have to keep that in mind," McHargue says. "It's not just about pleasing the owners, but the community."

"We try and make things look as natural as possible," says Zach Armstrong, project manager with Landscape Resources. "Not one thing is the attention grabber. It all goes together."

Landscape Resources' niche is in upper-end projects, including the Dell Inc. corporate campus.

Armstrong says his company has been getting a lot of calls from owners and managers of properties built during the same period as the Arboretum.

And most of the properties from that era used many of the same plant material, which now has somewhat of a trademark late 1980s look. Some of the foliage is starting to reach the end of its life cycle.

"Look at office buildings. A lot have the same plants," Armstrong says.

But nurseries now carry a greater variety of plants from other states, such as California and Oregon.

Armstrong walks through the completed first phase, proud of how the fountain turned out.

"It sets a vibe for the whole place," Armstrong says — much like landscaping.