

A *Living* Work of Art

A temporary installation proves to be an effective marketing tool for a landscape company, capturing contracts and showing there's art in what they do.

By Sally Benson



Photos courtesy of Plandscape Inc.



The intersection of Third and Franklin Streets in Geneva, Ill., is transformed overnight into a welcoming oasis for visitors to the city's annual Arts Fair.

For four years now, the intersection of Third and Franklin Streets in the small river town of Geneva, Ill., has been transformed from curb and pavement to a welcoming garden retreat.

Each July, the crew of Plandscape Inc., a design/build firm in nearby Elburn, has created an oasis for visitors who stroll through town at the annual Geneva Arts Fair. The two-day event features more than 150 artists and draws upwards of 25,000 visitors, making it the ideal place to display the art of landscape design.

Right time, right place

Jim Haugen, Plandscape's landscape architect, says the company considers the job an exceptional promotional opportunity. "It comes at a good time of the year for us; the spring rush is over, but

potential clients are still thinking about their yards and outdoor living. But it's also gratifying, the idea that people will hang on to the literature that we distribute to fairgoers and call as much as six to nine months later. It tells us we made an impression that lasted."

And that impression has led to contracts: "We track [calls] to help justify our costs, and there are as many as 12 to 15 sales per year that closed" based on the company's presence at the art fair. "It definitely pays for itself," he states.

The ongoing project began with an invitation from the local Chamber of Commerce to "decorate" the organization's information booth. That proved so popular that the Chamber then asked Plandscape to create a larger area for the weekend fair. Haugen says that Plandscape considered the demographics of visitors to this type of event to be a good fit with the

company's target client, thus fitting nicely into its promotional efforts. Asked what advice he'd give to other companies, he explains it's about what's appropriate for the event—and what's appropriate for your company.

"It's a little bit about matching whatever your brand is, what your niche is in your local marketplace—your skills—with the kind of clientele," he says. "If they asked us to participate in their carnival, street fair, sidewalk sale sort of a setting, we'd probably take a pass. It's a whole different kind of a crowd, in terms of age, are they homeowners, do they have disposable income, all those kinds of things.

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Plandscape staff are on hand to answer questions, which range from "What flower is this?" to "Can you do this in my yard?"

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It's a real good fit; that's the kind of company we think we're running, and you have the [appropriate] demographic there of the fairgoers."

Benefits have challenges, too

Staff, weather, timing—all present unique challenges to any installation. Most companies can postpone construction should the weather not cooperate, but the fair goes on as scheduled, rain or shine. The Plandscape crew has a brief window to create four individual garden settings, one on each corner of the intersection. As soon as the city closes Third Street to traffic the evening before the event, the crew moves in.

"[Set up] is probably the biggest challenge; it involves about four hours to set up, from when they close the streets to when it gets dark and you can't see what you're doing anymore," Haugen explains. "It's a real hectic time; we prefab as many of the displays as we can, and we have enough staff that we get it done, although we finish up under the streetlights each year.

"We've had some strong storms even during the set up; more than one has been set up in the rain or taken down in the rain," Haugen says.

The company's entire staff is on board for setup and removal, which also must be accomplished in a few hours. "On Sunday night, everything has to come down and be off the street by the time the lights go out. We do that ourselves, down to hosing the mulch off the street," Haugen explains. "The other limitation, of course, is that we have to put the whole thing on the back of a truck. It's got to be portable, and it goes together in a real short period of time."

Ready to do it again

Despite the frenzy of setup and teardown, Haugen is enthusiastic about the company's continuing agreement with the city. "I don't see any real downside to our involvement," he claims. "Anytime we get into something like this, any kind of charitable effort, it's always about being sure we can put our best foot forward, really put our best product out there—or just not do it. And it makes things difficult, at times, for us, but it does keep us viewed in the light that we're open for.

"In terms of justifying it with our marketing? In our business, we're not effective at painting a verbal picture of what we can do. You try and use photography and various kinds of media as much as possible ... certainly the website ... but there just is no substitute for catching somebody's attention with an example of the real thing, right in front of them. It's so effective."

In addition to winning contracts, Plandscape has been recognized by the Illinois Landscape Contractors Association for its work at the Geneva Arts Fair, winning a Gold Award for its 2013 installation. It's a lot of work for a short period of exposure, but they'll jump in again this year.

"We'll continue to do this, at least into the foreseeable future," Haugen says. "It's a win-win arrangement; [the Chamber of Commerce and fairgoers are] very enthusiastic and appreciative, and it's certainly our best marketing activity. It's the most effective anyway."

Sally Benson is the editorial director of American Nurseryman; she can be reached at sbenson@mooservermedia.com. Be sure to visit the Plandscape website at www.plandscapeinc.com, and to see more of the Geneva Arts Fair landscape installations, visit www.amerinursery.com.



Crews have a brief window of time in which to install four corner landscapes, often working until the streetlights come on.



Themes for each corner landscape change from year to year, often borrowing ideas—and items—from the designers' own gardens.



Fairgoers take a welcome break from the summer heat in one of Plandscape's corner installations.