

Turning Passion into Award-Winning Landscapes



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Jason Dengler speaks with confidence about his eight-year-old landscaping firm, [Wildwood Landscape](#), as being distinctively different from others in the Washington, D.C., area. Dengler feels that landscaping is a fine art and should be practiced with the same care, thought and skill as other high art forms. Wildwood is also embracing what Dengler is seeing as a trend in landscaping: going back to the classics. This means featuring traditional gardens that are elegant and less gimmicky, as well incorporating native and edible plants into landscapes. He uses public garden shows and landscape contests to showcase his firm's talents.

"The garden shows and design competitions are examples of ways that we can differentiate ourselves from our competition," says Dengler. "It's a great opportunity to put our skill set in front of a large group of people who are interested in what we do."

Wildwood emerged into the public consciousness in 2007 with the first of many displays created for the Leesburg (Va.) Flower and Garden Festival. The late April home and garden festival is unique in that it takes place outdoors on the streets of the historic town's center. Wildwood's designs have been honored at the festival every single year. It earned the Legacy Award for having won more awards than any other landscaping company – seven in total – in the festival's half-century of existence. Last year, in a new format for the show, Wildwood won for "Most Outstanding Creativity."

"When the Leesburg Flower and Garden Festival rolls around every spring, it's a marathon for us," says Dengler. "After months of planning the designs, we're up all night the day before putting up our displays. In our first year entering the themed landscape competitions, our Japanese tea garden came in second, losing by a single point. Since then, we've had a remarkable record of two firsts, two seconds and one third. We've never once been out of the

winner's circle."

In its third year in business, Wildwood also won the top landscape design award at the Washington Home and Garden Show competing against all the top landscape design firms throughout the D.C. area. It entered an out-of-the-box concept called the "Crooked Shed" featuring an asymmetrical fractured fairy-tale-type display. Other additions to its trophy case include the Distinction Award for Excellence in Landscape for the Design/Build Landscape Contractors Association and the Super Service Award for Angie's List.

Dengler's lifelong passion for landscaping began when he was just 8 years old. South Park arboretum and botanical garden, designed by Frederick Law Olmstead in Buffalo, N.Y., is just beyond his backyard fence. Every time he hopped over his fence, he discovered a new outdoors adventure.

After moving at the age of 15 with his family from his hometown of Buffalo to Washington, D.C., he became fascinated with graphic design. His first job at a local record store chain had him designing promotional displays for newly released record albums. After that, a couple years out of high school, he began working at a local vineyard where he learned about horticulture and tended bar. One of the bar regulars, who owned a landscape design and construction company, hired Dengler and financed his degree in landscape architecture.



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Wildwood Landscape earned an enviable reputation as a design/build company, and is now building up its landscape maintenance business.

Going on his own

After 11 years working at the firm, Dengler had a falling out with management, and was let go.

"At the time, I was starting a new family and was financially strapped," he explains. "My back was against the wall so I decided the best next move would be to start my own landscaping company."

He bought a \$2,500 navy blue Chevy truck, hired two friends on summer break from college and the small group worked out of his single-bay garage.

His first client, who was building a swimming pool in his backyard, hired Dengler to install an outdoor entertainment center and garden around it. Dengler started the design process, came up with an agreement and broke ground in less than a week.

"I had a blast that summer even though I didn't take a day off," he says.

As Dengler worked on that job, several former clients from his previous job hired him to do additional work, which carried his business through the first fall. In winter, he secured a masonry project. That gave him enough

confidence to hire a full-time foreman and accountant. His father Bill, who was retired from the Airline Pilot's Association, was also recruited to come and help. "We needed a jack-of-all-trades and he was the perfect candidate for the job," says Dengler.

Today, Wildwood has 26 employees and 14 vehicles, including Ford F550s for its crews, Tacoma support vehicles for its account and project managers and a Prius for its sales staff. During the Recession, Wildwood continued to grow, albeit more slowly. "The Recession helped manage our company's volume and growth," says Dengler. Over the past couple of years, Wildwood has stepped up the pace, growing on average 15 to 20 percent.



"Over the past two years, we've been aggressively pursuing maintenance," says Dengler. "We're working on building a commercial and residential maintenance book of businesses that's equal in size to our installation department. Our goal is to develop maintenance up to 50 percent of our revenue the next couple of years."

Traditionally a project-based company, Wildwood started adding maintenance to its scope of work in 2009, almost by default. Its install customers wanted the company to keep their gardens up as individual projects on an as-needed basis. It soon morphed into recurring services on a schedule that eventually had the company include mowing. It now puts together maintenance contracts with every project's final walk-through.

Wildwood's client mix is about 90 percent residential and 10 percent commercial. It's looking to grow its commercial business to approximately 40 percent by aggressively going after property management companies. One of its most successful marketing projects has been the hosting of "lunch and learns" serving home-cooked meals during its PowerPoint presentations.

"It's important to us to be known as an industry leader," says Dengler. "Marketing and branding is very interesting to me. Using professional design on our yard signs and trucks really makes a difference. Proper project management and cleanliness keeps our clients, and their neighbors who are good prospects, talking about their experiences with us in a positive way."

Wildwood recently moved into its new Virginia headquarters after acquiring the former 11-acre Overbrook Garden Center site, 50 miles northwest of Washington, D.C. The site was abandoned for three years.



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Once Jason Dengler exhibited model gardens and landscapes at local garden shows and landscape competitions and got a chance to show the public what his company, Wildwood Landscape, could do, he found lots of eager prospects seeking landscape projects.

Garden center plans

"If you grew up gardening in western Loudoun County, Overbrook Garden Center was an important part of your life," says Dengler. "For decades, it was a local gardening institution that began as a famous dairy farm."

Dengler is looking to re-open the garden center while planning the layout of his company's new headquarters. The garden center has been re-created as a regional interactive destination with unique water features, themed demonstration gardens and outdoor areas for picnicking and other events. The nursery stock will feature a variety of native, perennial and edible plants.



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"I want to use the garden center to educate the public," says Dengler. "I want to create an atmosphere where people can come to learn about local plant material and sustainable, native garden habitats as well as international gardening themes such as traditional English and Japanese styles."

For the first year, Dengler's goal is to get the nursery up and running and develop traffic to the site, then, according to the response, he will increase the choices and stock.

At the same time, a couple of interesting sidelights for Wildwood include the promotion of artificial turf and a partnership with a butterfly conservation program. "We are promoting Easy Turf, an artificial grass designed for many surface applications such as dog parks, day care facilities, rooftop gardens, swimming pool landscapes, indoor/outdoor putting greens and just about any other application where grass is desired," says Dengler. "We see this artificial turf as an environmentally-friendly landscape solution for many customers."

Wildwood is developing a relationship with the Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy spearheading a Monarch butterfly conservation program at its garden center including the creation of monarch waystations. These are gardens that have both milkweed and an assortment of nectar plants that the monarchs feed on during their caterpillar and adult stages.



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Wildwood Landscape's client mix is about 90 percent residential, but it's moving more aggressively into commercial each season.

Dengler believes that having a landscaping company today is really exciting. "The landscaping industry is growing by leaps and bounds," he says. "People's thoughts and expectations about landscaping are getting broader all the time. Shows such as HGTV are raising the level of expectations. Stores like Wal-Mart used to have a couple of aisles dedicated to gardening; now, they have entire sections devoted to gardening."

Fast Facts about Wildwood Landscape

Owner: Jason Dengler

Founded: 2005

Headquarters: Round Hill, Va.

Markets: Loudoun County and Washington, D.C., metro area

Services: Design/install, maintenance, hardscapes, outdoor kitchens, water features/pools and artificial turf installation, nursery/garden center

Employees: 25