

Water work

Fountain features spark new business

By **Jim T. Ryan**

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John Lauver of Glen Rock smooths wet cement footing around basalt columns. Lauver, a foreman for Wertz Landscapes and Hardscapes, collaborates with Robert Wertz, owner of the Fairview Township, York County-based landscape business, to design and create custom water features made from igneous rock quarried in Washington state. Photo/Amy Spangler

Robert Wertz was sitting in his parked truck on Second Street in Harrisburg one evening when a police car pulled up alongside him.

He thought he was in trouble.

Turns out, the officer just wanted to stop and take a closer look at the lava rock water fountain in the back of the pickup.

Wertz owns Wertz Landscapes and Hardscapes in York County, where he started a business in March turning million-year-old rock columns into high-end water fountains for homes and offices.

In late April, he opened the Igneous Rock Gallery, a showroom for the fountains, at 4702 Carlisle Pike in Hampden Township, Cumberland County. That will also be his sales office. Construction of the fountains will take place offsite.

Such water features have become popular in the last couple of years, Wertz and others said. While many people have cut expenses because prices for gas and food are up, others have spent more on their domestic environments to increase home values.

Landscaping trade magazines push water features, Wertz said.

“So I was interested in doing small water features,” he said, “and I saw basalt (lava rock) at a nursery and said, ‘My customers would like that.’”

That was two years ago. This year, Wertz built a water fountain in his garage out of the rock columns, with splotches of brown, red and gray tones, for a garden show. The interest he saw there convinced him to add the creations to his landscape business. He sold the maintenance sector of that business to fund the new venture.

“We’re having fun with this,” Wertz said.

The new venture is not a bad idea, considering the landscaping fields’ promising future.

The national median wage for landscape architects was more than \$55,000 a year in 2006, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. The number of jobs in the industry is projected to increase by 16 percent between 2006 and 2016.

Sales have increased for water features, while the size of projects have scaled back due to the economy, said Adrian Kapp, owner of C.E. Pontz & Sons Inc., a Lancaster County-based landscaping firm.

Many people are forgoing vacations this year and spending more money to add landscaping features to their homes, he said. People want to increase the value of their home for future sale, or they want a new way to enjoy the backyard, he said.

Water features can add about 7 percent to the value of a home. That’s the national average, Kapp said.

C.E. Pontz & Sons completes about 30 projects between May and October every year, he said. Basalt columns are more popular this summer than in previous summers. His firm worked on about a half-dozen water features this year, including waterfalls, basalt columns and bubbling rocks.

Landscaping sales are also affected by economies of scale. In that way, economic woes may not play as large of a role.

“The clientele we’re catering to probably haven’t been hit as hard as other people,” Wertz said.

He charges about \$1,500 and up for the custom-made basalt fountains. Larger projects with multiple columns, lights, polished tops and other features can cost more than \$5,000, depending on the size and work involved, he said.

Wertz has sold a couple of fountains so far. Carrabba’s Italian Grill on the Carlisle Pike bought one for its entrance, he said.

Monique Ullom also bought one. Ullom, president of Cumberland Valley Motors Inc., placed the fountain at her front door because it's a perfect welcome to guests, she said. Sometimes she sits out there in the evenings just to listen to it.

"It's relaxing and peaceful," she said. "It would be a very good idea for a business."

Although many projects are meant to please the eyes and ears with simulated stream beds, water lilies and trickling sounds, water features can be used for conservation efforts, too.

Rain exchanges are a growing trend, Kapp said. An exchange funnels rain from a home's gutters into a water feature, where plants, gravel and soil are used as natural filters to remove pollution.

On the surface, it looks like a waterfall, he said. But underneath, a water source can run the sprinklers or be used to wash the car. Such systems can supply 30,000 gallons a year for non-consumption uses without tapping the home's water supply, Kapp said.

"We're on an uphill climb of what's there," he said, "especially on the East Coast, where a lot of this is new. They've been doing this stuff in Las Vegas for years."

Back at Wertz's gallery, John Lauver shows off some creations he helped build. Lauver has worked with Wertz for more than three years. Lauver started mowing lawns but moved to helping Wertz design and install hardscapes, such as the fountains. Today, Lauver's a chief designer of the basalt fountains.

The new venture is about giving people an environment that's original and unusual, he said. That makes a home or office warmer and more inviting.

"I just couldn't see us selling frogs with water coming out of their mouths," Lauver said. "I know when I put something at my house I want it to mean something personal."