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# Landscaper's 'green' practices now enjoy attentive audience



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By **LESLIE BERKMAN**  
The Press-Enterprise

**Video:** [BMLA Landscaping Architecture goes green](#)

Baxter Miller, the 53-year-old president and owner of Corona-based BMLA Landscape Architecture, has college textbooks on landscape architecture older than some of his employees that describe the "green" gardening techniques now in vogue.

Choosing shrubs that can thrive with minimal water, fertilizer and pesticides and strategically planting trees to shade buildings are approaches long advocated by landscape architects, he said.

But a big change, he said, is that landscape architects today enjoy the strong support of government, particularly water districts that set strict usage limits on proposed projects.

**Q:** How have you positioned your firm to survive the current housing downturn?

**A:** We went through the last housing recession and that was a rude awakening because at the time we were doing almost entirely work for homebuilders. After we came out of that cycle in 1992-1993, we committed ourselves to balance the business, so half of our clients would be private builders and half public agencies.

**Q:** What keeps you busy now?

Story continues below



Terry Pierson / The Press-Enterprise  
BMLA President and owner Baxter Miller has long backed green landscaping techniques.

**A:** It is the peak of the government cycle. Government agencies are spending the money from all the fees they raised during the building boom to build parks and do streetscapes. Also when the economy is weak they do downtown beautification to attract business.

**Q:** Is embracing green technology a way to compete in this market?

**A:** The funny part is that landscape architects have always been in green technology. We now talk a lot about sustainability, which actually started as a concept in the 1970s with the earth movement. Sustainability is to adopt a pallet of plant materials so that no matter what goes on environmentally it can survive. When people ask me what is the most sustainable landscape I can do, I say drive around and look at abandoned houses and the shrubs and trees that survive with no water.

**Q:** So if landscape architects have always advocated green techniques, what has changed?

**A:** The nice part about it is that we no longer have to cajole our clients in that direction. ... Everybody is calling for sustainability and water conservation. Builders and public development agencies turn to us because they need to find a methodology so they can abide by water department guidelines.

**Q:** Does reclaimed water have an impact on landscaping?

**A:** We are trying to make sure they understand that native plant material and reclaimed water don't work together particularly well. Most native plants, except those that grow right on the coast, don't like salt water.

**Q:** And reclaimed water is heavy with salts?

**A:** Yes, because everybody has a lot of salt in the water softeners they use.

**Q:** What can landscape architects contribute to improving the environment?

**A:** Our biggest contribution is to reduce the use of pesticide, fertilizer and water and reduce the amount of maintenance needed. For many years, we thought that with irrigation, 60 percent efficiency was OK, meaning that 40 percent of the water was lost and not used by the plants. Now with drip irrigation we get 90 percent efficiency by putting water right at the roots.

**Q:** How much more does drip irrigation cost than the old-fashioned spray irrigation?

**A:** I would say 10 percent to 20 percent in added installation costs.

**Q:** How long does it take to get a payback in water savings?

**A:** With the high cost of water in California, on the order of two to three years.

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## **Baxter Miller**

**Title:** President

**Company:** BMLA Landscape Architecture

**City:** Corona

**Date Founded:** 1987

**Number of Employees:** 20

**Annual Revenues:** \$1.5 million for the most recent fiscal year ending in June

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