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more than the individual
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Results Beyond Expectations

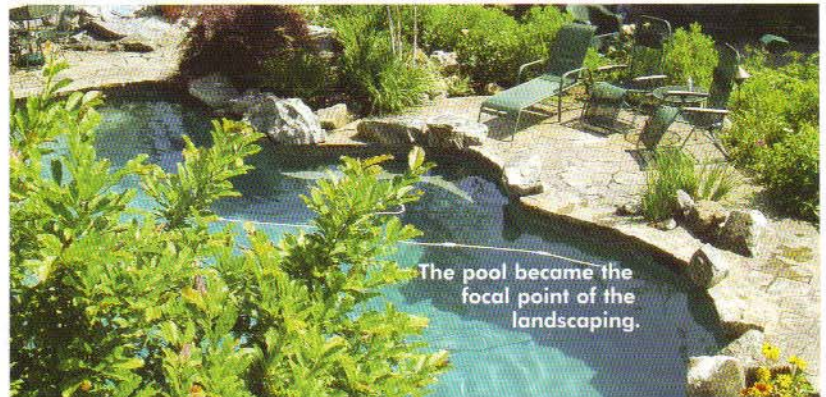
BY ELIZABETH LEXAU

What does it take to keep a successful landscape

design and construction business going and growing for more than twenty years? What does it take to manage a staff, eager to follow your lead, to have clients who are willing to wait for your services for well over a year, and above all to love what you do? If you talk to David Katz, president of Elite Landscaping, Inc., based in Wappingers Falls, New York, it quickly becomes apparent that of the many qualities that have brought him where he is today, one stands out. That quality is enthusiasm.

For Katz, this enthusiasm stems from the joy that comes from doing what he loves. It also comes from the confidence that his designs will thoroughly enhance the lives of his clients. Perhaps most importantly, his enthusiasm is unwavering in the face of

sixteen years later, many aspects of Katz's company have changed. The company has become more streamlined, thanks to better computer technology and more efficient staffing. They've virtually eliminated their marketing budget, as a result of great



the inevitable challenges, obstacles, and last minute changes that are part of the daily routine for a full service design/build firm.

Beyond expectation

In 1990, we took a look at Elite Landscaping. At that time, Katz already ran a company with a devoted clientele and a successful business model. Now,

word-of-mouth advertising from happy clients. But one thing has not changed. That is Katz's enthusiasm, his willingness to take risks, and his dedication to the company's tagline: Delivering results that are "beyond expectation."

"Beyond expectation" sets the tone for every level of the landscapes that Katz and his company have been



Before and after photos tell the story. Stamped concrete adds more charm to the driveway than plain concrete.

building since 1985. From the smallest plant to the most unique waterfall, Katz is always on the lookout for ways he can give clients much more than what they ask for.

For Katz, a great project is about more than the individual pieces which go into it. "Nice elements, good components, and quality workmanship are great," says Katz, "but all of these are nothing without great design." What amazes Katz's clients is the way he can put these pieces together with a design that is well beyond anything they could possibly have expected or even imagined on their own. The result is a landscape that's guaranteed to *wow!*

Setting the stage

From their first meeting with Katz, his clients quickly become aware of how his vision for their landscape will exceed their expectations. "I have a somewhat unorthodox approach in the initial consultation and design process," says Katz, referring to his practice of presenting his designs using only quick sketches and vivid verbal descriptions.

"I find that clients usually have a



very limited thought process about what they want," Katz explains. "They might know they want a pool and a patio and a waterfall, but they don't necessarily know what that could mean. They think it will enhance their life but they don't know how much it can enhance their life until I give them a sense of the possibilities."

Katz is so confident in the plan he has for their landscape, and so eager to share it with them, that his passion for the project quickly becomes contagious. "When they meet with me, and hear my enthusiasm, and we map out ideas, they

really get excited," he says. "By the time my hour-and-a-half consultation is up, we've agreed on what we're going to do. I don't usually go back with fancy drawings. At that point, that's all it would be—a fancy drawing of what's in my head. Why spend the money on a drawing if we've already decided what we're going to do and I'm the one who's going to implement it?"

A recent project for a LaGrangeville, New York couple and their four children illustrates the success Katz has with his approach. "We came to their house

about four years ago to discuss a pool project, but a simple pool installation evolved into much more."

"Everyone else wanted them to put the pool right next to the house," says Katz. "But when I walked the property and found a knoll with a great view of the mountains, I said, 'This is where you want to put the pool.'"

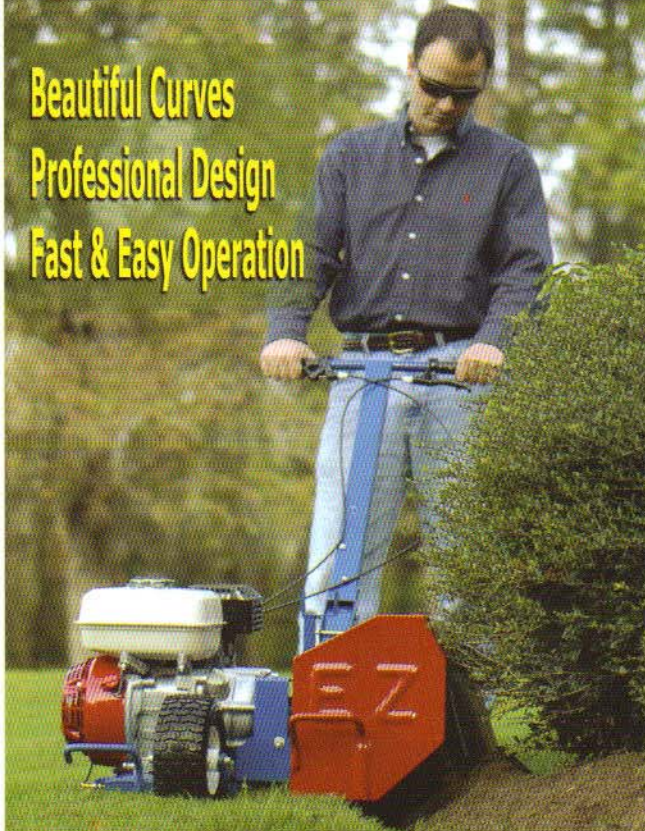
Locating a pool 300 feet from the house does not come without complications in terms of plumbing, outbuildings and patios. The couple decided to think about the

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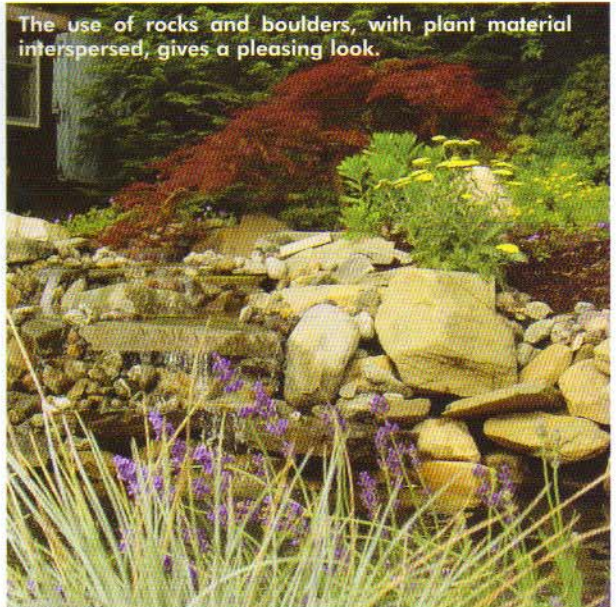
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pool project for awhile, but were excited about other ideas Katz had for the rest of their property, and went full speed ahead with a complete landscape around their home. When the landscape was completed, they were so happy with the results that they decided to go for a pool that, in size, scope, and drama, was well beyond what they originally had in mind.

The 1,400 square foot pool features patios, lighting, waterfalls, intimate pathways, and even a shallow beach entrance/patio area that's perfect for small children or lounging grown-ups. A water slide emerges from one of the pool's naturalistic, rock waterfalls, which is accented with lush plantings that grow between the stones and boulders.

Katz comments on the complexity that unique features like this add to a project. "Projects like this can be almost overwhelming," he says. "There are so many details to consider." The water slide area alone, with its plantings among the rocks, had to be designed with critical extra elements that prevent soil from getting into the pool. "There's a lot of engineering in just that one component."

But details like this are what keep Katz passionate about his work and keep his clients coming back for more. "Even though the pool project alone was possibly twice what these clients originally envisioned, their enthusiasm grew as the project grew," says Katz. "The day we plastered it we had their kids put their hand prints in and sign it. When we put the water in, their eight-year-old got in right away, played for awhile, then climbed out and said to me, "David, you are just amazing!"



The use of rocks and boulders, with plant material interspersed, gives a pleasing look.

Building relationships

"These are incredible people," Katz says of the family

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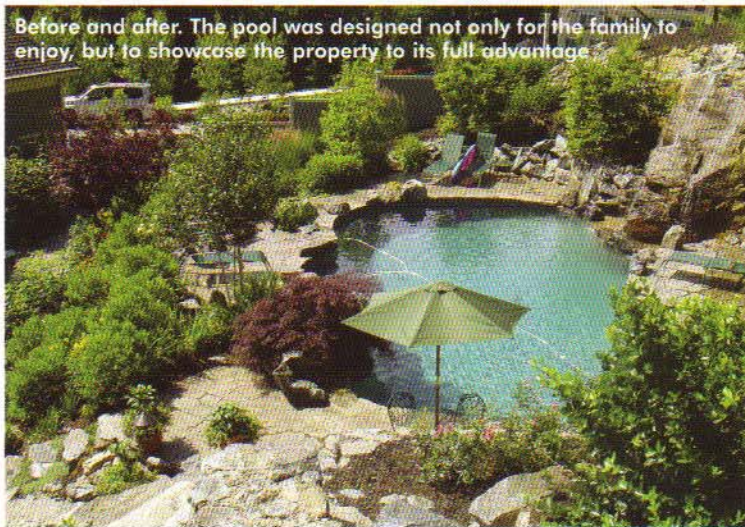
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he led through this project. "We've become very good friends. One night at about 8:00, I got a call on my cell phone from one of the kids. He said, 'David, I just want to tell you that you did an incredible job on our house.' Then he passed the phone to another one of the kids, who thanked me and then passed it along until each of the kids had a chance to express their appreciation."

The thrill of seeing and hearing how his creations



Before and after. The pool was designed not only for the family to enjoy, but to showcase the property to its full advantage.



have added to the lives of his clients is one of the most rewarding parts of Katz's vocation. His genuine interest in making their environment truly special is one of the things that brings Katz his loyal clients. "That's just what we do," he says. "Even when we're working on a project that's less than a third of the size of this one, we still get just as excited about it and put just as much care into it."

The client loyalty goes both ways. "We service a very large geographic area," says Katz, whose work spans three states and even includes the rooftops of Manhattan. "This can make things very complicated logistical-

ly. Some companies tend to reign in their geography after they've met with a certain level of success. But the way I see it, if these areas were good enough for me to work with when I was just starting out, they're good enough for me to work with now."

Besides, he says, cultivating a great list of satisfied return clients



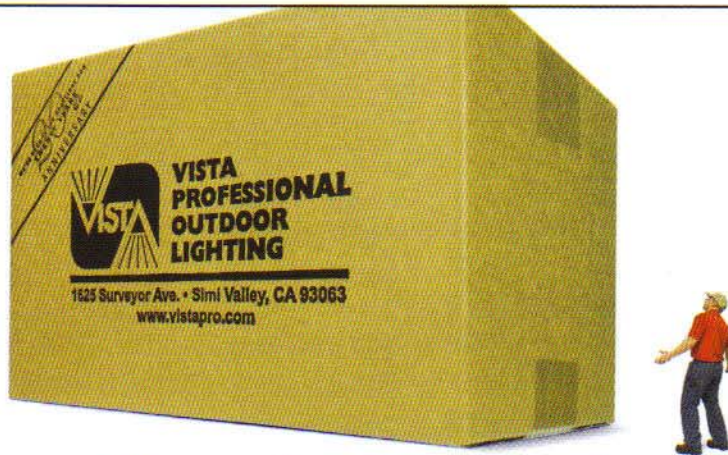
is more important in the long run than keeping your business close to home. "A \$5,000 job now may turn into a \$250,000 job a number of years from now."

A philosophy for success

Katz's philosophy has obviously helped Elite Landscaping thrive over the years. They now generate a volume of approximately 1.5 million dollars annually and are cur-

rently scheduling into 2007. Yet they work with a relatively small staff of approximately four permanent and eight seasonal employees. The company tackles nearly every aspect of each project in-house, from the carpentry, masonry, lighting, irrigation, and water features, to the planting and horticultural maintenance.

"Most companies that do a volume like ours do it with a lot more people and a lot more trucks," says Katz. Last year, volume was up thirty-one percent, despite the fact that they did not become fully staffed until late in the season, and the fact that the weather was miserable. So what does Katz attribute this growth and efficiency to?



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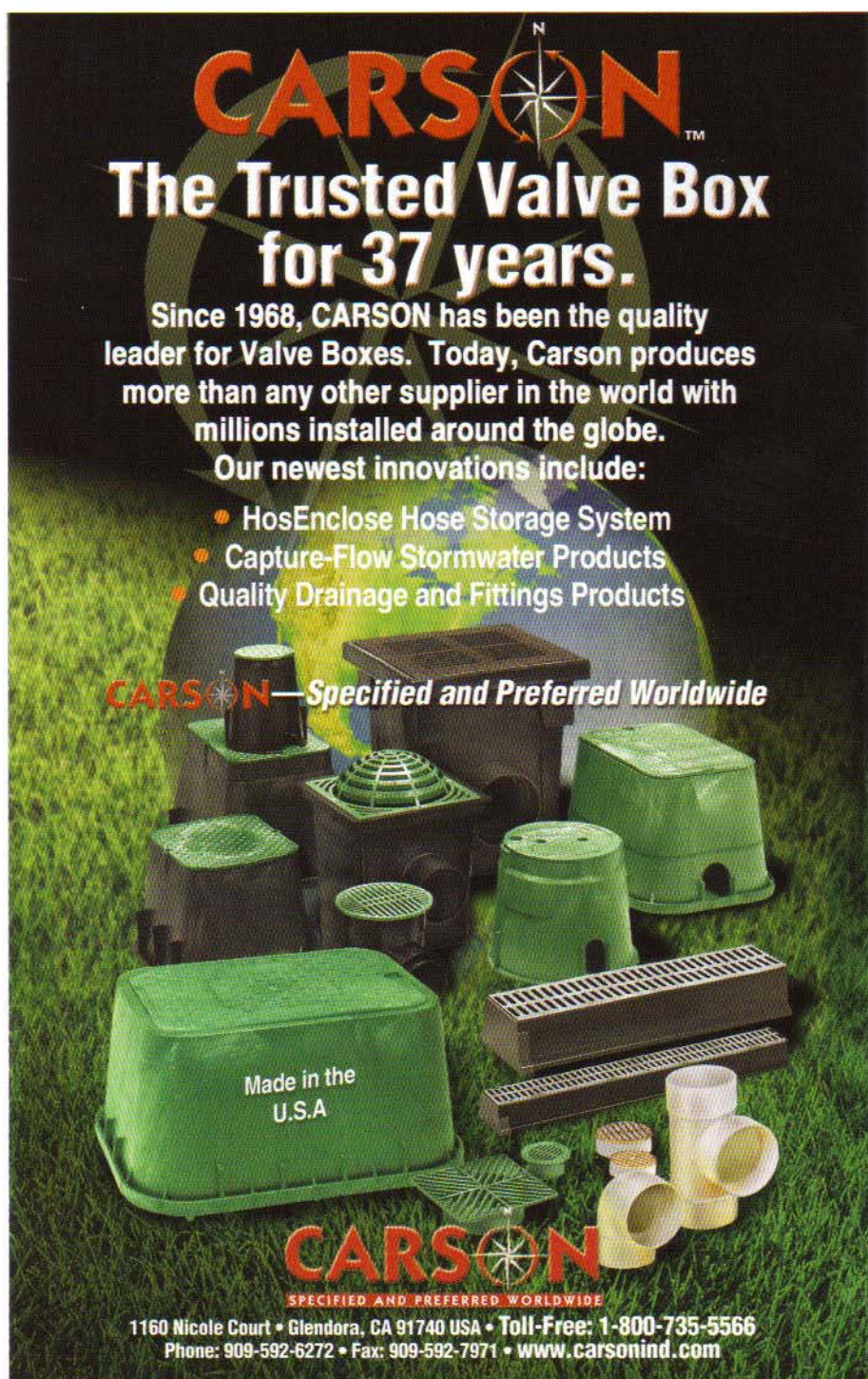
Without hesitation, he says it's due to "an incredible staff."

"When you hire people, you need to invest the time in working with them," he says. "Train them on every task and then work alongside them. When they can do it on their own, you still need to take the time to evaluate them several times. If you don't take the time to do that

and they do a job incorrectly, it's your mistake, not theirs."

"Of course, that's easy for me to say that now, but it wasn't always easy to do," Katz acknowledges. Now a seasoned veteran, Katz is entitled to give advice to new contractors. Ironically, one of the most important pieces of advice he offers is: don't listen to too much advice.

He cautions against taking anyone's advice—even his own—without evaluating whether it can



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be realistically applied to your own company, given your current resources.

"There are a lot of myths about marketing, for example," says Katz. "Your marketing approach when you're starting out might be very different from what it becomes once you're established. Look at your marketing budget creatively. One method is to do a project at a reduced rate. When the project is complete, you've gained the goodwill of a customer who will spread the word. You've marketed your services successfully with no out-of-pocket expense."

"Don't kid yourself," he says. "You don't have to price yourself

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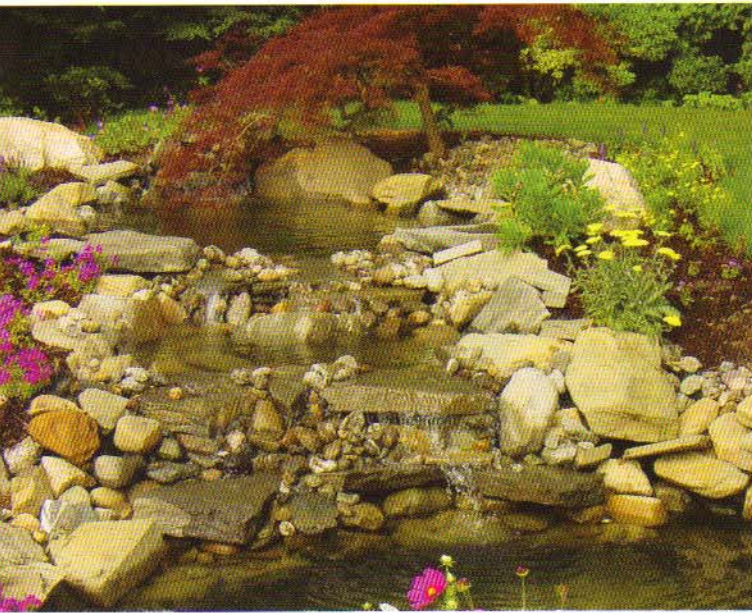
the same as the big companies, even if people say you should. Learn from others, but don't take

This is especially important because landscape design and construction can be a risky and incredibly complicated business. "We do so many different kinds of projects in so many different locations that there's a lot of room for problems," says Katz. The ability to handle change and deliver results no matter what happens can make or break

es," says Katz. "You can spend all the time in the world planning, but there are inevitably changes and unexpected problems that occur once you get to the jobsite. You have to be able to go with it and make it happen no matter what."

According to Katz, in order to stand out from the competition, you need to set a high level of expectation for yourself. "Someone once told me, if you want to grow, you have to accept some level of mediocrity," says Katz. "Well, that doesn't fly with me. You can't call yourself 'Elite' and let that fly."

Under Katz's leadership, Elite Landscaping has truly earned the right to its name. His enthusiasm for turning ordinary projects into extraordinary outdoor masterpieces will continue to delight clients with surprises that go well beyond their expectations. 🌱



it as gospel. Don't believe everything you read. And don't be afraid to take risks."

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