

LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT

Sprucing up the front of the house can help it sell in a competitive buyer's market.

By MARTY ROSS
Special to The Star

For sale" signs are popping up faster than dandelions these days. If you are an eager seller hoping to attract a buyer, you have about eight seconds to make a first impression. That's how long the average home buyer stops the car at the curb outside a house.

Real estate agents take curb appeal seriously. A few pots of colorful flowers, fresh mulch and good-looking porch furniture can persuade a potential buyer to step out of the car and into a house.

"I don't care what the price of the

house is, you have to get the buyers in the door," says Suellen Dice, a real estate agent with Prudential who last year was one of the company's top 25 sellers in Kansas City. Curb appeal gets that buyer up the front walk, onto the porch and over the threshold, Dice says. "You want them to drive by and say, 'Oh, I could live here. That looks like me. Oh, look at that, honey, look at that fabulous garden.'"

A pretty garden also shows house hunters (and neighbors) that you care about your home and community — and communities sell houses, says Pamela Geurds Kabati, vice president for publications and

Web publishing for the National Association of Realtors. "A pretty garden sends a message to the buyers that the house is in good condition, too."

When Dice works with sellers, she starts at the curb, or even across the street, looking at the house with the eyes of a potential buyer. Colorful flower pots on the porch and neat beds planted with blooming annuals in the front yard set your home apart from the competition, she says.

"I want it to have that pop," Dice says. Last year, she worked with a couple of landscapers to help sellers

get their properties ready for the big day when the "for sale" sign is planted in the lawn. Laura O'Meara and Mary Meador, who worked for years at Soil Service Garden Center in Kansas City, teamed up to help sellers plant pots and spruce up the fronts of their homes. This year they're on their own, working as the Soil Sisters.

Of course, all sellers would like to see their homes go under contract as quickly as possible, but you can't predict how long a house will be on the market. When O'Meara works on landscaping at a home for sale, she likes to shop for flowers that



will bloom for months, and she packs pots with lots of handsome foliage plants so the arrangements look full and lush from the street and up close.

Pots on the front porch or on the front steps should be in scale with the house, she says; tiny pots will not show up from the curb. Terra-cotta pots are classic, but O'Meara has also helped customers choose distinctive pots to complement a house's style and palette. When you're planting, don't skimp, she says: Fill the pots with hard-working plants that will not need much care.

"I like the pots to be really full," she says. "Every pot should have color and height and interest — and when you're finished, it should end up looking as pretty as a vase of flowers on a table."

Curb appeal doesn't have to be expensive. The selection at garden shops is at its absolute best right now, and you can put together some pretty container combinations just by walking around and picking up plants that appeal to you, mixing and matching in your shopping cart. Plant labels sometimes suggest smart color combinations, and the staff at garden shops can also help you make choices.

It's impossible to say exactly what the budget should be for a few pots or flats of bright annuals, O'Meara says, but for \$100 or \$200, you can put some real sparkle in your landscape.

Planting and mulching pay off, Geurds Kabati says. "You'll get a return — whether it's in terms of the price for the house, or in time."

There is plenty of competition out there. The inventory of homes for sale in Kansas City in February (the latest monthly housing statistics available) was 15,559. The figure represents new listings and existing inventory and translates to a 7.3-

month supply of homes, "a slight buyer's edge," according to the report.

"All my Realtors know the importance of curb appeal," says Renee Ryan-Edwards, president of the Kansas City Regional Association of Realtors and a managing broker for Reece & Nichols. "Trim back the bushes, put down some new doormats; walk around the house and look at what a buyer or appraiser might look at. Your first few minutes in front of the house make a huge difference."

Heather Wells, an agent who is part of the Marcia Wallace team, a Reece & Nichols group in Lee's Summit, says interest from potential buyers is picking up as fast as the grass is growing. "As soon as the sun came out, our business quadrupled," she says. Most potential buyers have seen a listing online before they visit in person. Potential buyers "are weeding out their selections online, but when they pull up to a home, they have to want to get out," she says. "You have to capture them."

Some of the best customers are what Wells calls "sign calls" — buyers who just happen to be driving around a neighborhood and see a home with a sign out front. "Those are our favorites," she says. "They like the neighborhood, they like the house, and they want to go inside." Curb appeal is what stops them, she says, and it's one of the easiest things sellers can do to increase interest in their homes.

Whether your house is on the market or not, pretty flowers, a trim lawn and well-cared-for trees and shrubs maintain the value of your home.

"It's all about selling your house, but it's also the pride you have in your home," says Dice, who lives in Brookside and is a long-time gardener. She says clients have called her after

walking the dog by a pretty garden. One day a sign appears and the buyers are already sure, because of the garden, that the house will be just as attractive on the inside.

"It all equals pride in your real estate, your home, your asset," Dice says. "I do it because it is so satisfying for me to stand at my sidewalk and look toward my house and see a garden filled with tulips, jonquils, hyacinths, and pots filled with lettuce, heave a big sigh, and say, 'I love living here.'"

LOOKING GOOD

Getting your home ready to go on the market can be overwhelming, but a good Realtor can help you determine where to invest your time and energy. He or she can also introduce you to experts who can help.

"Realtors visit hundreds of homes, and they have a very unique understanding of local resources," says Pamela Geurds Kabati, who developed the website houseologic.com to help homeowners maintain and enhance the value of their investment. "There is nothing that will hurt a home's value like deferred maintenance."

Here are some curb appeal suggestions from Geurds Kabati and local real estate professionals.

I Go green: The lawn should look attractive. "It doesn't have to be perfect," but it should be neat, says Suellen Dice, a real estate agent with Prudential.

I Keep a crisp, tailored look: Maintain a sharply trimmed edge on flower beds and the lawn where it meets the sidewalk.

I Mulch it: Put the finishing touch on flowerbeds, keep plant roots moist and control weeds with mulch. "I'm a big believer in mulch. It's like magic," Dice says. "But it has to be the right mulch. No red mulch — only natural mulch."

I Take a little off the sides: Trim your shrubbery. Natural forms are fine, but people should be able to see the windows.

I Pot some plants: Buy three, five, or seven pots in a stylish color that goes with your home's trim.

I Arrange for a special delivery: Buy a new mailbox and snappy house numbers.

I Sit a spell: "If you have a nice porch, put some nice furniture on it, create a vignette," Geurds Kabati says. Potential buyers should

be able to imagine themselves enjoying life on the porch.

I Hit the mat: A fresh new doormat will welcome potential buyers (and remind them to wipe their feet).

I Add color: Paint your front door. "I have 30 seconds to open the front door, and the potential buyer is standing there looking at everything," says Heather Wells, an agent with the Marcia Wallace team at Reece & Nichols in Lee's Summit. "The front should look phenomenal." Wells likes black: crisp, tailored and classic.

I Marty Ross, Special to The Star

PLANT FOR SUCCESS

Great landscaping sets a home apart from the dizzying number of possibilities on the market today. Even if you're not ready to sell, it's never too soon to think about planting a pretty shade tree, choosing handsome shrubs or adding flower beds. You'll have the pleasure of your plants while you live in your home, and the landscaping will give your home a well-cared-for look when the time comes to sell.

Here are some ideas from the Soil Sisters, Laura O'Meara (816-935-0812) and Mary Meador (816-456-4611), who have worked with Realtors and with sellers to spruce up homes on the market.

I Choose large flower pots and fill them full. They'll look gracious and inviting.

I Look for flowers and foliage plants that do not need special care. ProvenWinners.com, www.provenwinners.com, has lots of ideas for pots of all sizes and styles.

I Use common houseplants as foliage accents. Airplane plant, crotons and Boston fern fill in nicely in pots with annual flowers.

I Yellow flowers have lots of curb appeal, O'Meara says. Yellow shows up from the street, and it looks cheerful in combination with almost any other color.

I Red geraniums bloom all summer long. O'Meara likes the deep red Calliope geranium; last year she planted it with sparkly Diamond Frost euphorbia and Black Pearl ornamental peppers.

I Dragon Wings begonias bloom and look fresh all summer.

I For fall, O'Meara likes to fill pots with ornamental kale, pansies and pumpkins.

I If you're planning to sell your home next spring, plant tulip and daffodil bulbs in the fall.

I Marty Ross, Special to The Star



PHOTOS BY TERRY LAUGHLIN | THE KANSAS CITY STAR
Keep pots on the front steps in scale with the house, and add interest with varying heights and textures. Trailing ivy, a wicker chair and colorful pillows beckon passers-by.



Soil Sisters Laura O'Meara (left) and Mary Meador arrange plants in attractive pots to add curb appeal to a house that is for sale.



A pot of colorful flowers, including yellow Marguerite daisies, draw attention to the entryway of this Kansas City home.



PROVEN WINNERS

Let your home's trim colors suggest a palette for pots at the front door. Inside these creamy glazed pots: angelface blue angelonia, intenia orchid blast phlox and whirlwind blue scaevola. Pink calibrachoa superbells fill the smaller pot.



Above: Cheery yellow flowers, such as these ranunculus, show up from the street.

Below: Snipping the finishing clusters of candytuft or snowflake flowers encourages more blooming.



“Sometimes people say to me ‘We want to sell it as is.’ Everybody wants to sell ‘as is.’ The question is, do you want to sell the house, or do you want to own it?”

| SUELLEN DICE, A REALTOR WITH PRUDENTIAL



Bright, cheerful flowers catch the eye of potential buyers when your house is on the market — and make the whole block look sharp. Mulch the flowerbeds, set pots of flowers on the porch, and buyers will get the idea that they just might want to make your house their home.

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