

# Where do you draw the line?

## – CAD software for the Landscape Industry

By Trevor Fletcher

### BACKGROUND

In the mid 1990s many CAD programs were available but few of them fitted the bill for landscape professionals, apprentices and other prospective landscape designers. For one reason or another they've not had wide acceptance by our industry. Design offices of architects, developers, and construction companies have been using programs primarily developed for their industries. While many of

Significant benefits can be derived from running your business on a program that has specific features for landscape design. However, the decision to buy a program for Computer Aided Design that meets your needs is often difficult. Your decision will involve questions relating to cost, time investments, the program's performance and the availability of support. Therefore it's important to take the time to consider your options.

these programs can be used to produce accurate landscape plans, they are often larger, more expensive and slower to learn than some programs developed specifically for landscape design. Which program would then be suitable?

In 1994 PRO Landscape was released by Autodesk, the makers of AutoCAD. Eight years ago at Holmesglen TAFE, we began training Diploma students using PRO Landscape. It was chosen for its

powerful, easy-to-use features that were developed specifically for landscape design and business productivity. Two years later we launched Computer Aided Design training for industry professionals.

### What other programs are popular today?

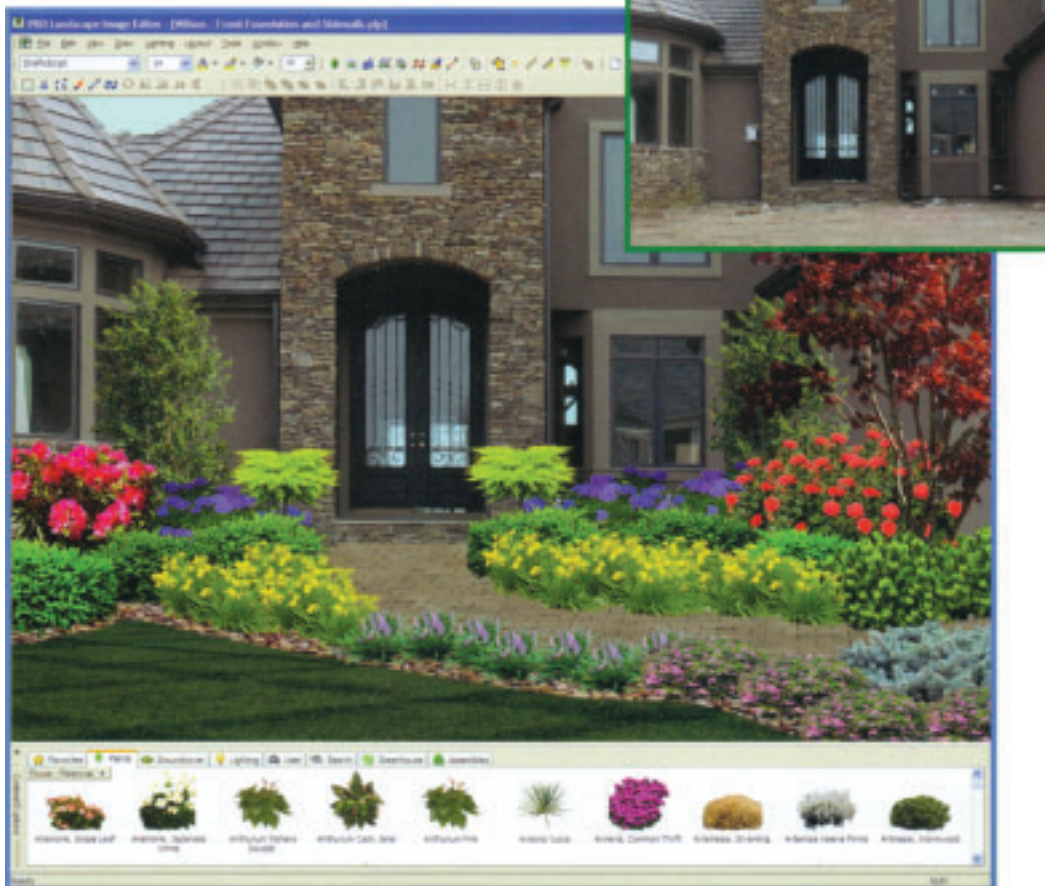
### CURRENT TRENDS

Two programs, Vectorworks and RealCAD were developed mainly for the architectural, engineering and manufacturing industries. Recently they have released landscape design versions of their software. Vectorworks - Landmark and RealCAD - LandworksCAD are now distributed by Australian retailers under licence agreements from parent companies in the USA.

### So how do PRO Landscape, Landmark and Landworks compare?

All three packages have some common features, such as the ability to produce accurate landscape plans, plant schedules, legends, notes, title blocks, labels and other objects. You can also import photos, scanned site plans and files from architects or designers into any of the above packages. Therefore, to find out what will suit your needs you need to look at other features, such as the range of tools it has for landscape design and how they perform.

### PRO Landscape Image Editor Project





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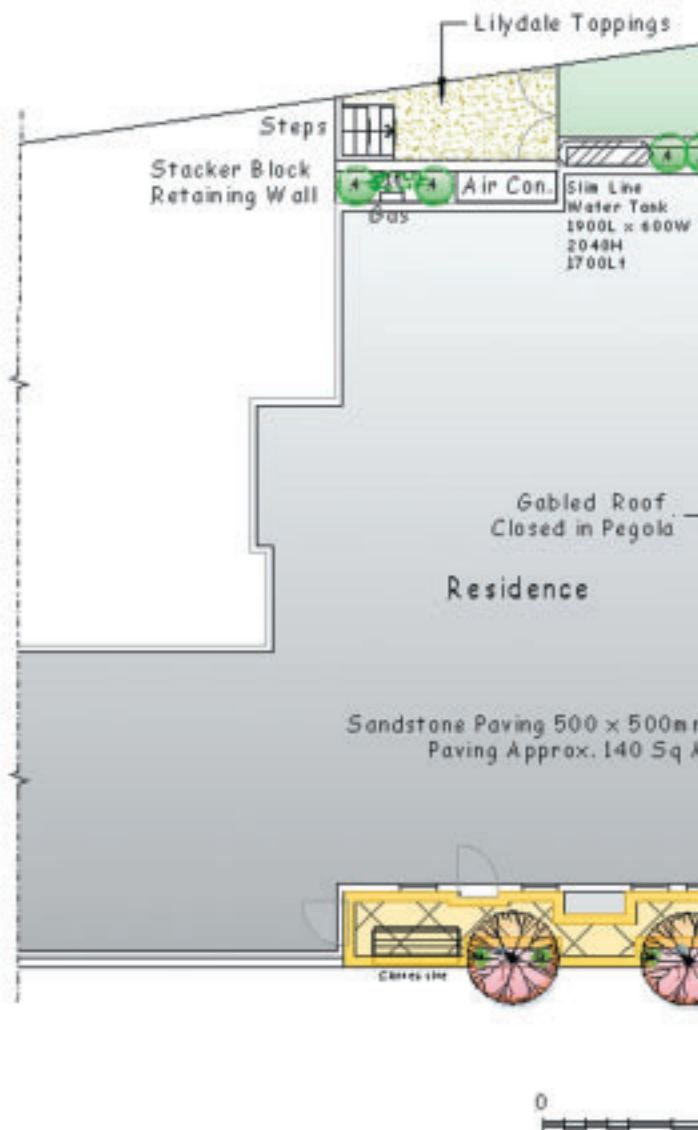
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Plan rendered using one of six render styles in PRO Landscape



## THE PACKAGE AND THE COST

### PRO Landscape

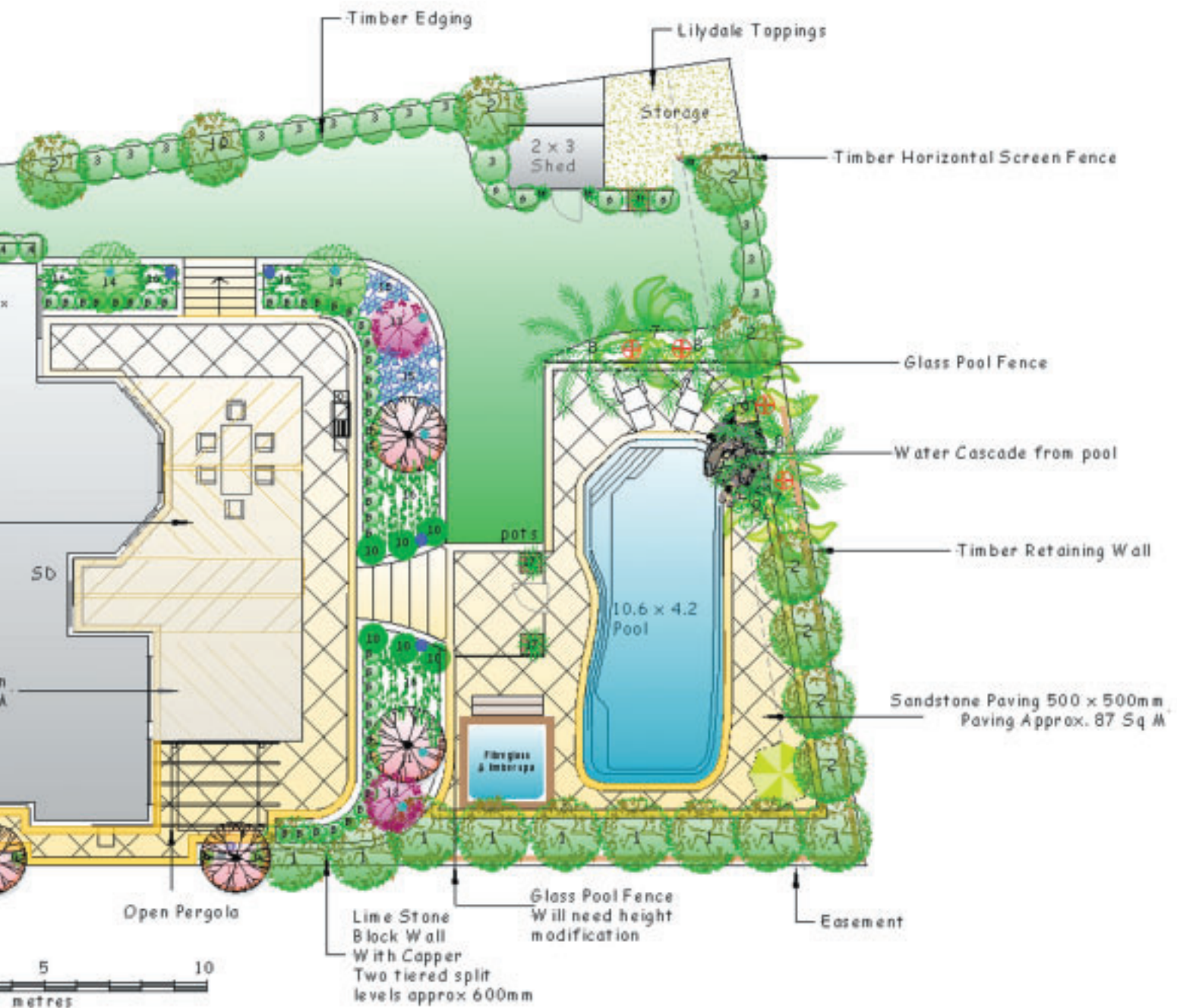
PRO Landscape comes as a single package with three main applications consisting of:

- Image Editor for creating photorealistic presentations of design projects
- Planner for CAD drawings of plans, sections, elevations and construction details
- Proposal for generating reports, quotes, invoices, supply lists, plant information, managing inventory and tracking customers.

PRO Landscape has a database of over 5000 plants and landscape

objects. Its database and symbol libraries are larger and include more features than other CAD programs. You can also create symbols like those you draw by hand and add your own pricing and other information. There are six rendering modes and other effects that offer the widest range of tools for exploring your creative talents.

It also has largest range of tools dedicated to drawing landscape items. This includes automatic calculations of all lengths, areas, volumes of materials and quantities. You can quickly save and recall various parts of a plan or project for pricing and quoting. For example, the paving, irrigation,



lighting, plants, front or rear yards can all be quoted separately from a single drawing, and it has a feature for rapidly creating 3D views.

Importing and exporting files from architects and other professionals can be problematic. However, PRO Landscape is powered by RealDWG from Autodesk. This enables it to import the latest AutoCAD files from architects and other professionals. PRO Landscape has greater compatibility than other programs.

PRO Landscape comes with 49 video tutorials included in the program. There's also a Quick Start Guide and a relatively small easy-to-read manual.

PRO Landscape has free local, international, email and phone support. There's also a free discussion forum to ask for help, and to exchange ideas, tips and techniques. Further support and training is available for a fee.

PRO Landscape is remarkably powerful yet easy to pick up. Often people use PRO Landscape for its high quality plans alone and ignore other features it has to offer. If most of your clients just need a landscape plan, PRO Landscape represents the best value for money.

However, it has much more to offer. **Cost:** \$1980 including GST for PRO Landscape version 14 plus a 60-day money-back guarantee.

### Vectorworks - Landmark

Vectorworks is a two and three dimensional design system for architects, landscape architects, lighting designers and mechanical engineers. Landmark is one version of Vectorworks that has been modified to suit landscape architects and designers. The 639 page manual is testimony to its complexity. Its controls are highly sophisticated 'easy to use for an experienced operator. Settings and preferences involve a level of complexity similar to larger CAD programs, such as AutoCAD and LandCADD. It offers 3D terrain modelling and cut and fill calculations for people interested in ground modelling, surveying

or engineering aspects of a site.

Various views of the site may be saved and recalled for presentation. Two dimensional elevation symbols of plants may be added to 3D models to present a semi-three dimensional view of the landscape. Shadows and rendering can also be applied using an additional program called Renderworks which is sold separately to Landmark. Instructions for Renderworks can be found in a second, larger manual, Vectorworks Fundamentals User's Guide.

Good looking landscape plans can be created in Landmark but it has fewer tools for landscape items than PRO Landscape. Navigation



## PRO Landscape Proposal Presentation

and control of its tools are also more difficult.

Landmark has an expandable database of approximately 1500 plants consisting of Australian and exotic plants.

New licences of Vectorworks come with free CDs of Core Concepts tutorials. Other tutorial CDs are available from \$88 to \$165 including GST.

Landmark has a discussion forum on the Vectorworks website. Local phone or email support is free for simple solutions. Further support and training is available for a fee.

**Cost:** \$3137.20 including GST for Landmark 2008. \$704.00 including GST for Renderworks 2008

### RealCAD - LANDworksCAD

RealCAD is a two and three dimensional design package. Landworks is one version of RealCAD, an American program for general drafting and design. The Landworks features added to RealCAD have been developed recently by a South Australian developer. Like Landmark it has an Australian retailer in Sydney.

Landworks comes in four versions with prices ranging from:

- \$2495 for LandworksCAD LT for 2D plans, sections, elevations and details
- \$2695 for LandworksCAD LT plus an image editing program, PhotolImpact
- \$3295 for LandworksCAD PRO for 2D/3D, and
- \$3495 for LandworksCAD PRO, 2D/3D plus PhotolImpact.

In my opinion Landworks LT is underdeveloped in comparison to PRO Landscape. It has no image editor, its controls are harder to navigate, it lacks many of the dedicated landscape tools found in PRO Landscape, and I find the appearance of its graphics unattractive. Yet it costs up to \$700 more.

The \$2695 asked for Landworks LT plus PhotolImpact also appears a little pricey. PhotolImpact is a third party program, currently available for \$158 (incl. GST) from other retailers. Its addition to both the LT and PRO versions above increases the price by \$200.

Landworks can produce good looking plans and presentations provided you invest in other software. Its 3D features are useful if that's your business

activity however, the examples of Landworks models that I've seen look unattractive. If you're an aspiring landscape architect or 3D terrain modeller I believe you could produce better results with alternative programs.

Its database is good but small. To balance this, an additional Australian program, Plantfile, is marketed through the Landworks website. Also available from Plantfile.com, Plantfile is a useful addition to any of the programs mentioned here. However, it's vital for any designer to develop their own list of plants currently available from their local nurseries. You still need to add your own plants regardless of which program you use.

Email or phone support for Landworks is free for 30 days after purchase. Thereafter a \$195 per year subscription entitles you to phone and email support, technical assistance by remote access, video tutorials and access to a users' forum. Other online tutorials are available at prices from \$99 to \$199. Further support and training is available for a fee.

**Cost:** \$2495 to \$3495.

### VERDICT

In the 1990s the transition from teaching landscape graphics on the board to CAD on screen carried a number of reservations. There were questions about the changing needs of people, industry standards, longevity of the program, level of support, learning curve, and affordability.

After twelve years of CAD drafting and eight years training people in PRO Landscape my outlook is clear. PRO Landscape provides plans, elevations, sections, construction details, quantities, rendering, photorealistic image presentations plus business management software all in the one package. In these aspects I believe it is better than Landmark and Landworks. It does not suffer from being an add-on to another drafting program as do other programs. PRO Landscape doesn't offer 3D terrain modelling or cut and fill calculations, however these are features seldom used by the bulk of people in our profession.

After fourteen years of development specifically for landscape professionals, the most powerful, lowest priced, and easy-to-use program is PRO Landscape. It continues to be the leading software for quickly producing high quality plans.

Where will YOU draw the line?  
*Trevor Fletcher is Technical Officer at Holmesglen TAFE*