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Steve Lambert, Landscape Architect Extraordinaire

By Sophie Braccini



Steve Lambert in front of his pond Photo provided

In an otherwise morose time for construction businesses, Steve Lambert, founder of Garden Lights Landscape & Pool Development, is seeing his activity growing and getting back to the steady stream he was enjoying before the recession. He believes that the series of five awards that he recently received from the East Bay Chapter of the California Landscape Contractors Association (CLCA) is a testimony to what makes his success: the quality of the training and of the work of his very long time employees. The Lamberts have lived in Orinda for 15 years and are raising their young family. Steve was raised in Walnut Creek and got a degree from Cal Poly San Luis Obispo in landscape and design. His family roots go deep into the American soil. One of Steve's grandfathers owned a cotton plantation in Arkansas while the other was a truck farmer and a ranger. He lost his father at an early age and was raised by his mother, a school teacher, who was always growing "stuff" in a big garden. "I always love plants and horticulture," says Lambert, "when I finished Cal Poly I

knew that some day I would have my own landscape company."

Lambert worked for two years at Seeno Construction as a landscape architect, grew into the business and decided, 19 years ago, to become his own boss. "When I started I already had a few clients," he said, "the hardest part was to find good employees. Today, Flavio has been with me for 14 years and Jose for 10, we are becoming a family."

When he started, Lambert felt there was a need for someone specialized in quality lighting. "It is an art to do lighting," he says, "you want to select the focal points of a garden, like a rock, a brick wall or a tree and magnify it. Then you consider the safety and the pathways." Lambert says that he is determined not to add to the lighting pollution of the surroundings; lighting is an art of nuance, of luminosity and shadows, not of too much intensity. "People often overdo the path lights for example," he adds, "if you light a nice rock near a path that can be enough there."

But Lambert would not limit himself to lighting, "I need it all," he says, "I enjoy working with water features and I would be depressed if I wouldn't plant plants." For 14 years the company has had a pool license. "Sometimes a remodeling can be the most interesting and challenging job," he says. The work that got him the "Best of the Best" Judges Awards given by CLCA was a garden in Oakland. "That specific job was the creation of a blue tile pool with a vanishing edge," says Lambert, "it was fun creating the look of a waterfall using blue tiles on the 8-foot supporting wall and then planting the base of the wall with materials that appear to be underwater." It is the third time that his company has won this top award.

But not all properties can accommodate a pool. In his Orinda home Lambert has built a pond. "In my garden pond we have 14 Koi fish," he explains, "the way we built it we have no problem with raccoons; our our biggest issue is herons." Lambert lost two fish to the magnificent bird that is said to be able to hear water from three miles away. "So they come and check it out," says Lambert, "but now we have added fishing line across the pond in five or six places, the herons see it and it deters them."

Lambert had to face another interesting challenge in the Moraga garden of the Kronenberg's that brought him the Achievement Award in Large Residential Design/Build Installation. "The place had to be completely redesigned and transformed," he remembers, "we had to fix irrigation and drainage problems and even moved four trees."

Lambert has always been sensitive to the technicality of landscaping and how a well conceived and maintained irrigation system can be water efficient. "That's our technicality and the caliber of our people that has made us win so many awards for so many consecutive years," says Lambert.

Garden Lights took 2 other awards in Orinda, First Place, Large Residential Design/Build Installation at the Klein Residence, and First Place, Small Residential Design/Build Installation at the Ramsey residence. Lambert is not one to brag, but when asked he confesses that his company was the only one to win so many awards, "a few others won a couple," he said. The result for him is a strain of business that is growing again. "I was very worried between October last year and February," he says, "and we had to let go 4 of our 28 employees, but since April business is picking up." Lambert thinks that people have realized that they can't sell their homes at the moment, and that they might as well improve them and take advantage of their gardens. "Customers are a little more conservative in what they are requesting," notices Lambert, "but there are still some pretty extravagant ones." To his surprise, Lambert said he was recently asked to install 2 outdoor TVs in the area. For more information on Garden Lights visit their website at www.gardenlightslandscape.com. For more information on the California Landscape Contractors Association visit, www.CLCA.org.

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