

Tips for Hiring a Landscaper

Landscaping is a valuable extension of your home and should be planned as carefully as any other major investment. Landscape contractors are trained and licensed to install paving, planting, hardscapes, structures, lighting, and irrigation and drainage systems. They may implement the plans of landscape architects and designers, or many will also design the projects they build.

Regardless of the size of your landscape project, its success may well depend on some careful planning and the hiring of a professional landscape and irrigation contractor. We hope you find this advice useful in selecting and working with a landscape contractor.

Ask key questions.

Every homeowner has a unique set of needs and preferences for their landscape projects. Here are some important topics to cover when interviewing a contractor:

- Verify that the contractor's license(s) is current, and is in good standing
- Verify that the contractor has general liability insurance and workers' compensation insurance.
- Request certificates in writing.
- Ask about any guarantees that may be available. Find out exactly how long the guarantee remains in effect.
- Inquire about the history of the company and how long they have been in business.
- Determine whether the contractor's specialties coincide with your project needs.
- During the interview process you should ask any candidate for specific advice on types of irrigation controllers, plant sizes, and grounds preparation that will enhance your property.

Get references.

One of the best ways to select a contractor is through recommendations from former customers who have recently contracted for landscape and irrigation work. Another source for referrals is from professionals in related industries.

Request a list of references for similar jobs the contractor has recently completed in your area.

Look at the work and, if possible, talk to the owners. You may want to ask if the job was completed on schedule, whether the contractor was responsive to needs and problems, and if the workers performed in a professional manner.

Take bids.

Request all bids in writing. If possible, obtain multiple bids so that the prices and work offered can be compared. Remember that the lowest price may not always be the best. Experienced landscapers can often avoid potential problems that less experienced landscapers might not plan for. Be certain that each bid lists all the preparatory and finish work that the contractor has suggested, making sure that each has included all the work quoted by other competitors. To get the best value, ask questions.

Insist on a written contract for your protection.

The contract should cover, as specifically as possible, everything you have agreed upon and should contain the following:

- Name, address, license number, and telephone number of the contractor. Complete description of the work to be done and materials to be used, including quantities and sizes of plant material and brands of irrigation equipment approximate date when work will begin and be completed
- Written copies of all warranties provided for workmanship and guarantees on plants and other materials
- Acknowledgement of the types of insurance held by the contractor and the name of his/her insurance company
- Statement that the contractor will do any necessary clean up and removal of debris after the job is completed
- Statement that the contractor will furnish a payment and performance bond or joint control company, if this has been agreed upon
- Payment amount and schedule. The contract should include the final cost and payment dates.

Determine payment arrangements.

It is normal for contractors to require some payment before work begins. Some expect half down to start work and purchase materials and the other half to be paid upon completion. Others may take smaller payments throughout the duration of the project.