7 Things You Need to Know Before Hiring a Landscaping Company

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1: HIRE A PROFESSIONAL
The Benefits of Using a Professional Landscaper

If this is your first landscaping project, you might be tempted to save money by doing the work yourself or hiring an unlicensed contractor to help. The problem with this strategy is that you could be wasting both time and money with the wrong landscaping decisions. Sometimes fixing a “broken” landscape (redoing the irrigation system, removing dead shrubs, flagstone, etc.) can cost more than doing it right the first time. Amateur landscapers often have problems determining the right amount of sunlight and water that different flowers, shrubs and trees require. Another problem can be not preparing the ground beneath hard scape features correctly such as: flagstone, paving-stones, concrete etc. Over time this could cause settling or cracking and may require removal and replacement. If you’re really determined to do it yourself, do as much research as you can before installing anything in the ground. Don’t rely on employees at home improvement stores or local big box chains to be landscaping experts. They can give you general directions, however, they won’t be as knowledgeable as the true professionals.

Overview:

- Which plants work best in your local soil and climate
- How to work with areas of shade and light
- Which flowers and plants work together and which combinations to avoid
- How to vary the distance between plants, accounting for their future growth and how to protect your hard-scape from spreading roots
- How to plan for technical elements like drainage, grading and soil conditions
- What landscaping designs will meet your long-term goals for a beautiful, functional yard
2: PLAY IT SAFE
Don’t Hire Landscapers Without License & Insurance

If you’ve made the decision to use a landscaper, it’s important to check them out. You should never hire a landscaper who doesn’t carry a contractor’s license, liability & workers compensation insurance.

Ask your landscaper if they have Liability and Workers’ Compensation Insurance. Liability Insurance protects a landscaper from being sued for negligence or injury. Workers’ Compensation Coverage covers workers who hurt themselves while working on the job. When your landscaper has insurance coverage, they will pay for medical expenses, lost wages and other unexpected costs of an accident.

Remember to always ask to see proof of insurance.

Read the documents carefully.

Ask Questions!

- Is it current? Check for the expiration date.
- Does it list the correct agency/organization name?
- Does it look legitimate? If it arouses even a small suspicion, you should call the insurance provider to double check.

Make sure you are hiring a licensed contractor, you can check by going to www.cslb.ca.gov and check to make sure they have a contractor’s license and are in good standing with the state license board. If you hire an unlicensed contractor they will not have workers compensation insurance and you may have trouble holding them accountable for inferior workmanship. Their contractor’s license number should be clearly displayed on company letterhead, trucks and all advertisements.

What can happen if you don't use an insured landscaper?

If your landscaper or one of his workers is accidentally injured while working on your property, you could be held responsible. If they purchase materials that are used on your property but haven’t paid for them – the original supplier can sue you for the cost. They even have the option of putting a mechanics lien on your property until they are paid.

By the same token, subcontractors or other workers on your landscaping job can sue you for wages if they were never paid.
3: REVIEWING REFERENCES & PORTFOLIOS

After you’ve checked the insurance and licensing credentials of your potential landscaper, it’s time to ask for references. A reputable, local provider should have several references. Ask for at least three, and contact the homeowners, general contractors or Landscape designers on the list. Ask questions such as:

- What were the pros and con’s of working with this landscaper?
- Were you satisfied with the knowledge and skill level of your provider?
- How did your yard look after the work was complete? Did it meet your expectations?
- Did your landscaper communicate plans with you and notify you of updates or changes?
- Were there problems? If so, how were they resolved?

The next step in reviewing your potential landscaper is to evaluate their website portfolio & testimonials. Be sure to look for images in the portfolio that will apply to your project, ones that are similar to yours in size and scope. Do you like the aesthetics of the yards in the portfolio? Be sure to make notes on what you really like. This will put you a step ahead when it comes to planning your own job.
4: TOP QUESTIONS YOU SHOULD ASK YOUR POTENTIAL LANDSCAPER

You should never hesitate to ask your landscaper questions. Always keep the lines of communication open. When you know what’s going on with your landscaping, you’ll not only be more satisfied with your yard, you’ll also be more knowledgeable for your future projects. Here are just a few sample questions to get you started. Do some brainstorming and you may come up with your own!

- What type of soil do I have and how will that affect the landscape?
- What type of mulch is being used? How often should it be updated?
- What type of irrigation system will be sufficient for my landscape plans?
- How large will my new plants/trees grow? What sort of maintenance is required?
- Which products should I use to maintain my outdoor kitchen, fire pit, or entertainment area?
- Are my expectations realistic with my budget? If not, is a phased project an option?
- Will this landscaping improve the resale value of my home?
- Do I need to improve my drainage system?
Always have your landscaper make a personal visit to your property for a visual inspection. Walk through the yard with them and point out areas that concern you. If you have a drawing it will make this process, go much smoother. This is the perfect time to repeat your needs and wish list. Make sure that you’re both on the same page. This helps your landscaper give you the most accurate bid. If you’re interviewing multiple landscapers and aren’t specific enough during this walk through, you won’t be comparing apples to apples. If you already have a design make sure the details are clear and existing site conditions are reviewed, this will reduce unexpected changes during the construction process.

After the visual inspection, your landscaper should give you a detailed description of the work that needs to be done. He should also provide an estimated time frame for the beginning and completion of the work. Before the landscaper leaves the site, he should give you a time frame on when you can expect to receive the bid.

When you have multiple bids for a job, you may want to consider more than just the bottom line price. If a bid sounds too good to be true, it probably is. The low-ball landscaper could be using inferior materials or uninsured helpers. Be wary! If a bid is ridiculously low, there is a reason. Often times the best value is a well thought out landscape plan that is installed correctly. When this is achieved it will offer many years of enjoyment and increase the value of your home.
You’re finally there! You’ve hired a professional landscaper, researched their credentials and portfolio, asked lots of questions and chosen your final landscaping plan. After the final review of bids and warranties, you’re confident about moving forward with your chosen provider. It’s time for the installation process to begin.

This is the fun part! Your landscaper, knowing both your personal preferences and optimal growing conditions of your area, will begin to transform your yard. Depending on the landscape you’ve chosen, the installation process and timeline will vary. However, in general, the process will be as follows:

• The landscaper will remove unwanted landscaping materials and recycle if possible.
• The next step will be to grade the area properly to accommodate the planned features.
• This is when the underground features are installed. This includes anything like sprinkler piping, drainage systems, low voltage wiring, etc.
• Hard-scape features come next, along with structural elements such as decks, pergola’s and outdoor kitchens.
• Plants, trees and sod are installed and other decorative features are added.
• You and your landscaper will do a final walk-through of your yard.

The final step is one of the most important. The walk through is your chance to confirm that your landscape installation reflects your original plan. If anything doesn’t meet your satisfaction, this is the time to speak up. If you have any questions that weren’t already answered, ask your landscaper now. It’s your responsibility to water your plants and to keep them alive after installation unless a maintenance agreement has been executed.
7: PAYING FOR YOUR BEAUTIFUL NEW LIVING SPACE

Down Payment/Deposit:
When you have chosen your landscaper, remember that you should never have to pay the full amount up front. You should expect to be asked for a deposit. If your landscaper asks for the entire amount before starting work, consider it a red flag, and reject their bid.

Contract/Payment Schedule:
You should be provided a contract that includes a payment schedule. Typically, your payments should reflect the percentage of work completed each week or terms that have been agreed to prior to starting the project.

Payment Methods:
Although a personal check is typical, some landscapers will take credit cards. Whatever the payment structure, be sure to get a confirmation of payment.

Mechanic Lien's & Pre-Lien Notices:
A mechanic lien is a legal tool that a contractor, sub-contractor or a material supplier can use to ensure that they will be paid for services rendered or materials supplied for a particular job.

Material suppliers: It is not unusual for a supplier that provides material for your project to mail a pre-lien notice. This does not mean they will follow through with a lien. The purpose of the pre-lien notice is to let you know they have provided material for your project and if your contractor does not pay them for the material they can place a lien on your property. If you receive a pre-lien from a supplier be sure to have your contractor provide proof of a lien release prior to your final payment or major milestone payment, depending on the amount of the lien.

Contractors: If you do not pay your contractor or if there is a sub-contractor involved that has not been paid they may place a lien on your property, be sure to get a lien release prior to making your final payment. Most professional contractors will be happy to explain this process in more detail if you have questions.

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