

HOW TO PICK A LANDSCAPE DESIGNER AND/OR CONTRACTOR

One of the most frequently asked question is how do I, as a homeowner, go about picking someone to design my yard? The following are some practical ways to make the process more objective and less by luck.

Step 1:

The most fundamental question is should you use a contractor, nursery, landscape designer and/or landscape architect to design your yard? There are advantages and disadvantages to each choice and the following table will try to explain some of those tradeoffs.

Category - Description	Advantages	Disadvantages
Homeowner (Self)	<p>Low and/or no real cost. As flexible and timely as you prioritize. Easily available. Able to reap any and all benefits and suffer any and all negatives.</p>	<p>Probably limited knowledge and experience base. No legal recourse. Probably limited resource availability. No independent third party review of design and/or plans or to help resolve conflicts with other family members. Probably limited technical knowledge. Solutions arrived at may cost more to implement than if designed and communicated by a trained professional. Possibly not as aesthetic a solution.</p>
Landscape Contractor	<p>One stop shopping. May be able to get a designer/architect for you. Better control over what is represented on the plans versus real costs. Should be licensed and controlled by State of California. Will sometimes include plan fee if they do the work. Legal recourse in case of problems.</p>	<p>May be limited in what they show or design based upon the trades and skills they have available. No independent review of work provided. May push a solution and/or product based upon economic gain for them versus best solution. Probably pay for plan fee in hidden cost of bid/contract. No experience and/or educational standards set by state.</p>

Category - Description	Advantages	Disadvantages
Nursery	<p>One stop shopping. May be able to get a designer/architect for you. Better control over what is represented on the plans versus real costs. Should be licensed and controlled by State of California. Will sometimes include plan fee if they do the work. Legal recourse in case of problem.</p>	<p>May be limited in what they show or design based upon the trades and skills they have available. No independent review of work provided. May push a solution, plant material and/or product based upon economic gain for them versus best solution. Probably pay for plan fee in hidden cost of bid/contract. No experience and/or educational standards set by state. Probably better planting design solutions than a homeowner, contractor and/or designer.</p>
Landscape Designer	<p>Should give you solution based upon design criteria. Should provide you with independent third party review of contractor work. Possible resource for other responsible contractors and/or suppliers.</p>	<p>Not licensed or controlled by State of California. No set criteria for experience base and/or skill set. Limited legal recourse in case of problems. May or may not be able to assist with the bidding, contracting and/or construction administration process.</p>
Landscape Architect	<p>Licensed by State of California – Legal recourse in case of problems. Should give you solution based upon design criteria. Should provide you with independent third party review of contractor work. Possible resource for other responsible contractors and/or suppliers. Minimum experience, educational and skill standards set by state. May have a higher fee than others.</p>	<p>May or may not be able to assist with the bidding, contracting and/or construction administration process. Should be as and/or more aesthetically pleasing than other categories (but may not be). Should be able to see all of the parts within the whole of the design. Probably better planting design selections.</p>

Rest assured that there is no right or wrong answer to the question of whom you use to design your yard for you. There are positive and negative tradeoffs for each category and what may be right or best for one person may not be for another. This information is provided with the idea of trying to allow you to make an informed decision in selecting someone to design your yard.

Step 2:

Start a picture file of plants and other garden elements that you like so that you can refer to them and/or share them with an outside consultant. These can be taken from photos, books, magazines, model homes, other yards in your area or any number of resources.

Step 3:

Consider how you plan to use your outdoor space and how highly you wish to maintain it or have it maintained. Make a prioritized list of what you want, from a functional standpoint in your front, side and rear yard areas. The reason for prioritizing them is to let the designer know what is the most and least important to you, so that if cuts need to be made due to available yard space and/or budgetary constraints, then the item that is most important to you is sure to be retained.

Step 4:

Decide on a realistic budget of what you can spend right away for improvements and what you are willing to spend in total. How much money can we spend within what time frame? In this way, it will assist the designer to know whether the yard can be completed in one construction phase or whether the work will need to be broken up into different budgetary and construction phases. Hopefully this will allow for installing utilities, sleeves, etc. to facilitate future construction items without tearing up and rebuilding existing items.

Step 5:

Look for a consultant who is experienced in the type and size of residential design you require. Check with friends and/or relatives for recommendations and look around your neighborhood or other areas close to you geographically and find yards with a style that is similar to what you would like your yard to be when finished. If it is being installed or just installed, there may be a sign indicating the contractor and/or designer who did the work. If not, then feel comfortable to knock on the door and ask the homeowner for this information.

Step 6:

Obtain firsthand information about a potential contractor and/or designer from a past customer to determine the contractor's / designer's / architect's strengths and weaknesses and to make sure they will be a good fit with your needs and desires. Do so by calling those on a list provided by the individual or contacting someone you know had work done by them. Ask the following questions:

- Did they hold to the budget?
- Were they good in meeting deadlines and commitments?
- Were they timely?
- Were they flexible?
- Were they dependable?
- Did you feel that the fees they charged were a good value?
- Did you feel that you got what you paid for?
- How was their personality to work with?
- Would you recommend them?
- Would you hire them again?

Step 7:

Interview potential contractors / designers / architects to see how they interface with you and how they answer the following questions. Whenever possible, try to do this in person, face to face.

- Describe your job and goals and find out if they interested in proposing.
- How busy are they and when do they think they can complete the design?
- Do they have a ballpark figure as to what it should cost?
- Are there any costs in obtaining a proposal for services?
- Is the fee contingent upon contracting with them for further work / installation / services?
- Do they have references with names, addresses and phone numbers?
- What are they good at or what are their strengths? (No one is great at everything!)
- What are they poor at or what are their weaknesses? (It is important to know what you can't do as well as what you can do!)
- Are they licensed by the State of California?
- Do they have any insurance and/or bonding?
- What do they do if something goes wrong or doesn't work out?
- Have they done work before in your community / association? City? Governing agency?

Step 8:

Make up a list of the information and answers to the questions you got from the potential contractors / designers / architects. Discuss your findings with others whom you trust as to what you like and dislike about each contact. Make a decision based upon objective observations and findings, and make sure your "feelings" confirm that selection.

Step 9:

Notify the selected individual and negotiate and enter into a contract, spelling out in writing their responsibilities and your expectations as much as possible. Be specific about these items as well as any reasonable time frames and what compensation, if any, is expected. Hire only as much expertise as you need.