

HOW TO SELECT A
LANDSCAPE
CONTRACTING OR MAINTENANCE
BUSINESS BE AN INFORMED
CONSUMER

*A well-designed, installed, and maintained
landscape can save water.*






An attractive landscape can add considerable value to a home.

Note: Landscape installation can only be done by a licensed landscape contracting business.

Choosing the right landscape contracting business(es) can determine the success or failure of this important investment. It also allows you to create a landscape that is more water efficient and one that requires less maintenance. Consider using the following guidelines when evaluating choices for your landscape.






First, determine the scope of your project. Installing plant material, building decks or patios, installing retaining walls or irrigation systems, and installing night lighting are just a few of the services that landscape contracting businesses can provide. If you wish to work on some of the project yourself, be sure to convey which part(s) you intend to perform to the business's representative. Under current Oregon law, a landscape contracting business must have the proper licensure to install a new landscape.

Second, determine who will provide the ongoing maintenance of your landscape – you or a landscape maintenance business.

Landscape maintenance is not presently a state-regulated trade and does not require a license through the Oregon Landscape Contractors Board (LCB). However, you should check with your city or county for local requirements.

The Oregon LCB defines landscape maintenance as trimming, some pruning, mowing, upkeep of already-installed landscape projects and the planting of annuals, perennials, and bulbs in existing beds. Check with the Landscape Contractors Board for more information on state licensure requirements (www.lcb.state.or.us or (503) 378-5909).



IS THE BUSINESS QUALIFIED?

ARE THEY:

- ☞ Properly licensed, bonded, and insured as a landscape contracting business? (Check with the Landscape Contractors Board to confirm: 503-378-5909 or www.lcb.state.or.us.)
- ☞ Licensed to do the specific type of work that is being conducted?
 - ☛ Standard License: planning and installing lawns, shrubs, vines, trees, water features, and any other nursery stock. Also allows building of fences, decks, arbors, driveways, walkways, landscape edging, water features, and retaining walls.
 - ☛ Irrigation Only, Plus Backflow License: planning and installing irrigation systems and installation of backflow protection devices.
 - ☛ All Phases, Plus Backflow License: all aspects of landscape installation and construction. This is the “highest” level of licensure with the Landscape Contractors Board.
- ☞ Able to provide current and past references with completed projects and professional qualifications? Better yet, visit one of their landscaping projects in progress.

TIPS TO HELP YOU WITH YOUR SELECTION PROCESS:

- ☞ Ask friends, neighbors, relatives, and coworkers if they would recommend and rehire the landscape contracting business based on their past experience.



- ☞ Request that the site is inspected prior to receiving a written estimate. Ask if there is a fee for providing a written estimate.
- ☞ Obtain at least three written estimates which include the price of designing and installing the landscape, all labor, materials, and local taxes and permit fees. Remember, a low bid may not necessarily save you time, water, or money in the long run. Read the fine print and make sure that the bids you are comparing include the same material, labor, and services.

IMPORTANT QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT THE COMPANY:

- ☞ How long has the company been in business?
- ☞ Who is the licensed landscape construction professional for the business? Who will supervise the work being performed?
- ☞ Does the firm intend to use subcontractors? If so, are they qualified and do they have the required licensure and appropriate certifications? Make sure you receive a copy of “Information Notice to Owner about Construction Liens” – it is your responsibility for payment to subcontractors and suppliers even if you have paid your licensed landscape contracting business in full. Learn how to protect yourself from liens.



- ⌘ What is the educational background and work experience of the employees who will work on your project? What kind of continuing education do they receive?
- ⌘ What professional affiliations does the company hold? Do they belong to OLCA (Oregon Landscape Contractors Association); PLANET (Professional Landcare Network); the IA (Irrigation Association)?
- ⌘ What certifications do the workers hold?
- ⌘ How are the design fees structured?
- ⌘ What is the payment schedule? It is customary to pay 25 to 35 percent of the total cost up front to cover early material and set up expenses by the company and then to make final payment only when you are completely satisfied with the job.
- ⌘ Insurance is a big concern. The performance of landscape construction work requires comprehensive insurance – both liability and worker’s compensation. Be sure to ask for proof of insurance. If a landscape contracting business is licensed with the Landscape Contractors Board, they must have a surety bond (minimum \$3000), and general liability insurance (minimum \$100,000). These requirements provide protection to you, the consumer.



- ☞ Ask about written guarantees – will the landscape contracting business or nursery stand behind a guarantee on plant material?

ARE THEY REPUTABLE?

- ☞ Ask for references, and take the time to visit previous jobs of the prospective business(es).
- ☞ Talk to past and present customers to answer questions such as:
 - ☞ Did the business display good work habits; for example, returning calls promptly and keeping appointments?
 - ☞ Did the business honor the contract with the customer?
 - ☞ Was the business responsive to concerns expressed by the customer?
 - ☞ Did the landscape contracting business design and install a landscape that met the customer's goals?



WHAT YOUR LANDSCAPE CONTRACTING BUSINESS SHOULD PROVIDE:

- ☞ Proper selection of plants and plant materials that are suitable for the Pacific Northwest climate.
- ☞ Plants with like watering needs grouped in the same irrigation zone.
- ☞ Plants that are appropriately located to other plants, structures, hard-scapes, and exposures so as to reduce unneeded maintenance.
- ☞ Appropriate planting practices; for example, plant holes should be dug twice as wide and deep as the root ball.
- ☞ Soil testing and analysis.
- ☞ Appropriate soil amendments based on the soil testing results.
- ☞ Copy of the landscape plan to scale, and landscape requirements.

ASK ABOUT ADVANCED CERTIFICATIONS:

- ☞ Oregon Landscape Contractors Association (OLCA) Certified Landscape Technician (CLT).
- ☞ Professional Landcare Network (PLANET) Certified Landscape Professional (CLP).
- ☞ Licensed individual Landscape Construction Professional (by the Landscape Contractors Board). *This person would have had to pass a comprehensive examination and have at least two years of landscape experience. This person is responsible for direct supervision of the unlicensed employees performing landscape work on the project.*
- ☞ Irrigation Association Certified Irrigation Contractor/Certified Irrigation Designer – if having irrigation work done.



CONTRACTS:

- ☞ Legally, all landscape projects require a written contract. This protects both parties in case of a dispute. The contract must include (*at a minimum*):
 - ☞ Landscape contracting business name, address, and phone number.
 - ☞ Consumer name and address.
 - ☞ Address of job site (if different than above).
 - ☞ List of plant materials to be used (size and quantity) – all of which should be included in the landscape plan.
 - ☞ General description of work to be performed.
 - ☞ Price and payment schedule.
 - ☞ Estimated time for completion and/or completion date.
 - ☞ Description of guarantee/warranty materials and services – if no guarantee or warranty this needs to be stated in writing
 - ☞ Signatures of both parties.
 - ☞ Statement that the business is licensed with the Oregon Landscape Contractor Board (LCB), the LCB's address, and phone number plus any other applicable licenses, such as business licenses.



- ☞ Additionally the contract should include:
 - ☞ Any special requirements that both parties agree to.
 - ☞ Confirmation of who will obtain all necessary permits, e.g. driveways, some decks, retaining walls in excess of certain heights, backflow protection installation, and low voltage wiring (for irrigation and/or lighting). *Ultimately, it is the owner's responsibility to ensure that all permits are obtained.*
 - ☞ **All changes to the contract should be made in writing.**

YOU, THE CUSTOMER, SHOULD:

- ☞ Check references before contracting with a landscape contracting business to install your landscape. Landscape installation is a significant investment for you and your property. Take time to check the business out.
- ☞ Make sure the contract lists all materials, services, and requirements you, the customer, want and/or need of the landscape contracting business.
- ☞ Check the license status of the business by calling the Landscape Contractors Board at 503-378-5909, sending the Board an e-mail at lcb.info@state.or.us, or checking the Website, www.lcb.state.or.us
- ☞ Keep good written records, including a log of conversations, copies of correspondence, cancelled checks, original signed contract, change orders, and receipts, in case of problems.



- ☞ Communicate with your business and landscape construction professional during the project.
- ☞ If you do have problems, call the Landscape Contractors Board for a “Claim Form” or go to their Website to download the form. **The deadline for filing claims is one year from the date the work was substantially completed.**

Maintenance of the completed project will protect your investment.

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WHERE TO GET REFERENCES FOR LANDSCAPE MAINTENANCE:

To develop a list of potential landscape maintenance businesses, personal references are a great place to start. Ask neighbors, friends, relatives, and coworkers what person or company they use for maintenance, and ask if they would recommend that landscape maintenance company. You can also look in the phone book under "Landscape Maintenance Contractors" for the names and phone numbers of landscape maintenance companies. Ask each contractor you contact for a list of references, and then follow through by observing the quality of their work. When you have completed your list, narrow it down by matching the best landscapes you have observed with the maintenance company that is conducting the maintenance on that particular landscape. Once you have narrowed your list to three or four businesses, schedule interviews with those businesses to ask some very important questions.

ASK QUESTIONS:

Ask each person/firm questions to better judge who you prefer maintaining your landscape:

- ☞ Do they have property damage insurance and worker's compensation for their employees?
- ☞ Who is supervising the maintenance work that is being performed?
- ☞ How often do they mow? (*Weekly, monthly, other?*)



- ☼ Do they use mulching mowers or bag the clippings? *(Mulching mowers leave very fine clippings to filter down through the grass and provide nutrients, primarily nitrogen, for the lawn, thereby reducing the amount of fertilizer and water needed.)*
- ☼ How often do they apply fertilizer, and what type do they use? *(Over-fertilizing is one of the primary causes of non-point source pollution in streams and rivers. Applying the right amount of fertilizer at the right time can help avoid this pollution.)*
- ☼ Will soil tests be conducted? *(How does the maintenance person know what amount of fertilizer to apply if they do not know the condition of the soil?)*
- ☼ Will pesticides be used? When and what type? Are the persons applying the pesticides licensed for pesticide application? *(Your lawn will not need pesticides unless there is a pest problem, but if pesticides are to be applied, you need to know if the person applying them is knowledgeable in their application.)*
- ☼ If there is to be irrigation maintenance, is the business licensed by the Landscape Contractors Board? Do they have Irrigation Association certifications? *(Installation and/or maintenance of an irrigation system requires a license from the Landscape Contractors Board.)*



- ☞ Does the service include aerating the lawn area? *(Aeration aids in getting water, air, and nutrients to the roots of your lawn, which can reduce the amount of water needed for a healthy lawn.)*
- ☞ Are mulching and soil amendments to be added? *(In flower and shrub beds, mulching reduces water loss due to evaporation and helps suppress weeds. Mulch depth should be applied at a minimum of 2 inches in depth.)*
- ☞ Who do I call if there is a question or a problem? *(If you are hiring a company with many employees, the company should provide you with the name and number of the person to contact regarding questions or complaints.)*
- ☞ What is the company's main area of expertise? *(You may wish to think twice about hiring someone to maintain your lawn if his or her main area of expertise is pruning trees.)*
- ☞ Will your landscape be surveyed prior to formulating a maintenance plan? *(A survey aids the company in formulating a maintenance plan suitable to your particular landscape.)*
- ☞ Trade associations help their members become more knowledgeable. Is the business, the owner, or the employees members of any of the following trade associations?
 - ☞ Oregon Landscape Contractors Association (OLCA)
 - ☞ Professional Landcare Network (PLANET)
 - ☞ Irrigation Association (IA)



- ☞ Are there any warranties for the work done?
(This should be in writing or should be written into your contract.)

THE MAINTENANCE CONTRACT:


You will want a written agreement (contract) with the landscape maintenance business. Read the contract carefully. **Accept no unwritten assurances.** If you discuss items or changes, make sure they are clearly spelled out in the contract. The contract should include:

- ☞ A detailed list of all work that is to be done.
- ☞ The frequency of the work: for example, how many times per month will they mow the lawn, trim the trees, pull the weeds.
- ☞ What are the service costs?
- ☞ How and when is payment due?
- ☞ Are there any warranties on materials and workmanship?





The Regional Water Providers Consortium provides leadership in the planning, management, stewardship, and resiliency of drinking water in the Portland, OR metropolitan region. Get more information and resources at www.regionalh2o.org.

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