



what consumers look for...

Source	%
Good references and reputation	67.4
Satisfaction guaranteed	39.5
Provides free estimates	33.8
In business for a number of years	32.9
Locally owned and operated company	32.4
Insured and bonded	27.9
Member of a professional trade association	13.3
Certification of professional training	12.4
Licensed by government	7.4
Local representative of a national company	5.7
Other	4.6
Award-winning company	3.0

Source: The Gallup Organization

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The best place to begin is by defining your needs. Landscaping can do wonders to improve your home from an aesthetic viewpoint, by introducing colorful shrubs and beautiful trees and plants. Professional landscaping can also add interest and useful space to your yard through the addition of decks, patios, walkways, and pools.

A landscape firm must have both the knowledge and experience to successfully complete your job. Often, they must be able to take a project from start to finish without overlooking the small details which could doom your whole project, such as a drainage problem or a building code violation.

Taking the time to fully research your potential landscape professional is a critical step in the process. A landscape professional's answers to some basic questions will give you a sense of whether or not you could comfortably work with the firm.

Depending upon the scope and size of your project, choose the questions that are relevant and important to you in order to make an informed decision. Pay attention to the firm's response and reaction to your questions. Ethical firms will be open to answering all of your questions.

Finally, verify all critical information such as license status, any disciplinary action, insurance coverage, credit standing, and professional references. Be sure to check out their lien history with the County and court records for lawsuits or bankruptcies.

The American Nursery and Landscaping Association (ANLA) recommends that you consider some of the following questions when searching for a landscape professional:

When was the company established?

Is the business a corporation or sole proprietorship?

What is the experience and reputation of the principals?

Have any of the principals ever filed for bankruptcy or been named in a lawsuit?

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Look for a company with an established business history in your community. Surviving in any business in today's competitive marketplace is a difficult task. Most successful firms are proud of their history in the industry.

What kind of services do they offer?

Professional firms usually offer a variety of services, from design and installation to maintenance programs that include color rotations, insect/disease control and irrigation. A firm who does it all could save you time and money in the long run.

What percentage of your business is repeat or referral business?

This will give you a good indication about the company's customer satisfaction.

How is your firm organized?

Do you have employees or do you hire subcontractors? If you do have employees, what are their job descriptions?

Does the company carry workers compensation and liability insurance?

Ask for copies of the insurance certificates to verify coverage. In addition, some states require licensing and registration. If your state does have construction licensing laws, ask for your contractor's registration and license, then confirm the license number and expiration date with your local jurisdiction.

What is your approach to a project of this scope?

This will give you an idea of how the contractor works and what to expect during the project. Listen carefully to the answer. This is one of the big indicators of the company's work ethic.

How many projects like mine have you completed in the past 12 months?

This will help you determine the contractor's familiarity with your type of project. You should confirm that a good portion of those completed projects were similar to the type of project you are proposing.

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Does the company have a list of references for projects they have completed which are similar to yours?

The contractor should be able to supply you with a minimum of three references, including names, telephone numbers and addresses. As a follow up to this question, ask how long ago the project was completed and if the contractor can arrange a visit to see the finished job. You should also ask for professional references from suppliers or subcontractors to verify sound business practices.

Will we need a permit for this project?

Most cities and towns require permits for building projects. Failure to obtain the necessary permits or to arrange obligatory inspections can be illegal. In some cases, if a project violates a zoning law or some other regulations, it may even have to be demolished if there is no way to comply with the law. A qualified landscape firm will be conscious of the permit process, and ensure that all permits have been obtained before initiating any work.

What is the time frame for starting the project?

Now is the time to ask questions about work schedules. What is your estimate for completion? How early will your crew normally begin work? When will they normally quit for the day? Will I be contacted about delays or changes in the schedule? By whom?

Will they provide a list of their suppliers?

You may want to consider calling the firm's suppliers. This will help protect you from liens for nonpayment by the firm. Suppliers also can be a source to establish credit history for the company.

Do they appear professional?

The professional landscaper arrives on time, takes pictures or draws sketches of your property while there, and uses uniformed workers and clean equipment.



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How are their communication skills?

It is important that you establish a good working relationship at the outset of the project. A positive approach to customer communications begins with a written estimate which explains what services and materials and plant sizes are provided, for what price, and includes the necessary details of weed control, edging, mulching and cleanup. Be sure to find out their anticipated work schedule, and any warranties for plants that die as a result of conditions within their control.

Do they give you a contract?

A reputable firm provides you with a contract specifying start and completion dates. If a deposit is required, the contract could show that the money is held in escrow at a specific bank.

ANLA recommends that you definitely consider a landscape professional if your project involves major construction. A professional can also provide invaluable help in plant selection for your soil type or to help lower your utility bills, advice on how to maintain your landscape, or ideas to help get you started on your project. A good professional can help you turn your yard or garden into a more useful, integrated part of your home, while avoiding the nightmares caused by unprofessional services.