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## Hiring a Landscape Contractor: How to Avoid Making the Top 5 Mistakes *by John Leslie* in Landscaping (submitted 2009-11-21)

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The type of project you have will determine the type of person you need to do the work. You may need only the services of a gardener or casual laborer. In this case, they may not fall into the category of being considered a "landscape contractor". Regardless of any licensing laws, however, you can still fall into a trap by committing one of the 5 top mistakes when it comes to hiring workers for your home or landscape project.

### 1) Not checking references

The easiest thing to do is to simply ask them for references either over the phone or the first time you see them in person. Don't feel that you come across in a negative manner - that you don't trust them. The truth is that you should not trust them until you get reassurances! RED FLAG: Failure to provide you with any verifiable references. If this is the case, move onto someone else.

Check with previous customers. Were they satisfied with the work? Was the work finished within a reasonable time frame? Did the contractor return phone calls? If the person had problems with the contractor, ask how the contractor responded to complaints. Look at examples of the landscape contractor's work.

A word of mouth referral is probably the best source to obtain names of a reputable landscape contractor. The person giving you the referral has some skin in the game. Their reputation is on the line. If they give you the name of someone whom performs shoddy work, how will that reflect back on them? Also consider the source of the referral. Did they hire the contractor to work for them, or was it actually their boss's sister who actually hired the contractor?

### 2) Not checking the landscape contractor's license.

In many states, a license is required for any construction business that advertises, offers, bids, arranges for, or performs any construction, alteration, home improvement, remodeling or repair work that exceeds a certain valuation. If you think your project is more along the lines of a handyman, then a contractor's license would not be required, but you should check them out otherwise through references or previous clients.

If the type of work you need done requires a licensed landscape contractor, do they have a license? This is a BIG red flag. Many "contractors" refuse to get licensed because they do not want to operate a legitimate business, which requires hiring legal employees, paying workers compensation and other insurance, charging and paying sales taxes or reporting such income to the IRS. They operate under the table and may often make a deal with you if you pay them cash.

This type of attitude and mentality is a reflection of their follow through with your job. Would you trust them to stand behind their work? How can you file a complaint if something goes wrong? (You can't).

If your project dictates the hiring of a licensed landscape contractor, contact the state agency that has the license on record. Check to see if the license is in good standing. Do they have any complaints? If so, were they resolved? Check to verify that the person who gave you their license is the same as that indicated with the state records.

There are unlicensed "contractors" who use other people's license numbers and hope you don't bother to check things out. It is also illegal for a licensed contractor to allow another individual to "use" their license.

### 3) Automatically accepting the lowest bid.

The old saying "you get what you pay for" generally applies here. A higher bid may be worth the price in better materials, workmanship and reliability. Taking the lowest bid is not always the best strategy. A private residence is not the same evaluation process that a government agency performs. When a government awards a contract to the "lowest bid" it is because those bidding have gone through extensive screening to be allowed to bid. Further, they are bidding on the exact same project, same design, same materials, etc., which makes the whole decision, come down to the lowest bid. You should not use this approach, because your project is not a government contract.

### 4) No written contract or poorly written contract

Any contractor who fails to prepare a written contract or who gives you a verbal statement of the cost to do certain work should be avoided. They are not professional and you have no idea what is to be performed. This is a recipe for disputes about what the contractor promised and what you expected.

Even if a contract is prepared, make sure it has essential contractual language such as the start date, expected completion, total cost of the job, installment payments, scope of work that lists in as much detail as possible, the materials, amounts, square footages, quantities, etc. and the products to be furnished. Avoid descriptions such as "install brick patio in backyard".

If your project seems silly to draw up a written contract, at least withhold payment until the job is done to your satisfaction, otherwise you will have no recourse.

5) Not understanding whom you should be hiring.

What is your landscape project? Does it consist of preparing a design as well as construction? Is the contractor with whom you are considering skilled at design? If not, perhaps you need to hire a separate landscape designer so that you get what you want and not what the contractor thinks you should have.

Knowing what you want in terms of your wants and needs and to an extent, the feel for what you want to achieve is very helpful in deciding whom to hire. If your project is a single focus such as building a brick patio, you may want to hire a contractor that specializes in "masonry work" rather than a person who normally does yard maintenance but who says they can do brick patios as well. If your project is all encompassing such as a new home with no landscaping, you should consider hiring a company that can both design and build the entire project.

Keep this in mind: most landscape contractors did not start out as landscape designers. But there are some landscape designers who obtained contractors licenses because they wanted more control over their designs. Find out their backgrounds, their education and career history and you will be in a good position to evaluate if you are hiring the right person.

## About the Author

John Stuart Leslie is creator and founder of Virtual Garden Designer. Now you can work with an experienced landscape designer online to have your garden or landscape designed professionally with ease and convenience. He holds a Master's degree in Landscape Architecture and has been a landscape designer and contractor for over 20 years. Free Landscape Design Ecourse at <http://www.virtualgardendesigner.com>

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