

- Who will be your main contact for additional questions and concerns?
- How will you be billed? (i.e. full payment before work begins, upon completion, or a down payment and the balance at completion)
- What forms of payment does the contractor accept (cash or credit)?
- What is the contractor's insurance coverage? (Make sure the contractor has insurance.)
- And to ensure the landscape contractor is interested; ask if they would like your business.

Finally, one of the most important aspects of choosing a landscape contractor comes from your intuition. What was your initial perception of the company and the individuals you spoke to? Did your potential project seem important to the contractor or did you have to make multiple calls before getting any response? Remember that if you are less than satisfied from the first impression, you will likely be less than satisfied with the final product.

When choosing a landscape contractor there are many factors that will influence you. Consider all the elements and make a list of pros and cons to help make your decision. Your landscape can be considered a long-term investment and price should never be the only factor in making this very important decision.

For more information on selection, planting, cultural practices, and environmental quality—

- contact your local Iowa State University Extension office
- visit these Web sites—  
ISU Extension Distribution Center (online store)  
[www.extension.iastate.edu/store](http://www.extension.iastate.edu/store)  
  
ISU Horticulture  
[www.yardandgarden.extension.iastate.edu](http://www.yardandgarden.extension.iastate.edu)  
  
Reiman Gardens  
[www.reimangardens.iastate.edu](http://www.reimangardens.iastate.edu)
- call Iowa State's Hortline at 515-294-3108 (Monday-Friday, 10 a.m.-noon and 1-4:30 p.m.).

If you want to learn more about horticulture through training and volunteer work, ask your ISU Extension office for information about the Iowa Master Gardener program.

Prepared by Kory Beidler, horticulture graduate student; Ann Marie VanDerZanden, extension horticulturalist; and Diane Nelson, communication specialist.

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# Choosing a Landscape Contractor

**H**iring a landscaper can be a daunting task. The scope, price, and expectation of each job will vary depending on you, the client. Some individuals seek the best company to plant a 15-gallon tree in their front yard at the lowest price, while others search for a company that can completely renovate their 1.5-acre property. Choosing a landscaper is a decision with a number of considerations.

One way to start is to review potential landscape companies from the telephone book yellow pages, both the book and online versions. Often landscapers will state specializations in their advertisements. If you are using the online yellow pages, you can quickly link to the company's Web site for additional information. Keep in mind that many landscapers still believe the best way to increase business is by "word of mouth" and may not have a listing. Talk to friends, family, or anyone in the neighborhood who recently had landscaping done that impressed you.

### **Professional Certification**

An important consideration in choosing a landscaper should be memberships and certifications. Companies that are serious about their profession often have active memberships in national, state, or local associations. Some of the more common professional groups and certifications include the following:

#### **International Society of Arboriculture**

- Certified arborists
- [www.isa-arbor.com](http://www.isa-arbor.com)

#### **Iowa Department of Agriculture & Land Stewardship**

- Iowa commercial pesticide certification

#### **Iowa Nursery and Landscape Association (INLA)**

- Certified nursery professionals in Iowa
- [www.iowanla.org](http://www.iowanla.org)

#### **The Irrigation Association**

- Certified irrigation contractors

#### **Professional Landcare Network (PLANET)**

- [www.landcarenetwork.org](http://www.landcarenetwork.org)

This 2005 merger combines the Associated Landscape Contractors of America (ALCA) with the Professional Lawn Care Association of America (PLCAA) to form a green industry clearinghouse for information. Certification training programs are available to landscape technicians (CLT: Certified Landscape Technician) and business owners and managers (CLP: Certified Landscape Professionals). From the Homeowners section, consumers can click on "Find a Professional" and "Find a Supplier" to find members in their state.

#### **Iowa Requirements**

State registration and licensure also are important when choosing a landscape contractor. For example, the Iowa Workforce Development (Iowa Division of Labor) requires all contractors be registered.

Registration does not guarantee quality or satisfaction of workmanship, but you can ensure that the business is official. Registered contractors in Iowa are required to complete the application process, prove compliance with unemployment tax and worker's compensation requirements, and pay a fee. To check an Iowa contractor's registration status, search the online database ([www.iowaworkforce.org/labor/contractor.htm](http://www.iowaworkforce.org/labor/contractor.htm)).

In addition to state registration, some counties or cities will have a license requirement. Check with your county and city offices for additional contractor requirements.

### **Tips on choosing a landscape contractor**

The next step is to contact each company and ask some basic questions. This initial conversation will allow you, and the contractor, to find out if the contractor's skills are a potential match for your landscape needs. Prepare your questions or concerns before calling or setting up a meeting. The following is a list of questions or topic points to discuss:

- What is the company's average size job?
- Do they have a required minimum to do work?
- Do they work in the area where you live?
- Are estimates and/or designs free?
- Can they provide a list of references or recent clients that you may contact?
- Do they have a list of recently completed jobs you can go look at?
- Are there any properties they completed several years ago that you can look at?
- How long has the landscape company been in business?
- What type of warranty comes with the plant material and workmanship?
- Are the quoted prices fixed or just estimates?
- What happens in unexpected situations (such as hitting an underground utility)?
- What (if any) college degrees are held by the owners and managers?
- What certifications are held by the owners and managers?