

5 Things Clients Should Do Before Calling a Landscape Contractor

*Written by: M. Alderman
Outer Beauty Landscapes
Burlington, On*

With the construction season only weeks away, landscape contractors are busy consulting with potential clients and scheduling projects for the months ahead. Attending numerous consultations each week, there never seems to be enough hours in the day to tackle the growing list of things to be completed before the season hits full swing. However, this time of year can be especially busy and stressful for potential clients as well.

As a way to make the process of hiring your landscape contractor more pleasant, informative and efficient, we have compiled a list of 5 important things each client should do prior to calling their first potential landscaper.

In some particular order, this list will provide you the tools and knowledge to narrow your list of potential contractors to only those best suited to complete your landscape project.

1) Create an overall design vision:

The first thing each client should do is have a premeditated or preconceived picture of what they want the final outcome of their landscape project to be.

Trade magazines, brochures, manufacturers websites and even a walk around the neighborhood are great avenues to gather ideas and compare design options which you can discuss during your first consultation with your chosen contractor.

There is always going to be room for creativity on the part of the designer but without a vision for the final product, through a client's direct input, it is next to impossible to put together an effective design which does not require major amendments, revisions and further time spent discussing the changes needed to shape what the client is ultimately seeking.

2) Research your material options:

With the continued growth of the landscape industry, there exists a multitude of products and materials available for use in the creation of unique outdoor features. Clients should research the available material options for their specific projects.

Visiting manufacturers websites is a good way to compare the sizes, styles and colours of available materials. On these sites, you will be able to find the pro's and con's as well as the recommended applications and limitations of materials to narrow the list of available options for you.

Visiting local suppliers will also give you the chance to compare pricing on various materials. By knowing which materials fall within your expected price range can greatly narrow the seemingly overwhelming field of choices. During your visit you will also be able to view actual samples of the materials as they would arrive to your home for installation. Because colour samples tend to vary between brochures and what leaves the factory, seeing materials in front of you may sway your decision and narrow your options further.

By knowing what products and materials you like and their associated costs provides a good basis to a creative and effective design requiring fewer revisions and time spent discussing them.

3) Research current construction standards:

The old adage 'They don't build things like they used to' is one that every potential client should pay particular attention to.

The way we construct landscapes today has changed from what it was even 10 years ago. This evolution comes about for good reason; recommended use of the best construction materials and methodologies comes to life through scientific research and replaces the practices of old. Unfortunately, when you examine the current industry standards, you will find a lot of landscape companies today are still doing it 'like they used to'.

The industry standards for constructing most landscape features are constantly assessed to reflect the current 'best practices' for installation. Checking industry and trade association websites (ICPI, Landscape Ontario for example) are the best ways to find what 'best practices' are currently available. This provides valuable information to be knowledgeable of before selecting a landscape contractor.

By comparing the practices of different landscape companies in areas such as excavation depths, base material selection (3/4" crusher vs limestone screenings), compaction methods etc., to those of the current industry standard, you will be able to narrow the field of choice to those contractors whose installations meet the highest level of construction code ensuring continued enjoyment for years to come.

You will also have the necessary tools to assess why one company may be priced higher than another by analyzing their methods of construction and material choices. It is more cost effective for those contractors who are focused more so on their bottom line rather than on quality installations to dump in 6" of limestone screenings as a the base for a walkway or patio (if your lucky to get 6" of material installed at all), run their compactor over it once, add another inch of screenings, rake it level by eye, lay the interlocking pavers, sweep in some fine brick sand, pack them down with their plate tamper, collect your money and be off to the next project as quickly as possible. These types of contractors base their business models around quantity rather than quality. By installing landscape features to a lesser standard than the current industry best practices means that an unqualified

contractor spends less money in labour and materials and is better able to undercut the price given by a more professional and educated company.

Knowing the current industry standards gives each client the power to analyze all costs associated with their project and to make comparisons between contractors in order to assess the long-term value they could receive by hiring a company who may not have provided the cheapest quotation, but whose methods of installation would ensure added longevity and enjoyment in their landscape transformations.

4) Set a Realistic Budget:

The one thing that often stops a contractor's design/estimate presentation dead in its tracks occurs when a potential client reads the estimated price to complete their project and gets blown away because it is more than they were hoping to pay. This is typically where the polite smile and handshake come into play and we go our separate ways.

Experience has found that clients are often reluctant to provide a budget during a consultation with a contractor, even when asked. Not having a dollar figure in mind essentially gives the designer no financial restrictions to constrain their design, only what material options and design styles you prefer. In most cases, clients weigh their choice of contractor heavily on the estimated costs provided. The end result is valuable time wasted by both parties as no financial limits had been set to design within.

By combining research on available materials and current construction standards with your overall design vision provides the basis for setting an educated budget plan to your project.

Even if you have not researched the options, having a budgeted figure which you are willing to invest provides a contractor with the appropriate confinements in meeting a client's expectations.

Do not be hesitant to share your allotted budget with a potential contractor. If an overall cost is clearly set, everyone's expectations will be clear and the designer can work within its limits to provide maximum enjoyment of the finished project.

5) Compare Contractors to Provide an Even Playing Field:

It is important that each client do the necessary background research in order to ensure they are dealing with an experienced, reputable and professional company that can competently complete all aspects of their project.

Because the spectrum of landscape companies ranges from your 'weekend warrior' with a shovel and wheelbarrow to fully certified and accredited contractors whose only business is in artistic landscape creation, clients need to know the caliber of

companies competing for their project and why the total costs between competitors can vary.

The best place to start before placing your first call would be a company's website. If a contractor has no website or the links on the site are not active, that should set off some initial 'red flags'.

Reputable companies will have websites which fully describe their areas of specialization and expertise in the industry, provide mission statements regarding their business and its objectives, inform clients of their processes and how they operate, explain any warranties associated with workmanship and provide details on any contractor liability insurance they possess.

Professional companies should also provide an online portfolio showcasing their work to give potential clients an idea of their creative potential.

Reputable contractors will also list any organizations or trade associations they are members to as well as listing any industry certifications and qualifications held. Typically, the more memberships and credentials a company possesses, the higher their level of commitment to quality in standards and forward progression of the landscape industry.

Another reliable way to assess the quality of potential contractors prior to scheduling your first estimate is to assess how they promote and market themselves. How did you, as a potential client, get their contact information? How did you hear about them? Was it word of mouth? Referred by a supplier who deals with local landscape contractors? An advertisement?

Established and reputable companies will have marketing and advertising budgets worked into their annual overhead costs and recognize the value in reaching out to potential clients, letting you know they want your business. Some of the more reputable forms of promotion include direct mail flyers, paid website advertisements (ie. Google Ads vs Kijiji) and trade association directories.

By advertising, landscape contractors are giving you an invitation to check out their credentials and want clients to compare them to local competitors.

A competent and qualified contractor will have no problem spelling out what sets them apart from their lesser qualified competitors and why you should hire them as the right contractor to complete your landscape transformations.