



HOW DO I HIRE A LANDSCAPE CONTRACTOR?

Hiring the right contractor to take care of your business or common area landscapes can be a challenging and critical decision. Installation or maintenance staff who have the proper knowledge and credentials will protect your investment and save you money in the long run. This document includes two sections. One for how to screen contractors during the hiring process. The second section will provide details on how to develop a scope of work and capital improvement plan.

I. SCREENING - BEFORE YOU HIRE

COMPANY QUALIFICATIONS

The company must be licensed, bonded, and insured to work in the State of Arizona. Ask for proof. The company must hold a current contractors' license, not just a business license.

It is a good idea to ask for a company profile. This tells how long the company has been in business, how many employees it has and the structure of the company. Ask for and call references and visit their properties. Call the Registrar of Contractors to find out if the contractor has had any complaints filed against him or her.

Most importantly, make sure that the company has experience and knowledge in the landscape or horticultural industry. Use the following as a handy checklist:

REFERENCES

Contacts (call them)

Locations (go look at quality and condition)

EDUCATION

A member of the onsite staff (owner or supervisor) must have appropriate horticultural training or an industry certification, i.e. Associates or Bachelor's degree in Horticulture, or certifications or certificates of completion in any of the following:

- Smartscape Program

- Master Gardener Program

- Arizona Certified Nursery Professional

- Arizona Certified Landscape Professional Program (ACLPP)

 - ACLPP Sustainable Landscape Management Certification

- Certified Irrigation Auditor, Contractor, Designer or Manager

- Desert Landscaper School Certification from Desert Botanical Garden

- Certified Arborist or Tree Worker through Intl. Society of Arboriculture

- Certified Pesticide Applicator through AZ Department of Agriculture

LICENSED & BONDED

Check better business bureau for past complaints

Check registrar of contractors for status and type of license

CUSTOMER SERVICE

Do they return phone calls in a timely manner?

Are they easy to contact?

Are they friendly and courteous?

How big is the company, if small, is there someone available at all times?

Will they provide records, work reports, written recommendations, or plan-of-work reports?

Are they willing to have monthly or quarterly meetings or inspections with property management?

WATER MANAGEMENT PHILOSOPHY

How do they adjust watering frequency depending on weather / soil / plant or turf type?

How do they perform seasonal scheduling?

Do they understand watering to promote deep roots?

Can they explain water distribution uniformity?

Are they willing to read meters and submit water reports?

Can they develop water budgeting schedules?

IRRIGATION SYSTEM MAINTENANCE

What is the frequency of inspection?

How do they handle repairs - how quickly?

PRUNING PHILOSOPHY

Have they had special training in pruning?

Do they top trees? (If so, it is not recommended to have them prune for you)

Do they believe in minimal or heavy pruning?

Do they prefer natural or formal pruning or use restorative pruning? (formal is not preferred)

If plants require pruning constantly because of location, would they prefer to replace them with something more appropriate?

Do they have knowledge of plant material and understand its' natural form?

WEED AND PEST CONTROL PHILOSOPHY

Do they have an Office of Pest Management Certification Card/License?

What is their philosophy on weed control in turf and/or in desert landscape areas?

What safety precautions do they use when spraying pesticides?

FERTILIZING REGIME

How often do they fertilize desert plants and/or tropical plants?

How often do they fertilize turf?

TURF MANAGEMENT PHILOSOPHY

What types of mowers do they use?

At what height do they cut the grass?

How often do they dethatch and aerate the soil?

Do they use top dressing?

What is their overseeding philosophy?

What is their schedule for reseeding winter rye?

II. CREATING A SCOPE OF WORK &/OR CAPITAL IMPROVEMENT PLAN

Property managers often ask for bids from contractors with little or no idea as to what they want done. Be prepared, do your homework, and create a scope of work specific to the property in question. If you do not feel confident creating a thorough scope of work, hire a consultant.*

1. SCOPE OF WORK

Consider these ideas:

- Create or obtain a map of the community that is clear and large enough to read. Detail the exact areas of the property that are to be serviced.
- Clearly spell out what duties are to be performed in what areas. For example, determine how often the grass will be mowed and which areas, if any, will be overseeded with winter grass. Determine how often the shrubs and hedges need pruning based on plant type and location (see Pruning Philosophy above or find our [Stop Shearing Shrubs](#) document). Trees along the pool, patio, or in high traffic areas may require pruning at least twice a year. Perimeter trees may only need annual pruning.
- Determine a monthly water budget based on the plant water requirements. This should be determined through a [landscape water-use calculator](#).
- Specify if there are certain hours that the irrigation is not allowed to operate in order to minimize evaporation and/or liability.
- Specify if the contractor will be using onsite trash dumpsters or be required to haul away debris.
- It is important to be specific about how extra work such as storm damage, vandalism, emergencies, or accidents will be handled. Will there be additional billing charges?
- Communicate to the contractor the Homeowners Association's rules (CCR's), which may include that the Contractor and employees wear uniforms and name badges, check in with the onsite manager, and possibly special operating times of noisy equipment.
- Know what the residents are expecting their community to look like. Would they like the shrubs to be manicured or natural looking?

An onsite pre-bid meeting is an ideal way to distribute your scope of work to all the contractors interested in bidding on your property. This is a good time to answer questions that may arise.

2. CAPITAL IMPROVEMENT PLAN

Consideration for capital improvements is often overlooked in landscaping. Plants, irrigation systems, walls, and patios need to be factored in for renovations and upgrades. Associations make plans or provisions to paint the units, resurface the drives, and parking lots, but are totally unprepared when the 10- or 15-year-old sprinkler system starts failing. It may be important that the company you hire have a design staff and construction crew to assist you in these upgrades or possible remodels.

The more information you have up front, the more comfortable you will feel working with the contractor. Good luck!

* These recommendations were developed by the City of Mesa with contributions by Glenn Fahringer, Owner of Earth Care "For All That's Green" Inc. Glenn is a Certified Arborist and an Arizona Certified Landscape Professional.