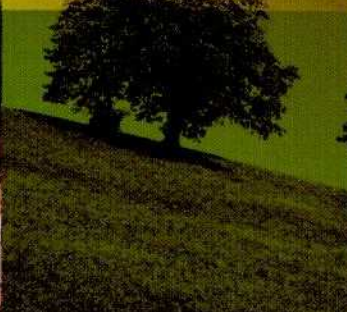


Hiring A Landscape Company

► **What You Should Know
Before You Start**



Hiring A Landscape Company

What You Should Know Before You Start

► Introduction

► Interview

Pre-Interview Preparation

- Develop Project Outline
- Generate List of Candidates
- Check for Credentials or Certification
 - Better Business Bureau
 - California Contractors State License Board
- Review Portfolio/Resume including references

Final Preparation for Interview

- Schedule Interview
- Review Project Outline
- Outline Interview Topics
- Review/Examine Credentials

Interview Topics/Landscape Details

- Installation
 - Soil Evaluation
 - Erosion Control
 - Irrigation Systems
 - Plant Selection
- Maintenance
 - General Maintenance
 - Fertilizer Management
 - Pest Management and Weed Control

► Additional Resources

University of California Cooperative Extension
Master Gardener Association
County Department of Agriculture, Weights, and Measures
Western Plant Health Association
California Irrigation Management Information System (CIMIS)
International Society of Arboriculture
California Contractors State License Board
California Landscape Contractors Association
Better Business Bureau

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INTRODUCTION

- How often and how much should I water my lawn?
- Can the plants I select for my landscape help reduce my water bill?
- Can I use the same fertilizer on all my plants?
- What product and how often should I spray to keep my yard pest free?

If you don't know the answers to these questions, or if you are too busy to research the information, but still want to maintain an attractive outside environment, then the services of a professional landscape company may be the answer for you!

As a homeowner, manager of a homeowners association, or a business owner with specific landscaping needs, this brochure and the associated interview worksheet will be useful tools as you research, interview, and select the professional landscape company that is right for you.

INTERVIEW

► Pre-Interview Preparation

Before you have turned over your first shovel of soil or have your first shrub planted, there are a few simple steps you can take to ensure that you have selected the right landscape company. A good starting point is to develop a written outline for your project. This outline should include items such as your vision, goals and expectations, type of project (installation only vs. installation and/or scheduled maintenance), budget, and a listing of local regulations, permits, and restrictions.

In defining the scope of your project it will be helpful to divide the activities into the following two categories:

CONSTRUCTION - should include items such as landscape design, installation of irrigation systems, construction of hardscape, and consideration of environmental and habitat issues.

ONGOING MAINTENANCE - should include activities such as mowing, edging, raking, aeration,



pruning, irrigation system repairs, fertilizing, and pest and weed management. Identifying these components at the onset of your project will assist in refining your overall landscape plan, budget development, and candidate selection. It is important to note that when developing a budget for your landscape project, equal attention must be given to the installation and the maintenance portions. A budget that focuses solely on the installation of a project without regard to the required ongoing maintenance will most likely result in a neglected landscape and a dissatisfied consumer. If you are representing a homeowners group or are living in a planned community it is essential that you communicate any Homeowners Association (HOA) regulations or restrictions to the landscape companies you consider.

After you have developed a comprehensive project outline, you will want to compile a list of 4-6 potential landscape companies. To generate this list, solicit recommendations from trusted friends and business colleagues, professional landscape organizations, and other horticultural groups. Once a satisfactory list has been created, contact the local chapter of the Better Business Bureau as well as the California Contractors State License Board to verify that each company on your list is in good standing in the business community and that their contractor's license is current and free from any complaints. This information is provided free of charge by these agencies and can prove to be extremely useful in heading off potential problems. *(Please see Additional Resources on page 10 for a listing of contact information.)*

Now that you have developed a pool of acceptable candidates, it is time to start reviewing their individual qualifications. To do this, request a resume/portfolio and reference list from each company. Obtaining these materials in advance of the initial interview will give you the chance to further refine your list as well as create possible questions for the next phase of the process, the interview.



Summary

- Develop Project Outline**
 - Goals and Expectations**
 - Type of Project and Assistance Needed**
 - Installation
 - Installation and/or Maintenance
 - Budget**
 - Installation
 - Maintenance
 - List of Local Regulations and Restrictions**
- Generate a List of Potential Candidates**
- Check with Better Business Bureau**
- Check with California Contractors State License Board**
- Review Portfolio/Resume**
- Check References**

► Final Preparation For Interview

Once you have made your “short list” of potential landscape companies, it is time to schedule individual interviews with a representative of each operation. Depending on the size of the companies on your list, the representative you interview may be a manager, a project supervisor, or the owner. In preparing for your interview, you will want to review your project outline so you can clearly convey your goals, expectations, and budget to each candidate. Remember, this is your first opportunity to communicate your vision to your future landscaper. If you are unsure of this vision, this is your opportunity to explore your interviewee's creativity and foresight.

Topics of discussion for this meeting should include: soil evaluation, erosion control, irrigation systems and elimination of runoff water, plant selection, maintenance, fertilizer management, pest management and weed control, and any topic that is pertinent to local restrictions, permits, and regulations. These topics will be explored in more detail in the next section of this brochure and are also found in the interview worksheet.

The interview is also a good opportunity to examine the landscape company's credentials and certifications. These documents should include, at a minimum, the company's contractor's license, liability insurance, and Workers' Compensation insurance. You should also take this opportunity to verify that the landscape companies' employees possess the proper credentials to follow through with the needed care for your property or project. These credentials include the necessary education and/or experience as well as the proper certification for the work that will be performed. A properly planned and conducted interview is an important key to the selection of the right landscape company.



Summary

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Schedule Interview | <input type="checkbox"/> Review/Examine Credentials |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Review Project Outline | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Contractor's License• Liability Insurance• Workers' Compensation Insurance• Maintenance Gardener Business License• Employee Credentials• Experience/Education/Certification |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Outline Interview Topics | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Soil Evaluation• Erosion Control• Irrigation Systems• Plant Selection• General Maintenance• Fertilizer Management• Pest Management & Weed Control | |

Minimum Required Licensing and Certification

- State Contractors License (Landscape Contractor License C-27)
 - For installation/remodeling projects valued at \$500+
- Minimum of *Qualified Applicator's Certificate Card* for pesticide application regulated by the CA Dept. of Pesticide Regulation
- Maintenance Gardener Business License provided by the CA Dept. of Pesticide Regulation
- Registered with County Dept. of Agriculture

Interview Topics/Landscape Details: INSTALLATION

► Soil Evaluation

The basis for a healthy landscape is healthy soil. Proper soil condition and composition are the key elements for the development of a successful landscape. You should ask your landscape company if a soil test will be conducted when they begin the evaluation of a property/project. You should also ask them how they will use this information to manage your landscape. A simple soil test will provide vital information regarding soil composition, nutrient levels, and organic content. The results of this evaluation can then be integrated into the design plan for your project. From this comparison, deficiencies are noted and amendments are recommended.

! Key Points & Questions

- › Is a soil test conducted?
- › How are the results utilized to strengthen your landscape plan?
(Example: Compare soil test results to the landscape plan to determine needed amendments and appropriate plant choices.)



► Erosion Control

Erosion control is a key factor to consider when evaluating a property or considering changes to an existing landscape. Although erosion occurs naturally through wind and water movement, it can also be accelerated by man-made influences, such as new construction, traffic patterns, and routine maintenance. You will want to discuss with your landscape company potential erosion issues of your specific project as well as how they will correct existing problems. Likely

solutions to erosion can include a correctly planned and maintained irrigation system, appropriate plant selection, and the utilization of compost or mulch. Proper erosion control will also reduce the movement of materials such as sediment, organic matter, and other nutrients into the storm drain system.

! Key Points & Questions

- › Are potential erosion issues examined?
- › What solutions are recommended for existing erosion problems?
- › What preventative actions are recommended to minimize or avoid future erosion?



► Irrigation Systems

A properly planned, installed, and maintained irrigation system will efficiently water your landscape while minimizing water cost, erosion, and plant disease. Your landscape installation company should have the ability to design, install, and schedule irrigation systems appropriately for your landscape. A well-designed landscape irrigation system may utilize sprinkler, spray, bubbler, and/or drip technology for application of the correct amount of water at the appropriate time without producing runoff. The irrigation system must be compatible with the landscape design. Typically, your landscape plants are grouped into “hydro-zones” (according to irrigation or cultural needs) and an irrigation valve station is used to effectively water each zone. Irrigation scheduling can be achieved by programming an electronic controller with watering days and times for each zone or station. Soil moisture and weather monitoring technologies are also available to enhance precision in irrigation control or fully automate a system.

Proper maintenance of the system is crucial for efficient irrigation. Ask your landscaper to explain how his company will schedule, monitor, and maintain the condition of your irrigation system. Organic soil amendments and mulches can also be utilized to assist with water retention and absorption, thereby conserving water and reducing water runoff. Remember, an additional benefit of a properly planned and maintained irrigation system is the elimination of water runoff. By eliminating water runoff from your property you are doing your part in minimizing the release of contaminants into our storm drain system.

! Key Points & Questions

- › Is the irrigation system divided into watering zones?
- › Is the irrigation system based on plant needs?
- › Is climate resource information utilized?
- › Are appropriate irrigation systems utilized to apply water uniformly and minimize runoff?
- › How is over-watering avoided?
- › Are organic amendments used to increase water holding capacity of soil?
- › How will the irrigation system be maintained?
- › Is water runoff eliminated?

► Plant Selection

Proper plant selection can contribute greatly to creating a landscape environment that requires minimum care, uses water efficiently, and provides maximum pleasure. In creating a list of potential plants, your landscape company will want to consider factors such as site location, landscape design plan, climate, salinity, cost of water, maintenance requirements, and consumer wishes. Equally as important is to select plants, if possible, that are suited to the area, are pest-resistant, are site-appropriate, and are non-invasive. Plants that address all or several of these factors will decrease maintenance costs while adding to the overall satisfaction of the landscape environment.

! Key Points & Questions

- Are plants that are site appropriate and suitable for the area recommended for your landscape design?
 - Select plants that are pest-resistant.
 - Select plants that are non-invasive.
 - Select plants that are compatible with maintenance budget.
- Is the landscape design compatible with your budget?

Interview Topics/Landscape Details: MAINTENANCE

► General Maintenance

When you plan to utilize a landscape company as the primary caretaker for your property/project, you will need to discuss what type of maintenance schedule is necessary to provide optimum care at an acceptable price. You will also want to clearly outline what, if any, involvement you will have in the maintenance of your landscape. If you do not plan to employ your contractor for the maintenance portion of your project, you will want to include in your interview a detailed discussion of what will be required by you to maintain your newly installed landscape. Having this discussion before the project is installed can help eliminate aspects of your landscape project that may be visually appealing, but require an excessive amount of care.

! Key Points & Questions

- What type of service program will be necessary to maintain your landscape?
- What type of maintenance will be required on a weekly, monthly, seasonal, and/or annual basis? (For example: mowing, edging, raking, aeration, pruning, irrigation system repairs, fertilizing, and pest and weed management.)
- What will be the homeowner's responsibility, if any, in maintaining the landscape?
- What type of emergency maintenance plan is available for situations such as a broken irrigation line?



➤ Fertilizer Management

Fertilizer management is essential in providing your landscape with needed nutrients in the appropriate amounts necessary to thrive. A proper fertilizer management plan should deliver nutrients at the correct level and time to the target plants. Landscape companies have many fertilizer management methods and materials available for use. Application methods include pre-plant, broadcast, and fertigation (*injecting fertilizer directly into the irrigation system*). Fertilizer materials can range from highly-soluble, fast-acting fertilizers to slow-release fertilizers and are available in chemical and organic forms.

When developing a list of fertilizer management options, your landscape company should consider the personal philosophy of the individual homeowner, HOA, or business regarding chemical or organic additives. Some individuals or organizations may prefer to use one method over another. Additionally, a well designed fertilizer plan will aid in the reduction or elimination of the release of excess nutrients into the surrounding environment.

! Key Points & Questions

- Review of application practices including timing, amounts, and location.
 - Is runoff potential considered when using nutrient products?
 - Are organic amendments used when appropriate?
 - Are fertilizer practices closely tied to plant selection?
- To maximize fertilizer efficiency, like plants should be planted in groups with similar fertilizer and water needs.

► Pest Management and Weed Control

Many pest management and weed control methods have the potential of generating concern with homeowners, homeowner associations, and neighborhood communities. To address this issue, it is recommended that you discuss with each landscape company a list of pest management products that are used on a regular basis. This discussion should include a full explanation of the product as well as the effect the product will have on target organisms, non-target organisms, and the environment in general. With this information in hand, you can then develop a list of agreed-upon methods for your specific project.

A landscape company that conducts their pest management by using an Integrated Pest Management (IPM) approach will demonstrate a respect for the environment, generally provide the best care to an individual property, and minimize neighborhood concerns over pesticide use. A proper IPM program begins with an extensive knowledge of pest and weed problems within a region and incorporates a regular scouting program to monitor for pest activity. This knowledge is then combined with an arsenal of solutions that include biological, physical, and chemical control options along with a communicated understanding of acceptable thresholds of pest damage and weed presence. When the use of pest management products is necessary, a landscape company using an IPM approach will select products with minimal impact on the environment and non-target organisms. (Remember that these products should only be applied by properly licensed personnel.) The products will be applied with restraint, preferably as spot-treatments, and the applicator will demonstrate a full knowledge of the agents' effect on the problem as well as the environment.

! Key Points & Questions

- › Is an Integrated Pest Management (IPM) approach regarding pest management and weed control utilized?
- › Is a regular scouting or pest monitoring program part of their IPM approach?
- › Do the candidates have a knowledge of local pests and weed problems?
- › Are biological agents used for pest control where appropriate and available?
- › Are physical controls for weed suppression utilized if possible?
- › Is there an adequate understanding of the effect pesticide use has on the environment?
- › Do all employees associated with pesticide use have current appropriate licenses? (*See box on page 4.*)
- › Are the companies willing to provide information on possible pesticides that will be used?
- › Is the maintenance program recommended by the landscape company within the stated maintenance budget?



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- ▶ **University of California Cooperative Extension**
Farm and Home Advisors Office
www.ucanr.org - *State Site*
- ▶ **California Master Gardeners Network**
University of California Cooperative Extension
Farm and Home Advisors Office
www.cmgn.ucdavis.edu - *State Site*
- ▶ **County Department of Agriculture, Weights, and Measures**
www.cdfa.ca.gov- *CA Department of Food and Agriculture*
www.dpr.ca.gov- *CA Department of Pesticide Regulations*
- ▶ **Western Plant Health Association**
1801 I Street, Suite 200
Sacramento, CA 95814
Phone: 916-446-3316
FAX: 916-446-3067
www.healthylants.org - *State Site*
- ▶ **California Irrigation Management Information System (CIMIS)**
www.cimis.water.ca.gov/cimis/welcome.jsp
- ▶ **International Society of Arboriculture**
PO Box 3129
Champaign, IL 61826
www.isa-arbor.com/home.aspx - *International Site*
- ▶ **California Contractors State License Board**
9821 Business Park Drive
Sacramento, CA 95827
Phone: 800-321-2752
www.cslb.ca.gov - *State Site*
- ▶ **California Landscape Contractors Association**
1491 River Park Drive, Suite 100
Sacramento, CA 95813
Phone: 916-830-2780
FAX: 916-830-2788
Email: hq@clca.org
www.clca.org- *State Site*
- ▶ **Better Business Bureau**
www.bbb.com- *National Site*



This copy made compliments of:

For additional information contact:

*UCCE San Diego County
Farm and Home Advisors Office
5555 Overland Avenue, Suite #4101
San Diego, CA 92123
Phone 858-694-2184
Web Site: www.cesandiego.ucdavis.edu*



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University of California, County of San Diego, and the United States Department of Agriculture cooperating.