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## HIRING THE PERFECT LANDSCAPE CONTRACTOR

Hiring the right contractor to perform work at your home can be challenging, especially in the landscaping industry, where it seems that anyone who owns a truck and a shovel can call themselves a landscaper. Here are a few ways to minimize the risk when dealing with landscapers or other contractors, so you end up with a contractor you can count on and a final result you're satisfied with.

1. **Get a personal referral.** Ask your friends and coworkers if they've had any personal experience with a landscaper who they would recommend. Usually, you'll get a list of people to try. Call them and see if they have any materials they can send you about their company to help you pinpoint exactly what type of services you're looking for. Initial consultations should be free to you and be able to provide you with a wealth of information. Be prepared for your meeting by gathering photos of landscapes you like or by jotting down some ideas of what you hope to accomplish in your yard.
2. **Check references.** Once you've met with any landscaping candidates, the first thing you'll want to do is to check on their references. Ask for a list of their customers and then do the leg work and find out what they liked or didn't like about their experience. Sometimes even the best landscapers don't provide the greatest customer service and follow up, and that's a good thing to find out before you sign on the dotted line. If you still want more information about the contractor, ask about their vendor references. Good rapport with vendors is a must for contractors in this industry and you should get a good sense of whether your contractor is using your deposit money to pay for materials he bought for a job he did 6 months ago.
3. **Look at examples of work.** If you want to see if your landscaper's style meshes with your vision for your yard, take a tour of some of their finished projects. Ask for a list of addresses to look at and then take an afternoon to drive around and check them out. If you're interested in landscape lighting, drive around at dusk when the lights are on but it's still bright enough to get a good sense of the landscape as well.
4. **Get an estimate based on a design.** This is really important!! Don't trust a contractor who walks around your yard for 10 minutes and then tells you nonchalantly that he could landscape it for \$10,000. You need to know exactly what that \$10,000 buys, and the only way to do that is to have a scale design down on paper. Without it, you have no idea if your money is buying seeded turf grass or sod, seedlings or 5 gallon shrubs, cedar mulch or pole peelings, etc. You wouldn't go to the grocery store and pay \$50 for a steak sight unseen. You'd want to know how many pounds of what cut & what type of meat that \$50 bought you. The same goes for landscaping. And, once you have a design, you can get several estimates comparing like terms.
5. **Never put down more than 50% deposit.** We've heard horror stories of people paying for their entire landscape up front and then having the contractor perform half the work, or worse, taking your money and leaving town. Checking references is a good way to combat this unscrupulous activity, but a good rule of thumb is NEVER give a contractor more than a 50% deposit for work. It's unnecessary and risky.
6. **Get it in writing.** Before giving a contractor money, make sure you have in writing exactly what that money is buying. Usually, a simple estimate of services should spell out all the details of their proposal, and give you a good idea of exactly what you are getting for the money. If it's too general or says something vague like "Landscape services-\$10,000" send it back for revisions. By having it in writing, you have something to refer to if the job doesn't turn out as expected, or if any part of the process doesn't seem right.
7. **Act as a reference.** If you were satisfied with the job your landscaper did upon completion, offer to be a reference. By informing other potential consumers about your experience, you provide an invaluable service both to the landscaper and to his/her perspective clients. Furthermore, you do your part to keep the good contractors employed and the bad ones from taking advantage of anyone else.

By taking a few simple steps to protect yourself, your landscaping experience should be enjoyable and exciting, not stressful and frustrating. Always work with a knowledgeable contractor and don't be afraid to ask questions. Remember, they work for you, not the other way around.