

Q I'm finally ready to start making a plan for my outdoor area. Where do I start? — JOSH T. IN MANAHAWKIN

A Hiring the right person for the job is the best place to start. Here are some tips to help you in your search.

1 INTERVIEW EARLY. This allows time to plan intricate projects and to get a feel for which contractor will best meet your needs. Narrow the list to at least three choices, but don't stop the search if you aren't comfortable with those options.



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2 SCREEN OUT ANYONE WITHOUT THE RIGHT CREDENTIALS. Obtain copies of the company's licenses and insurance certificates. If you are hiring a landscape architect, check his or her state license number with the New Jersey Division of Consumer Affairs at 973-273-8090 or visit www.state.nj.us/cgi-bin/consumeraffairs/search/searchentry.pl.

3 CHECK REFERENCES. Ask specific questions of previous clients, such as:

- Did in-house employees or subcontractors do the work?
- Were there unforeseen costs due to misunderstandings?
- Did the completed work meet or exceed your expectations?
- Was there any warranty work and was it handled to your satisfaction?

4 VISIT COMPLETED JOB SITES. Once you've narrowed down the choice to a few candidates, go see their work. Make sure the job you're visiting is on the reference list, that the homeowner will be available when you visit, and that the project is similar to what yours will be. Here are some points to keep in mind as you examine the work:

Masonry

- Walk all over a patio. It should feel solid underneath
- Check the joints on a masonry patio. To prevent ice penetration, they shouldn't be bigger than your thumb.

- If you're looking at a traditional pattern of stone, the lines north and south should be perfectly parallel.
- Large walls should be graceful and neat without openings between the stones or bulging.

Plants

- Does the texture throughout the garden look the same or is there contrast? Plants bloom for only a short time. It's after the prom when you really see how your date held up.
- Are the trees planted in scale with the surrounding structures? Does the grouping of shrubs and perennials look natural or are there lots of single plants that will never form a natural mass?
- If you see an overwhelming number of specimen trees in a large planting, the project is unbalanced and the owners likely paid more than they should have. It's better to have a couple of accent specimens with the greater area covered with lush shrub and perennial masses.

Water Features

- Waterfalls that look like steps into a pool aren't natural.
- How does the waterfall fit into the landscape? Does it look like a volcano or like a pile of rocks sitting on the edge of the water? It should be aesthetically pleasing.
- Is there a lot of cement in the waterfall construction? Is the water plentiful or at a trickle?

5 FOR COMPLICATED PROJECTS, HIRE A LICENSED LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT. Landscape architects with experience in large projects have the advantage of the certification and continuing education required to maintain their licensing.

6 MAKE SURE THE OWNER OF THE COMPANY WILL BE ON-SITE DURING YOUR PROJECT. Companies where the owner manages the work offer better service.

7 INSIST ON UNIT PRICING. Always ask for unit pricing so you can compare apples to apples, and don't assume everything is included in your bid. If it isn't listed in black and white, nine out of 10 times it isn't included. If you already have a bulk bid but can't determine what's included, ask the company for details.

8 BEWARE OF COMPANIES THAT LACK THE PROPER EXPERTISE. If a company says it "does it all," ask for that in writing. Don't be fooled into hiring a contractor who claims to have experience in a particular area but instead uses low-bid subcontractors.

9 KNOW YOUR GUARANTEES. Always check the terms of a guarantee and make sure all labor and materials are included. A longer guarantee usually means the builder is more confident in his or her methods of construction. You are more likely to get issues resolved when one company handles all aspects of the project. If a general contractor or management firm oversees your project, make sure the managing party is directly responsible for all warranty items. Too often, low-bid subcontractors disappear when warranty obligations need to be fulfilled or play the blame game with one another, leaving you in limbo.

10 DON'T BE YOUR OWN GENERAL CONTRACTOR. Managing a large landscape and pool project takes experience. Hiring the right professional will reduce worries, give you more up-to-date features, and minimize the possibility of costly mistakes and redos. You get what you pay for. **DNJ**

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