



Designing a Landscape? Seek Professional Assistance

by Michelle Le Strange, UC Master Gardener

So you've bought your first house or perhaps you've finally achieved your retirement dream of five acres in the country. All that outdoor space is a blank tapestry beckoning you to weave it full of color, style, and tranquility while conserving water and being environmentally friendly. Yet, every time you think about breaking ground, your feeling is one of helplessness and fear.

Admit it. You need professional help. Most landscapes would be more appreciated, if they started with a better design. If only homeowners weren't so macho or naïve to admit that they need professional help. Even avid gardeners that know quite a bit about plants come to recognize that something is just all wrong with their garden layout or design.

Finding a good landscape professional can appear confusing. There are landscape architects, designers, and contractors – or simply “landscapers.” Which pro do you need? And once you decide that, how do you find one who you will like?

If solving your problems entails some heavy duty construction such as retaining walls and major changes in slopes, grades, hydraulics and elevations, then perhaps a member of the American Association of Landscape Architects (ASLA) is for you. Those who use this title must have taken a four or five year program at an accredited university and passed a national examination.

But if you're the average homeowner with a quarter acre lot or less and a small budget, then an ASLA member might be overkill.

Landscape designers are apt to concentrate more on horticulture and less on hydraulics. But anyone can use the title “designer,” so how do you begin to find a good one?

Someone who advertises as a landscape contractor may have an instinct for design, but may also be an installer of plants and decks; the person you call after you have a design.

Some are landscape designers and contractors and have established enough of a reputation that they get all their business by word of mouth. If you really admire a neighbor's garden and suspect that they had some help putting it together, ask them who designed their plan. And just as hardware stores frequently have names of building contractors, local nurseries can often recommend reputable garden designers and contractors.



Letting your fingers walk through the Yellow Pages is a pretty hit-or-miss proposition, but landscape designer/contractor ads do give you an idea about their main focus, whether it be natural- scapes, water features, or specific landscape styles like Southwestern, Tuscan, or Japanese, and even Gardening Central Valley Style. Consult with a few of them to see who best meets your ideas and expectations.

Your initial phone call to the professional is important. Find out as much as you can in a short time. Explain how big your property is, where it is, and the key changes you think you want to make. You'll learn pretty quickly if your project is too small or too far away from where the designer likes to work. Also ask the designer about credentials – training, years of experience, certification, and professional memberships. See if you can get names and phone numbers of former clients or places where you can see previous work.

Tell the designer/contractor whether you just want a plan drawn or want to have every brick installed and every annual planted. Of course, you must talk about...money. If you don't ask them first for an estimate, then the professional will ask you, or you should offer what you are willing to spend over how long a period. If the budget is tight or if you are doing the labor yourself, the designer may be happy to talk about a plan that can be carried out in stages over several seasons.

Good professional designers will look at your outdoor spaces with an artist's eye. They are likely to give you more ideas in a couple of hours than you can produce in months. They will guide you in framing a view with trees, or shaping a patio to create an illusion of more space. It's not hard to find a designer to help you bring out the natural beauty of your property. Your landscape may literally take on whole new dimensions.

Check out the Water-Wise Gardening Visalia website designed by CA Water Service at <http://www.visalia.watersavingplants.com/>. Their Garden Gallery has hundreds of pictures of front, back, and side yards plus more. You will get a feel for what you like and don't like and be able to discuss ideas with your new landscape professional.

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