



OHIO LANDSCAPE ASSOCIATION

The rustic architecture of a Colorado ski community inspired the style of this home in Jackson Township. Landscape architects from Rice's Nursery & Landscaping, in North Canton, installed natural stone outcroppings along with large Colorado spruce, dwarf evergreens and clusters of alpine perennials to reinforce the Rocky Mountain theme. Tall deciduous trees were kept away from the house to keep the expansive feeling of a western landscape. A large natural stone water feature was positioned out from the back foundation of the home to simulate a babbling mountain brook that can be seen from inside as well as from two deck areas.

How to choose a professional landscaper

ROXANNE WASHINGTON
Plain Dealer Reporter

It seems like spring can't get here fast enough.

But if you plan to hire a professional landscaper, and you haven't settled on a company, spring will be here before you know it, and you'll be scrambling to grab whatever company is still available.

"Once you find a landscaper, they may be busy two weeks out, six weeks out, or six months out," comes the advice from the Landscapers-Direct Web site. "Their schedule needs to coincide with your schedule. If you're using multiple services, i.e. a designer and an installer, and you're doing the subcontracting, there are multiple schedules you will need to juggle."

Then, of course, there's always the danger that when all is said and done, you're unhappy with the work.

Let's face it: Choosing a landscaper can be mind-boggling, particularly in Northeast Ohio, where the choices are many.

"Ohio is very rich in the landscape industry, and we're lucky to have so many nurseries near here," says Sandy Munley, executive director of the Ohio Landscape Association.

The nonprofit trade group, through education, seminars and publications, works to maintain high professional standards in landscape design, contracting and customer service.

There's a wealth of information on the organization's Web site, www.myohiolandscape.com, about residential and commercial landscaping. If all that you need is lawn mowing and snow removal, the association can point you in the direction of landscapers that mainly do maintenance.

If you're going for the whole shebang, swimming pool, outdoor hot tub, outdoor kitchen — jobs that require digging, irrigating and wiring — they'll pair you with landscape designers and, if need be, landscape architects.

But the first step in finding a landscaper is obvious.

"Look around at other landscaping in your area and see what catches your eye," says Munley. "Ask the homeowner who he or she worked with."

That's what Mark Cipriano of North Royalton and his wife did after reaching the conclusion that their yard needed serious help — new deck,

patio, paving, sprinkler system — the works.

"A couple of people in the area kept raving about the same company, which was Precision [Lawnscapes, in North Royalton]," says Cipriano. "Other than them, we got two other estimates, but when we saw Precision could do everything we wanted, we went with them."

Cipriano mentions "everything we wanted" because landscaping services vary greatly. You can hire a company that maintains your lawn, shrubs and flowers. You can hire someone to design your landscape — show you the best placement for certain flowers and trees and shrubs — and that's where their job ends.

If you don't want to do the planting yourself, you'll have to hire another company to do the actual digging and planting. That's when you get into trouble because everybody's schedule, including yours, has to flow to get the job done in a timely manner.

When you throw paving and installing fountain, hardscaping and building codes into the mix, if all the companies involved aren't on the same page, it can be chaos.

"Landscape designers tend to be more focused on plant material and residential services," says Munley. "A landscape architect is more commercial work, more involved in the infrastructure. A good landscape designer can give you anything and more than you'll need. If you have property and need a cantilever, you need an architect."

It's pointless to hire a top-of-the-line landscape designer, then skimp on materials.

"People spend a huge amount of budget on design and then go with the lowest bidder on installation," says Eric Griff, landscape manager at Lowe's Greenhouses, Florist & Gift Shop in Chagrin Falls. "If you have poor bed preparation and poor choice of botanicals, it won't look as nice as the designer intended it to."

Remember, you don't have to overhaul your yard all at once, especially if the budget doesn't allow.

"A landscaper can help you plan out what you want in phases," says Munley. "A well-thought-out landscape will increase the value of your home in time, and a good landscaper can stage it out for you in phases."

To reach this Plain Dealer reporter:
rwashington@plained.com, 216-999-4427

Check landscaper's credentials in advance

You hire a landscaper because you want a beautiful yard. But you want someone who knows what he's doing.

Check for professional credentials, such as Certified Landscape Technician, Certified Landscape Professional and Ohio Certified Nursery Technician.

These Web sites can get you on your way.

- The Ohio Landscape Association, www.myohiolandscape.com. If you have no idea where to start looking for a landscaper, you can start by typing in your ZIP code on the Web site to at least find companies that are closest to you.

- www.buckeyegardening.com/choosinghelp.html.

- www.landscapers-direct.com/choose-landscapers.html.

Questions for prospective landscapers

How long has your company been in business?

How many employees do you have, and how many will work on the job?

If your company is reselling nursery stock, do you have a nursery dealer's certificate?

What services do you provide, and what are your specialties?

What are your business hours and the best time to reach you?

What professional affiliations do you belong to, such as the Better Business Bureau, and national and state landscaping associations?

Is the company licensed? (Being certified by the state means that the service is accountable to you and operating legally. And it normally implies that the employees have passed tests which prove a higher level of education, professionalism and the quality of work.)

Are you insured? (If not properly insured, the homeowner could be liable for accidents or injuries that happen on the job. Check for proof of insurance, and make a photocopy if need be. Make sure the company's name is on the policy, the policy number, expiration date, insurance company's phone number and so on. It's smart to verify with the insurance company that the policy is valid.)

What guarantees does your company have? What is specifically covered, and what is the length of the guarantee?

Other pointers

- Make sure to get at least three references. Drive by the locations if possible and look, or look at photographs of their work. If you feel comfortable, contact the homeowners the company did work for and ask questions.

- The company should provide a written contract with details of the project clearly laid out, with prices for each detail. If you can get a detailed graphic layout of the work, do so. Also, get a quote on changes or possible problems or unseen factors that may arise during the job.

- Last but not least, schedule the work so that you can be around during the process. It's important to constantly examine the quality of the work, that they're doing exactly what they were hired to do, and that they are there when scheduled to be there.

When the job is completed, take one last walk-through with the lead contractor, possibly with contract in hand, making sure that the job is completed to your satisfaction.

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