

# How to Choose a Landscape Service Provider

*Agents Corner*—By Laura Miller, County Extension Agent—Commercial Horticulture

**M**aster gardeners by nature enjoy getting out and working in their gardens. Do-It-Yourself landscapers benefit from fresh air, exercise, and the satisfaction of seeing the results of their own labors. However there are times when even those who love mowing their own lawns may find themselves in need of a little professional help. This could be due to limitations in time or mobility, or because the job is just a bit too complicated (installing a new irrigation system) or even dangerous (removing a storm-damaged tree) for the average D-I-Yer. Hiring someone to Do-It-For-Me can allow even those who love gardening to spend more time relaxing in the landscape on Saturday evenings instead of sweating in the landscape on Saturday mornings.

## - Which Services Do You Need?

The first step in finding a landscape service provider is always the same: decide what you want the provider to do. The most basic landscape service is often called “mow and blow.” Almost anyone from the teenager next door to a national landscape company can provide this kind of service, but a good company will be able to do this much more efficiently than you can. Ian MacLean of Highland Landscaping in Southlake says that new customers are always impressed with how quickly his crews can mow and edge. “While it might take them a few hours, we can do it in 20 minutes.”

Sometimes you need more than regular maintenance, and when you do you’ll want to find someone who is well qualified to handle the job. That doesn’t always mean that they will be licensed. In the State of Texas, a license is required to:

- Apply pesticides. The Texas Department of Agriculture, [www.texasagriculture.gov](http://www.texasagriculture.gov), regulates the commercial application of all pesticides and requires that individuals who apply pesticides for hire be licensed. This license is not required to apply fertilizers.
- Sell plant materials. The Texas Department of Agriculture also inspects plant materials to prevent the movement of plant pests and requires that anyone who sells plants to have a Nursery/Floral license and to provide access to those plants to inspectors. This not required to install plants that you purchase from a licensed retailer.
- Install or modify an irrigation system. The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, [www.tceq.state.tx.us](http://www.tceq.state.tx.us), regulates landscape irrigation to prevent contamination of public water supplies and to encourage water conservation.
- Landscape Architects, but not Landscape Designers, are also required to have a professional license issued by the state.
- When landscape services can be provided by individuals who are not licensed, consider looking at certifications. Certifications can help you determine which providers have proven that they have met certain professional qualifications, usually by providing proof of education and experience and by passing a standard examination.

Certifications to look for include:

- Certified Arborist. The International Society of Arboriculture, [www.isa-arbor.com](http://www.isa-arbor.com), offers some of the most widely recognized certifications due to the scope and history of the organization and its programs. There are several levels of ISA certification and all require experience, education, and completion of an examination. To maintain certification, they must earn Continuing Education Units. Trees are the largest, most valuable components of a landscape and their care often requires special skills and equipment. While no one has ever

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been injured by an improperly pruned Nandina, in 2009 in the United States 44 people were injured and there were 59 tree-related fatalities that were non-work related. These statistics were compiled by a worldwide news-clipping service, so the real numbers are probably higher.

- Texas Certified Nursery and Landscape Professionals. The Texas Nursery and Landscape Association's consumer website, [www.landscapetexas.org](http://www.landscapetexas.org), can help you find a certified professional in your area. Certifications include Texas Certified Nursery Professional (TCNP), Texas Certified Landscape Professional (TCLP), and Texas Master Certified Nursery Professional (TMCNP). These professionals have to document education and work experience and pass an exam. To maintain certification, they must earn Continuing Education Units.

### **- Where Do You Find a Good Provider?**

In addition to checking the lists of licensed and certified individuals as described above, another great way to start is by asking friends and neighbors whose landscapes you admire for recommendations. Many companies have good websites with photographs of their work and information about the services they provide as well as additional information about the company.

Always ask questions about both the business itself and about the practices and products that will be used. Ask to see any required licenses and require proof of insurance, both liability and workers' compensation. Educate yourself about environmentally appropriate lawn care practices and remember that you **want** to pay for expertise in addition to services provided. A good landscape service provider will allow you to have a more beautiful and valuable landscape without breaking a sweat.

### **- What Should Be Included in a Contract?**

A written agreement sets the stage for good communication and clear expectations between you and your landscape service provider. Don't accept unwritten assurances that things will be done a certain way. Make sure that everything is clearly spelled out in the contract, and that it is signed and

dated by both parties.

A contract should include:

- The landscape business name, address, and contact name and phone number
- Your name and address (and the addresses of any job sites that are different from your address)
- A detailed list of all work that is to be done—include environmentally friendly practices such as leaving grass clippings on the grass surface, maintaining mulch in beds at a depth of 2-4 inches, keeping mulch 6 inches away from the trunks of trees, etc.
- The frequency of the work (times per week, month or year that services will be performed)
- A list of any materials that will be used (type of mulch, annual bedding plants, fertilizers)
- Costs of services and materials
- How and when payment is due
- Warranties on materials and workmanship