

# A Guide to Hiring a Landscape Architect

What You Need to Know Before You Hire a  
Landscape Architect

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# INTRODUCTION

If you are planning new construction or renovation of a property, you certainly know that there are a lot of details to think about and orchestrate. It's exciting to think about the vision you have for your completed project: perhaps you're planning a renovation of a business district in your town that will revive the use of that area and improve the local economy with hip new bars, restaurants, and boutiques to attract tourists and local citizens. Or maybe you are developing a new hotel and golf resort that will challenge golfers of all levels and provide them with an elegant, yet relaxing resort and hotel that also offers horseback and biking trails. Or, perhaps you're creating your dream home with outdoor living spaces that include stone fireplaces and an outdoor kitchen that overlooks a pool and lush gardens.

Whether you have never been involved in a project like this before, or you are a seasoned industry professional, the 7 tips in this e-book include ideas and insights into the minds of landscape architects to help you have a successful project.

As we were preparing this, one of our colleagues accused us of being crazy for just giving away so much valuable information. "What if they take this information and hire one of our competitors?" he asked. We finally convinced him that providing this information is a great idea because it helps more people to fully understand the entire project process and how landscape architects fit into that process.

With so much experience and knowledge about what the components of a successful project include, we consider it a privilege to be able to share this level of information with you. It's almost as if you're getting an insider's look at the industry.

The ideas and tips we give you here support the high standards to which we hold ourselves at Sustainable Design and Consulting. We think that the more people who read this, the easier it will be for them to identify the landscape architect that will best fit their needs.

By now you've probably started to ask which professionals need to be involved in the planning and execution of your project? How do you know who you should hire? What regulations or ordinances must be followed and who is responsible for understanding how they impact your project? The questions can be overwhelming at times!

We understand. It's why we are providing you with these 7 important tips you should know about landscape architects. Whether you are preparing to improve the look of your yard, how you use the outdoor space at your home or you're planning new construction of your city's stadium, after you read these 7 tips, you'll have a better understanding of exactly what landscape architects do (and DON'T do!); how we work; what to look for when you are hiring a landscape architect; and other important facts that will help your project run smoothly.

After all, regardless of the size and scope of your project, you want to make sure that your budget is used wisely and that you are working with the best professionals available to ensure work is completed with as few mid-project change orders as possible. Otherwise, your project could easily run over your initial budget and deadlines. That's something everyone wants to avoid.

# What is a Landscape Architect?

What exactly is a Landscape Architect?

Many people get confused when they hear the term, “landscape architect.” Some people ask us questions like, “Do you design buildings too?” or “Do you take care of the plants after they are installed?” or “How are you different from the other architects or engineers who are involved in my project?” Those are all great questions!

So, before we even start, here is a broad definition of what landscape architects do:

Landscape architecture is the design of outdoor and public spaces to influence and achieve environmental, social behavior and appealing visual results. As part of the design process, a great landscape architect will consider many things, including:

- Social needs
  - Aesthetics
- Ecological factors
  - Geography
  - Budget
- Land management
  - Rehabilitation
  - Public safety
  - Sustainability

Landscape architects provide professional services surrounding the planning and design of land so that people can use it to their benefit today and for many future generations. Their work can include the following:

- Site and environmental analysis
- Analysis of social and economic conditions for the area
  - Site suitability studies
- Developing alternative land use strategies

- Producing conceptual and master plan documents
  - Providing detailed designs
- Supervising the construction and bidding process for contractors
- Ongoing landscape management and maintenance plans
  - Producing planting plans and specifications
  - Developing irrigation plans
- Cost estimating and contract administration
  - Protecting environmentally sensitive areas
    - Protecting watershed and water quality
  - Solving site drainage or hydrology problems
- Providing designs that comply with local or state regulations and codes

By incorporating proper aesthetic, practical and environmental design, landscape architects can help create new or updated outdoor spaces that are attractive, useful, and eco-friendly.

Landscape architects possess a unique combination of education, experience and knowledge of design, environmental issues, horticulture, engineering and construction. Our work impacts (and is impacted by) these professions, and so we must understand how to best integrate our plans as part of a project that is completed on time and within budget.

Whether you are involved with planning a residential, commercial or public project, having the right landscape architect on your team is key to its successful completion. The landscape architect will consult and work with other professionals involved in the project such as your civil engineers, general contractor, building architect, surveyors, as well as other engineers and subcontractors.

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## Screening a Landscape Architect

Right now, you may be interviewing or preparing to interview several landscape architects for your project. We suggest that you establish a list of criteria or some sort of method for scoring the candidates to help simplify your evaluation process. Making a final choice on who your landscape architect will be is one of the most important decisions you will make throughout your entire project. Because landscape architects are responsible for so much of the exterior design, and because they are an integral part of your entire team of professionals who will be involved, it's vital that you make an intelligent decision here!

We've even included an evaluation scorecard so that you can do this at the end of this report. In the meantime, we invite you to read this information with your next project in mind. As you do so, think about the suggestions and lists of questions we have included for you and your potential landscape architects. These should help you with your project planning and selection process.

As you interview and evaluate landscape architects, it's important to look at factors other than simply the submitted bid price or project proposal. Actually, we don't recommend ever using a bid process. It leaves too many of the questions that we'll review in this e-book unanswered. Instead, we encourage you to consider the 7 tips described in this report and use the sample questions we've included throughout so that you can choose a landscape architect who will work with you to produce the vision of your overall project.

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# *The 7 Most Important Landscape Architecture Tips*

**Tip #1 - Know what level of expertise and area of specialization you require for your project**

**Tip #2 - Clear communication is key to successful project completion**

**Tip #3 - Understand your landscape architect's approach to the design process**

**Tip #4 - Ask your landscape architect about his or her horticultural knowledge**

**Tip #5 - Understand the role your landscape architect will play in your project and make sure your contract includes details that protect both parties to leave little room for misunderstandings or miscommunication**

**Tip #6 - Understand the differences in professional designations and licensure**

**Tip #7 - Use a scoring system to make a wise business decision**

## Tip #1

### Know what level of expertise and area of specialization you require for your project

Before you begin your project, you should take into consideration what areas of expertise your ideal landscape architect will have. Of course, much of this will depend upon the scope of your project.

#### What Type of Project Is it?

- Commercial (restaurants, retail, office buildings, warehouses)
- Government/Public Project (highways, public buildings)
- Urban development
- Large residential development (such as a townhome or apartment community)
- Private residence
- Park or Recreation area
- Historical site
- Retail/shopping center
- Resorts (golf courses, ski resorts, retreat centers, beach resorts, etc.)
- Institutional (schools and universities, hospitals)
- Religious site (church, synagogue or other religious structure and surrounding grounds)
- Restoration of land (wetlands, mined areas, forested land, etc.)

Whatever category or type of project you are planning, you will probably want to look for an individual or firm that specializes or at least has some level of experience in that area. As you may imagine, preparing plans for a seaside golf course is much different than urban design, restoring a former strip mine site, or preserving a registered historical site.

Review your candidates' websites to get an initial understanding for what they present themselves to be expert at and then talk with them about their project experience. Ask them to tell you about previous similar projects they worked on and what challenges they may foresee with the proposed project. Most projects have something "unusual" to take into consideration. The more that can be anticipated prior to the proposal stage, the more accurate the submitted proposals will be. This will help you keep the overall project within budget. An experienced landscape architect may notice issues that should be discussed with your engineer(s) or other contractors to make sure there are minimal "surprises" after the groundbreaking.

If you're working with a firm that has multiple landscape architects on staff, be sure to get an understanding of exactly who will be working on your project, what their level of experience is, and who, if anyone will be overseeing the project on their end. You don't want to hire a firm where you think you'll have exclusive access to a 30 year career professional when in reality, the bulk of the work may be done by an intern or junior staff member with little supervision. If your project requires a high level of specialized expertise, be sure you know you can access that from the firm you choose to work with.

Just as with any other company that you hire, be sure to ask for at least three references that your landscape architect worked with in the past that may have been a similar project to yours in some way. Talk with those references and ask them what their experience was like. It will give you better insight into how well your project will be managed.

## 4 Questions to Ask of References of the Landscape Architect

1. What type of project was it?
2. Who was your main point of contact within the firm?
3. Overall, were you satisfied with the design and the work performed?
4. Knowing what you know now, would you hire the same landscape architect to do that project again? If so, why? If not, why not?

## Tip #2

# Clear communication is key to successful project completion

Most of the tips in this report are centered on the importance of establishing and maintaining good communication. The success of a project which involves the many factors that a landscape architect must take into consideration is dependent upon having accurate data and good communication skills among the entire project team.

### Questions to Ask Before You Begin your Project

- What do you want to accomplish with this project?
  - What is your budget?
  - Have you ever worked with a landscape architect in the past?
  - Do you have absolute project start and/or completion dates?
  - Are there materials that you absolutely want (or do not want) used?
  - How important is it for you to incorporate environmentally friendly concepts into the design? (sustainability, water conservation, 'green' technologies, etc.)
  - What do you want your landscape architect to understand about you, other members of the team, your company or organization, and the goals of this project?
  - On a daily basis, how involved do you need to or want to be with this project?
  - What is your preferred method of communication (email, texting, phone, fax, in person)
  - What is your landscape architect's preferred method of communication?
- How often will you need to have meetings?
- Will you be the main point of contact for this project? If not, who will it be? Is there an assistant or alternative contact person in case of emergency?
  - Who needs to authorize any updates or changes?
  - Who needs to authorize payments and what information should be submitted for payment processing?

The answers to the above questions will help you plan your conversation and interviews with project candidates. They can also be used to draft your RFP (request for proposal).

A good landscape architect will probably also have a set of questions to ask you about your project requirements, expectations, and other professionals, if any, involved in the project.

It's always a good idea to have a project kickoff meeting once the team members have been chosen so that introductions can be made and an overview of expectations, guidelines or other important information can be shared with everyone involved. Although it's ideal to conduct this meeting in person, it can also be accomplished via an online web conference (where documents, video and charts can be seen if necessary) or phone conference call.

**Remember – Clear communication is vital to the success of any project.**

Any construction/landscape-related project involves multiple people gathering, sharing, and storing various sets of data. Improper or lack of communication is one of the leading causes of mistakes and exceeding timelines and budgets. With all of the modern communication tools available, these mistakes and miscommunications should ideally be kept to a minimum!

## Tip #3 – Understand your landscape architect’s approach to the design process

Although landscape architects are much more than mere designers, design is an important part of the overall scope of what we do, and it’s what most people notice – especially if it’s done either exceptionally well or (unfortunately) without a lot of thought and looks exceptionally horrible.

An increasingly important part of our work includes sustainable design. This term refers to how the entire space works together to last longer, support local wildlife, reduce energy and water usage and produce less pollution, water runoff and other unwanted consequences from the project.

For example, many new projects use the concept of walkable communities that use sidewalks and bike paths to make it easy and safe for people to commute on foot or bike (instead of their cars) from their homes to nearby offices, shops, parks and other high-use areas. This aids in reduction of carbon emissions, helps people to maintain healthy lifestyles, and promotes a sense of community.

Another example of sustainable design would be the trend of a “green” roof seen on the rooftops of buildings – especially in high density, urban areas. If you were to fly in a helicopter over a large city, you would probably notice that many of the buildings have vegetation growing on the roofs which can aid in keeping temperatures lower. These are also often designed as areas where employees or inhabitants of the building can congregate, grow vegetable gardens, and enjoy being outside without feeling like everything around them is glass and concrete.

Other sustainable design concerns include using drought-resistant vegetation – especially in regions that are especially arid or prone to drought cycles. Some plans may include buying stock from local growers to reduce transportation costs and increase use of native plants that thrive in the area.

This is where you will want to look at a landscape architect's portfolio of previous work. Often, they will include some designs and photos on their website, but you will also want to review the portfolio and ask them about how they typically incorporate sustainability into their designs when you meet in person

Of course, your candidate(s) will want to see the project property in person as part of their analysis and design preparation.

Talk with your prospective landscape architects about the usage requirements for your project and ask them how they would approach their design.

## Typical Questions a Landscape Architect Will Ask You

- What types of people will be using this space? Children in play or adult sin entertaining?
- How many people are expected to use the site today? What are projected forecasts for usage?
- Do you have preferred materials that you want incorporated into the landscape?
- How important is sustainable design to you? How and where do you envision that it might be used?
- If there are building structures, what is their purpose and style? How do you want the landscape to blend or accentuate the structure(s)?
- What lighting will be needed and where?
- Do you want outdoor gathering areas? Do they need to have outdoor structures, seating, shade trees or other considerations?
- Are there or will there be water features to consider – fountains, reflecting pools, ponds, streams, swimming pools, etc?
- Are there particular topographical, environmental or ecological issues to consider?
- What rules or codes must be taken into consideration?

## Tip #4

### Ask your landscape architect about his or her horticultural knowledge

This is something that may be a little more difficult to discern when interviewing various landscape architects for your project. However, it's critically important to the viability of the plan.

In extreme situations, inappropriate plant recommendations could end up costing you thousands of dollars when you need to replace dead or unhealthy looking plants that never should have been used in the first place.

Although a typical landscape architect is not a landscaper or horticulturist, he or she should understand enough about climate, native species, soil conditions, sunlight, growth rates, any local water restrictions, etc. to be able to recommend the appropriate plant species for each area of your plan.

For example, in 10 years, will that tiny sapling grow to dwarf the area it's planted in? Or will it eventually create too much shade and cause the grass or other ground covering underneath to stop growing? If so, will you be willing to make modifications to that area or would you prefer to have something planted there now that will not cause those types of issues in the future?

### Maintenance Questions the Landscape Architect May Ask You

- If it's your own home, will you be maintaining all or a portion of the landscape yourself?
- How much time and effort do you want to devote to your landscape?
- Will you be hiring a landscape professional to maintain your property? If so, what will your budget be? How much or how little maintenance and upkeep is acceptable to you?
- There is a big difference in what your budget will be if your landscape includes mostly grass, trees and shrubs (that need occasional trimming) vs. ornamental plantings, flower beds and other high maintenance features that require more regular attention to stay healthy and look their best.
- What is their ability to properly maintain the new design?



As you walk your property with landscape architect candidates, ask them about the soil and drainage conditions and what recommendations they may have for various plants, drainage installation and/or soil amendment. They should be able to provide you with some basic answers and recommendations, or consult a reputable horticulturist, arborist and/or landscape professional.

You may have some creative or innovative ideas that you want to incorporate into the design, but be sure you understand what it will take to maintain that look long after the project has been completed.

## Tip #5

Understand the role your landscape architect will play in your project and make sure your contract includes details that protect both parties to leave little room for misunderstandings or miscommunication

Your landscape architect may or may not play an active role in representing you in interactions with the general contractor and with other sub-contractors. In some cases they may provide a certain level of on-site supervision. Every landscape architect works a little differently in this aspect, so understand what level of support you require and expect from your landscape architect. Be sure to communicate this with them during the interview/evaluation phase and that it's included in your written contract.

To avoid future misunderstandings, your contract should include many of the following details:

- Description of services to be provided by the landscape architect
- Outline or description of the approval process
- The type of specifications and drawings that will be presented to you for approval at each planning stage
- Who is responsible for signing approval of plans, change orders, etc.?
- Clarification of who owns the final design documents or other information developed by the landscape architect
- What (if any) assistance your landscape architect will provide regarding bid solicitation from sub-contractors, bid review and selection. Will all outsourced services from the landscape architect be done via bid or does the firm work with certain preferred vendors at negotiated rates? If so, how might this affect your project pricing?
- Which permits will be applied for and who is responsible for obtaining them – the property owner, landscape architect, general contractor, or another member of your project team?
- What is the proposed project timeline and what happens if deadlines are missed?

- What is the estimated fee for the project and what specific services are included?
- When are fee payments due and what are the acceptable payment methods?
- Clarification of what will require additional costs, who will approve them, who will pay for them, and when those payments are due
- What markup fee (if any) is applied to any subcontractors the landscape architect may use on your project?
- A clause describing how either party may terminate the agreement before the project is completed and how any disputes will be handled
- Definition of project completion and requirements for the final approvals of work completed and any 'punch list' items

Obviously, each contract will be slightly different and this is not a comprehensive list of everything needed in a legal document. Most landscape architects will present you with a thoroughly prepared contract. You just want to make sure that it includes the detailed language and agreements you need to avoid any possible misunderstandings.

In general, some of the issues listed above will depend upon the size and scope of the project. Large multi-million dollar projects will usually be managed by a general contractor/construction management firm while smaller projects may have the property owner/developer as the main point of contact and final decision maker on many details.

As you are reading this, you probably have a general idea of the type(s) of project(s) you are preparing for and understand the amount of hands-on project management you are comfortable with and the level of involvement you will have with all of the professionals involved in your project. Just be sure this is communicated clearly during the interview process, and if necessary, included in your contract.

## Tip #6 Understand the differences in professional designations and licensure

As part of your assessment process, you will want to make sure that you are talking with and potentially working with properly accredited landscape architect professionals.

At a minimum, landscape architects will possess a BLA (Bachelor of Landscape Architecture) or MLA (Master of Landscape Architecture) degree from an accredited program. Accreditation is granted through organizations such as ASLA (American Society of Landscape Architects) and Council Landscape Architecture Review Board (CLARB).

Any landscape architect will post his or her designations and licenses to work in their marketing materials or on their website. You may want to confirm licensure or other information about a particular landscape architect by contacting the state at Department of Business and Professional Regulation (DBPR) at <http://www.myfloridalicense.com/dbpr/index.html> or by calling 850.487.1395.

You should also ask other industry professionals who may have worked with the firm, what their experience was. If you perform an internet search about the landscape architect and his or her firm what information or comments do you get for the results? If there are several results that show lawsuits or negative comments about the firm, you should definitely ask the candidate to explain what happened and what the final resolution was (or if it's an ongoing legal case).

## Tip #7

### Use a scorecard to make a wise business decision

Because a landscape architect is such an integral member of any successful project, it's important to be thorough in your evaluation and make a wise business decision that involves more than choosing the lowest bid or the personality you like the most.

Of course, keeping costs low is important, but many times the lowest bid can develop into a project nightmare because whoever prepared the numbers did not take something important into account that will end up increasing the costs in the long run.

And it's always nice to work with people you like and respect. We certainly don't suggest that you choose to work with someone who makes you feel uncomfortable. But just because someone can tell a good joke or seems like a nice person does not mean they are the best fit for accomplishing the objectives for your project.

Therefore, we've developed a scorecard you can use to evaluate the candidates you've identified as being potential landscape architects for your project. Hopefully, this will make your decision-making process more analytical and based on facts rather than a "gut feeling" or seeing a fancy presentation with beautiful graphics and interesting concepts. The previous 6 tips should help you understand how to evaluate this information.

# Landscape Architect Candidates Evaluation Scorecard

Use the following scale to answer each question:

0 - unknown/no/dislike

1 - just okay/somewhat

2 - neutral

3 - yes/like

4 - very positive/enthusiastic yes

	Firm A	Firm B	Firm C	Firm D
1. Does firm have experience needed for this project?				
2. Do they have good references for similar projects?				
3. Is proposal reflective of project requirements?				
4. Understanding of horticultural, climate & soil conditions				
5. Answered all questions to my satisfaction				
6. Asked questions to thoroughly understand project scope				

7. I am comfortable working with this person				
8.I know we communicate well with each other				
9.This person is properly licensed to perform work				
10. This firm uses project management software that I can access for accurate information flow				
11. Project portfolio is impressive				
12. This person has walked the project site				
TOTAL				

After you've answered each question using the evaluation scoring system described at the top of the page, add up all the columns. The firm with the highest score is the logical choice to be your landscape architect professional.

## Bonus Tip

**Bonus Tip: Please think of us as a source of information about the industry (and potential candidates for your next project!)**

We hope you've learned at least one or two new ideas that will help you with your project. As we said at the beginning of this e-book, as we were preparing this, one of our colleagues accused us of being crazy for giving away so much valuable information. We prefer to think of this e-book as a way to educate our clients. We want you to understand more about our industry so that you can make intelligent decisions about who you will work with. Of course, we welcome the opportunity to provide you with a proposal and hope that you will consider us!

We know that we provide the highest quality work, which will always attract new project opportunities for our firm. We're not afraid of competition – it would be impossible for us to work on every project in the market anyway. There is plenty of work to go around!

We also look forward to hearing your questions and feedback about any information in this report, a general industry question or a particular project concern.

We always enjoy discussing details of a project – whether it's something we are involved with, or to help others understand more about our profession in general. After all, this is our life's work. It's what we do and we are passionate about it.

If you ever have a question about the specific types of projects we do, what makes our firm different from others, and how we may be the right fit for your next project, we look forward to having that conversation too.

Thank you!

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# Resources

Below are links to helpful and useful resources.

## Websites Specializing Landscape Architecture

The Council of Landscape Architectural Registration Boards (CLARB)

<https://www.clarb.org>

American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA)

<http://asla.org/>

The Department of Business and Professional Regulation (DBPR)

<http://www.myfloridalicense.com/dbpr/index.html>

## Landscape Architect Ecological/Environmental Consultant

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