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Landscape Planning Guide

How to get the most out of your landscape dollars

\$14.95

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So You Want To Landscape?

A great landscape requires a lot of planning and many factors to produce a livable landscape you will love. Listed below are some considerations you might think about before deciding on a final landscape design. The information you decide on will help your landscape designer, to help you find a sense of well being in your home and have a landscape that truly reflects your personality and lifestyle and budget. A good designer, with a copy of your current water bill can figure future water costs on your new landscape design. A great resource to help you make good plant choices for your Western landscape would be Sunset's Western Garden Book. This book will help you understand the plant choices and limitations you have as well as guide you in the continuing care of your new landscape.

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Sometimes the very act of sitting down and asking yourself some basic questions will bring great clarity to your mind about your home and your landscape project. I urge you to answer the following questions as honestly as possible so you can stay clearly focused on your landscape goals. These first 3 questions will set the stage for YOUR landscape success. Don't shortcut this part of the process. Think it through and you will be rewarded with the perfect landscape for you and your home.

WHY do you want to landscape? _____

What "Pain" or problem are you solving by landscaping? _____

When that pain is solved, what can that make possible for you? _____

How to decide what your budget should be

Now that you have decided the reason WHY you want to landscape your home, it is time to decide on a budget. Nobody wants to talk money. However, everyone has SOME pre-conceived notion of what a big purchase like landscaping should cost, but rarely will they sit down and crunch the numbers together to get a real idea of what the dream landscape they envision will cost. Spouses often don't talk about it to each other, or skirt around the issue until it is too late and they have to sign on the dotted line or tell the contractor to get lost.

Setting a realistic budget is the hardest, yet the most important aspect of any large home purchase. Most people think about their landscapes for months or even years before they call in a designer or contractor to help them get started. Some people will call out several contractors for their "ideas" and pricing for months before they are ready to landscape just to get an idea of the cost for budgeting purposes. This is really just a shot in the dark, because each contractor will have his own ideas of what to install, and you will not be getting pricing on the same thing from each, like comparing apples to oranges.

A simple way to get a starting point from which to work from would be to plan on spending 7 to 15 percent on average of the value of your home for a simple landscape. According to the PLANET, the Professional Landcare Network, landscaping adds value to your home and your neighborhood. The right landscaping can increase the value of your home by an average of 15 percent, allowing owners to recoup 100 to 200 percent of their investment. Your landscape is one of the first things prospective buyers notice when they visit your house. Realtors estimate that 95 percent of home shoppers will not even get out of their car if the house lacks "curb appeal."

While landscapes can vary from very simple to very grandiose, you should budget the money for the type of landscape you can afford. If you get fancy with lots of masonry or concrete, Patio covers, outdoor kitchens etc then plan on spending more. However, if you are like most people, and need to be prudent with your landscape budget then stick with the basics

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and leave room to expand later if time, money and desire exists. Try pricing the features you might want to add by making calls or check out home shows for pricing on the larger aspects of your proposed landscape like outdoor kitchens, masonry walls, concrete etc. then sit down and crunch the numbers with your partner or spouse and see what makes sense to you.

Since landscaping is like art and totally custom to the site and tastes of the client, you can't just Google it and figure out how much it will cost. The difference in the features of landscaping can be compared to the difference in features for vehicles. You won't get the same features in a low priced Kia as you will in the more expensive Mercedes Benz. The size of the area to be landscaped can greatly affect the price to landscape as well, with both extra small and extra large areas having their own special challenges.

Most people are afraid to mention their budget to the contractor for fear that the contractor will pick up on that amount and inflate their prices to fill the budget and the homeowner will have paid more than they have to. You MUST develop a relationship with a designer/ contractor you can trust and let them in early on your proposed budget. Most people's first budget or estimate for landscaping is usually too low due to their unfamiliarity of the time, materials and unseen efforts that go into producing a beautiful landscape. Most contractors will do their best to hit the target you have set for them unless it is unrealistic. They will be doing both you and them no favors if they don't tell you when your budget is not doable for the landscape you want.

One special note here is be sure to calculate the amount of time and money you want to spend on maintaining your landscape. Don't plan on a large lawn area if you can't afford or don't want to mow it or water it. DEMAND a designer and a contractor that will be able to tell you how much time and effort it will take to maintain your new landscape or that will tailor the landscape to YOU and your lifestyle. Listen carefully. Do they have the expertise to know this. One of the biggest errors in landscaping, both professional and amateur, is installing plant material that is inappropriate for the space, climate or ability to maintain.

To help you set your budget, ask yourself the following questions and you will be well on your way to a landscape that fits you.

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Have you ever had any professional landscaping done before? _____

How was that experience for you? _____

Area(s) to be landscaped _____

Landscape goals _____

How do you currently use the outdoor spaces you are looking to landscape?

How would you like to change that?

How much time would you like to spend taking care of your landscape?

_____ per _____

Does the landscape need to have features for children in your life? _____ If Yes, tell us the number and ages of children/grandchildren _____

Do we need to consider features for your pets? _____

Is there a spa or swimming pool currently? _____ or possibly later? _____ when _____?

Are BBQ or outdoor kitchen areas to be included in the plan? _____

Will your sprinkler system be manual or automatic? _____

Will you hire a gardener? _____

Are you concerned about water use? _____

Are you interested in drip irrigation systems? _____

Are you concerned about soils or drainage issues? _____

Describe _____

Do you have any recurring pest issues? _____ If so what? _____

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Do you currently have any landscaping? _____

What, if anything do you want to remove? _____

What do you want to keep? _____

What needs special care or protection during the process? (example: antique garden doodad inherited from grandma) _____

Is designing for privacy an issue? _____ Where would you like more privacy? _____

Do you currently have any sprinkler valves or sprinklers? _____

Do you currently have a sprinkler clock installed? _____

Sprinkler clock location _____ Current ___ or Preferred ___?

Do you know where your water meter is located? _____ Where? _____

Do you know if you have a (separate from the house) turn off for sprinklers? _____

If so, do you know where it is? _____ How to turn it off? _____

List some plants or features you would like to include:

List plants or features your DON'T want used:

Have you set a deadline for getting some or all of the work done? _____ If so, please describe _____

Have you set a preliminary budget for landscaping? _____

How much would you like to spend in the first 6 months _____ Next six months _____

Second year _____ Third year _____ Fourth year _____

Would you be interested in phasing your landscaping work and/or breaking the work up into more financially manageable chunks? _____ OR

Would you prefer to do it all at once if financially feasible for you? _____

Would financing make it more possible if it were available? _____

Adding Curb Appeal Will Pay Off

Some landscape features will add more curb appeal than others. While you want a landscape that fits your personal style and tastes, keep the unusual or unique garden feature for the back yard. Everyone wants his home to stand out from the crowd, however, make sure the crowd is not staring in shock.

I'm talking about perhaps a pirate ship. One homeowner wanted a pirate ship in his yard. He had a fixation with it. Disaster potentially loomed. The solution came to build half a pirate ship in the back yard with the gangplank as the diving board to the pool. Voila! His personality showed through in an innovative and fun way, with the property values in his neighborhood safe with a more traditional landscape in front.

Curb appeal is different for everyone. However, some things are common for everyone. A clean and well-maintained yard with no dead plants, piled junk, abandoned cars (or even custom cars waiting for the hubby to get around to fixing up) is a must. Keep the house maintenance up, painted and clean and keep your plants healthy and well watered.

Keep landscaping to the scale of the space. For example, don't use a tiny 5 ft by 7 ft grass lawn set to one side in a yawning expanse of gravel as I saw recently. Or plant trees or shrubs that will engulf the walkways in time.

Gaudy does not work well either. Like the small simple tract home with several huge fountains in front that looked more like they should be near the Trevi fountain in Rome. Down the street from my house is a simple mobile home across the street with a chain link fence and a grandiose wall both sides of the driveway entry capped with two enormous concrete lions. I call it the "MGM- not so Grand"

Add enough concrete to exit your vehicle comfortably and a wide enough walk way to the front door to welcome visitors. Colorful pottery with fresh flowers adds to your welcome is a great curb appeal touch.

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Think about the following landscape options and decide if you would like to add them to your landscape and how they would affect your curb appeal and your livability.

	Vegetable/Herbs		Cut Flowers		Fruit Trees		Lighting
	View Enhancement		RV/ Toy parking		Drinking fountain		Tool Storage
	Decorative Fountain		Artificial turf		Garden Faucets		Dry Creek Bed
	Potting bench		Golf green		Fire Pit		Boulder Accents
	Pottery		Bike Parking		Sitting Areas		Desert landscape
	Greenhouse		Wood storage		Arbors & Pergolas		Rock or gravel
	Tennis court		Trash Can Storage		Art/ Statuary		Tropical look
	Horseshoe Pit		Sandbox		Childs Toy Storage		Pond/Waterfall
	Basketball area		Swingset		Screening/Privacy		Drip systems
	Deck		Playground equip.		Block wall		Lawn

Bringing It All Together With a Plan

You need to begin with the end in mind. You need a plan.

If you want to build a house you **begin with the end in mind**. You imagine the finished home, but you don't just go the home improvement store and start buying stuff pile it up on the site and grab some boards and start hammering. You find an architect and discuss plans and budget. Then they draw up the plans, and make the revisions to tailor to your needs and budget. You then find a contractor who stays on top of the project and makes sure you get what you envisioned. Hiring a professional designer to review the site and assess your needs and give you options to consider. A small sum spent with a professional designer can save thousands in re-dos and mistakes.

Creating a successful landscape is no different. There are many steps to creating a beautiful, lasting and sustainable landscape that will add value to your home. Starting with a design is integral to this goal. Also ask friends and relatives what they might like to change about their landscape. (You can benefit from their mistakes or successes).

A proper plan will take into consideration the site conditions such as soil composition, micro-climates that create problems or special situations for plants, ways to minimize utility costs, maintenance issues and the best use of space for now and in the future.

Having a plan makes it easier to save money on your landscape. You will only do things once if you have a master plan and stick with it. You can phase your landscape over time to make it more affordable. You will know what phase is coming up and will avoid buying things that you don't need or aren't ready for yet. Money spent now on a good landscape plan will be recouped many times over for the life of the landscape. Get a designer you can work with who will listen to your needs and take your ideas and make them better.

The Real Secret to Creating a Low-Maintenance Landscape

Low-Maintenance. Nobody ever asks for a landscape that takes a lot of time to maintain. So when someone says that they want a low maintenance landscape, I'm thinking... well, yeah. Very few people in this world do not care how long or how much it takes to care for their landscape. If they don't, then they can, and do usually afford to have someone do it for them.

That's not most of us. The real key to getting a low maintenance (or Easy-Care as I call it) landscape is all in the planning. At that stage, you will know how much time and money you want to invest in the care of your new landscape. Right then, BOOM! is where most landscapes are successful or not.

You gotta understand plants to landscape properly. One plant might work just great for your neighbor, but be soooo not right for you. Or not right for THAT place in your yard. ONLY if you know your client, plants, climate, and location can you select the right landscaping. And if you have the wrong plants in the wrong places matched with the wrong maintenance skills or budget, you, my friend have just wasted your money on landscaping. It's as simple as that!

Picture a cute little evergreen bought at the nursery 2 feet high by 1 ft wide. Plant 20 of those suckers 1 foot away from the front sidewalk in a row every 5 feet. Cute when planted. However, did I mention that those little cuties are arborvitae? Now when you know that, you know that they will reach 10 feet wide and 15 feet tall within 10 years, they don't look so cute. When you know that they could ultimately reach 30 feet wide and 45 feet tall. They are downright monsters. Think of trying to make them stay small and all the effort that will go into that for the first few years and the time an expense that it will take to take them out when they get too big. That is the big secret... Plant only what works for the space both now and ultimately.

Smart Ways to Conserve Water in the Landscape

Landscaping has always been the original “Green Business”. Along with that label goes the responsibility to install plants that will thrive in the conditions they are being planted in. Most areas of the Southwest require additional watering (irrigation) for the plantings in a landscape.

Automatic irrigation makes our life easier. We live hectic lives and if you have to go away for the weekend, you don’t have to worry about the plants you leave behind if they are automatically watered.

Automatic watering systems can be very wasteful. Let me re-phrase that. The people who set the automatic watering systems can be very wasteful. Plants need a certain amount of water to survive and more to thrive. Most plants have a range of moisture conditions in which they grow well. The very best way to conserve water in your landscape is to install plants on the same sprinkler zone (valve) that have matching water needs so when watered, all the plants on that zone or valve will thrive with the moisture conditions we are presenting them with.

Choosing the right plants, (going back to your designer creating a proper plan) is essential to conserving water. You may want some areas of high water use plants such as grass or flowers. Use those close to the house and put each on a zone separately from plants that need different watering conditions so you may control the amount of water those areas get.

Put low-water use plants on a zone or valve together so you can water them less often than your high water use areas. Make sure you get a sprinkler timer (or clock) that has multiple programs and a program that can be used for the longer running times needed for drip irrigation.

Install a Smart Controller that waters the proper amounts for the weather conditions. Smart controllers are sprinkler timers that automatically adjust sprinkler run times in response to weather conditions.

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Smart controllers use sensors and weather information to manage watering times and frequency. As weather conditions change, the clock increases or decreases watering. Smart controllers have the ability to turn off your sprinklers automatically during rain, high wind or low temperature.

Smart controllers are said to reduce outdoor water use by an average of 15 to 30 percent. They also reduce over watering, which can cause fungal disease and insect problems.

These clocks are more complicated to program, but are becoming much more popular and will be the wave of the future.

How the Big Box Stores Set You Up For Failure

You gotta love the big box stores. We all use them. They are so handy. They seem to have everything we need. Or do they? Do we really need what they have, or do they want us to need it because they have it?

Big box stores carry a lot of “stuff”. They are in the business of selling “stuff” Who buys all that “stuff”. Well, “stuff buyers” for the store. They specialize in buying stuff for you and me to buy. (A job my husband says I was born to.) Well, buyers buy stuff that sells. But they may also be buyers for many areas and that doesn’t work sometimes when the areas you buy for covers a diverse climate range, like the Southwest. We can go in one day from 115 degrees during the day in some places to 40 degrees at night not that far away. That can get you in trouble when you assume the plants you buy will work well in all areas.

That is what I find when I go to the big box stores is that they have plants that don’t work so well in our climate and I can’t get the plants I’d like.

Professional Landscapers will buy most of their plant material from nurseries that specialize in their climate to get the plants that work the best. Sometimes we go to the big box stores for a quick item. They often will have things that don’t go well in our climate. People go there and see these little gems blooming their heads off and snap them up. Plant them at home and sooner or later they die and they get mad at the big box stores for selling them something that doesn’t work in this climate. “ Why do they sell it if it won’t work here??” they demand.

Just keep in mind that you need to know if the plant is right for your situation before you buy it. I have bought plants that I know will freeze in winter just to have them and their glory for a season. Most plants don’t live forever. We forget this. Sometimes we buy a plant that is only temporary, like marigolds or pansies or pumpkins. Buy with knowledge and you won’t feel gyped.

Getting the Right Contractor

Landscape companies, and landscaping in general, encompass many skills and services. In your search for a landscape contractor, you will find that some companies specialize in specific areas (i.e., maintenance or paving) whereas others perform a myriad of landscape services. A good place to begin your search is with referrals from friends and neighbors who have used a professional landscape contractor. You may consider contacting a property owner you are not acquainted with, who has an obviously pleasing, professionally landscaped property, for a referral.

It is important to remember that landscaping, particularly landscape design and installation, is not a commodity for which a price tag can be easily attached. Purchasing landscape design and installation services might better compare to purchasing art. Landscapes that are pleasing to the eye, functional, and of lasting quality require professional design and installation. This is why many people choose to landscape their properties over a period of time, rather than all at once, so they can budget adequate funds to complete their work properly.

You will know you are ready to hire a professional landscape contractor, because you have determined WHY you want to landscape. You can't reach a goal if you don't know why you are going there.

You have determined the basic scope of the landscaping you want to do and the basic features you'd like to have AND you have set a budget.

You have clear, written specifications, whenever possible, listing exactly what services (and how often), or products you expect for your dollar. You have a list of the items or services you expect a bid on, (Specifications) ready to give to all bidders so they are all bidding the same thing. Contractor "A" might say "sprinkler system" in his bid. Contractor "B" may say "Three ¾" champion brass anti-siphon manual valves and ¾" pvc piping with Rainbird 1804 pop-up spray heads with 15 foot nozzles spaced no more than 15 foot apart to cover approximately 2,200 square feet".

Are you getting the same thing from each? There is no way to tell unless the contract specifically lists what you are getting. If the contract doesn't list it, Contractor "A" is free to

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make cheaper substitutions or leave things out if they so desire because there is nothing in writing to bind them to the agreement with you.

Expect that each company is to give you a bid with specifications attached and no verbal alterations to these specifications or if they are offering something different than you first specified, make sure you get everything in writing. It's the only way you can be sure each company is giving you a price that includes the same services or products. Later, this information will be invaluable to you if you suspect you are not getting what you bought.

Do your homework by contacting professional organizations such as CLCA (California Landscape Contractor's Association) HDCA (High Desert Contractor's Association) or other local or state associations for advice. Professional organizations promote training and education and ethical practices within their industry. Contractors who are members, are businesses that promote professionalism and education within their company.

The next step is to check them out. The California Contractor's State License Board requires all contractors to be licensed if they provide services or products valued at \$500 or more. The CSLB will not be able to help you if you hire an un-licensed contractor and have problems. You may also be liable for damages arising out of any injuries to the contractor or his employees if they are not properly insured. You can call the CSLB at (800) 321-CSLB or go online at www.cslb.ca.gov to check out any contractor you are considering hiring by license number or name to make sure they are properly licensed and insured.

? Did you know that state law limits all contractors to taking no more than 10% of the contract (up to \$1000 maximum deposit no matter the size of the job) as an initial deposit? Progress payments as portions of the job progresses are common on jobs spanning a period of time and substantial materials, but don't pay the final payment until you are satisfied you received what your contract specified. Make sure all changes to the contract are documented and signed by all parties.

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Yellow page listings are no guarantee a company is reputable and licensed. A recent search for a contractor to do some roofing work sent me to the CSLB website to check out prospective contractors found in the Yellow pages. Of 4 half-page ads for roofers, two companies had their license suspended and one of those had been suspended for 5 years!

Ask for references. Any ethical professional contractor will be happy to provide you with a few recent references for you to contact or even written testimonials from past clients.

Another way to ensure professionalism and a quality job is to inquire if your contractor has any advanced training or licenses in their industry such as Irrigation Auditors or Licensed Pest Control Applicators. Many certifications and licenses are required to take continuing education hours every year to keep their licenses and to keep up with new and innovative techniques, products and regulations.

Beware of “contractors” who “Cheat to Compete” They are cutting corners somewhere to get those low, low prices. IF they are bidding to do the same thing, they might be cutting on important things like licensing and insurance. This can cost you lots in the long run if you allow this shortcut. Request proof of liability and workers compensation insurance. Any reputable contractor will be happy to provide you with proof of the insurance they carry to protect your home and property.

Ask about their Warranty. How long will they cover their work and materials? What is covered? Will they put it in writing?

Ask yourself “Do you trust this person with your home and family?” Can you communicate well with them?

Follow these simple guides when hiring contractors and you will be rewarded with getting what you thought you were getting when you hired them. Once you have considered all this information, you will have a better idea of where you are going with your landscape and will be ready to get started.

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Let's Get Growing!

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