



# LANDSCAPE MAINTENANCE: CHOOSING THE RIGHT SERVICE

Choosing a landscape maintenance professional who will properly maintain your landscape is important to the long-term health (and worth!) of a landscape.

A properly designed and maintained landscape can contribute up to 20% of the value of a home, as well as add beauty and living space. A poorly designed and maintained landscape can not only detract from your home's value, but poor maintenance can damage large trees and shrubs that have taken decades to establish.



When assessing the needs of a landscape and the available budget for landscape maintenance, be realistic. The more labor-intensive the upkeep of your yard, the more expensive it will be to provide landscape upkeep. If having a native and drought-tolerant garden is important, finding a company specializing in that type of plant material maintenance is important.

Finally, if having a chemical-free, nontoxic environment for children and pets to play is a priority, it will be important to clearly demand that no pesticides or herbicides are applied to any part of the property. Some pesticides/herbicides linger in the landscape for a very long time after application, and pesticides/herbicides applied to soil and plant material will kill beneficial organisms, too.

To get landscaping maintenance needs met, first those needs must be identified. Many landscape maintenance companies provide a wide range of services, and others may specialize in one or two services. Some companies provide pest-control services; others contract out this specialty to a licensed Pest Control Adviser/Applicator. Maintenance of a landscape may or may not include fertilizer application, mulch application and weed control. Some activities, such as tree pruning and lawn aeration and dethatching, are only done periodically, and may be better handled by a company specializing in that service. By identifying a landscape's maintenance needs, it becomes easier to find a company to meet those needs.

The following checklist can be used to specify landscape maintenance needs.

## Step 1: Identify landscape maintenance priorities (rate by number)

- Save money on water bills
- Price of landscape maintenance service
- Appearance
- "Green" practices (nontoxic pest- and weed-control methods, etc.)
- Child-friendly landscape
- Pet-friendly landscape

Entertainment-friendly landscape

**Step 2: What are your landscape maintenance needs?**

Lawn care

Mowing, edging

Weeding

Pest control

Fertilizer

Shrubs, hedges, flower beds

Weeding

Pest control

Fertilizer

Hedging (with hedge-trimmers)

Trees

Pest control

Fertilizer

Pruning (it is strongly suggested that tree pruning only be done by a Certified Arborist)

Rake leaves

Hardscape

Sweeping

Blowing

Irrigation

Program the irrigation controller

Change programming seasonally

Maintain system

Identify and fix broken/clogged sprinkler heads

Identify and fix leaks

Manage system for highest irrigation efficiency (Certified Water Mgr. or other specialist)

Periodic water audits

Water features

Fill

Clean

Chemicals

Maintain pump

Maintain aquatic plants

Maintain aquatic animals

Periodic activities

Aerate lawn

- Dethatch lawn
- Apply mulch
- Pruning/restructuring shrubs (not with hedge-trimmers)
- Tree pruning (by Certified Arborist)
- Water audits
- Other
  - Remove trimmings from property
  - Compost trimmings on property
  - Maintain rose garden
  - Maintain fruit trees
  - Turn compost pile/bin
  - Install plants

**Step 2: Decide your budget.** Decide how much you can afford to pay for landscape maintenance.

**Step 3: Review your list of landscape maintenance needs, and decide which of these you would be willing to do yourself.** You will need this list because it is possible that your budgeted amount for a landscape maintenance service will not be enough to get everything you need done.

**Step 4: Educate yourself on important maintenance activities.** Become an educated consumer. If pruning shrubs is part of what you want done, learn the basics about shrub pruning so you can judge whether a good job is being done or not.

**Step 4: Start calling landscapers.** Ask friends for recommendations. See if a landscaper who is a CLCA Certified Water Manager (<http://www.clca.us/water/index.html>) or Green Gardener (<http://www.greengardener.org/>) is working in your area.

**Step 5: Do a phone interview.** Discuss with the company's representative the chores you would like done, and your specific priorities. If you don't want toxic chemicals used on your property, this is the time to say it. If saving money on your water bill is a priority, then having a water manager that is trained to manage landscapes for water efficiency is necessary.

**Step 6: Make appointments with landscape maintenance services to visit your landscape.**

- Have copies of your list of the maintenance activities you require, and provide one to each company's representative.
- If you don't want all of your shrubs and trees hedged into square boxes, specify that hedge-trimmers are not to be used on your landscape.
- Ask for a price for maintenance of your landscape. Be sure to have them specify whether it is a monthly charge which you will pay even if they don't visit your landscape every week (rain days).
- Have them specify which of the activities you have named will be part of the maintenance fee and which activities will incur extra charges.
- Require provision of proof of their Workers Compensation and Liability insurance.

Other questions to ask:

1. When and how often are services provided?
2. Is a soil test conducted?
3. How are plant problems diagnosed and decisions to use pesticides made?
4. Will copies of the soil test and plant diagnostic results be supplied?
5. What approaches to weed control are used?

6. What kinds of mulch are used? How is it applied? How often is it applied?
7. If providing pest control, do you follow Integrated Pest Management (IPM) practices?
8. Do you offer organic land care services?
9. Do you have a valid Pesticide Applicators License?

In addition to land care practices, questions about the business itself should be asked:

1. How long have they been in the business?
2. What are the management and staff qualifications or areas of expertise?
3. If tree care is provided, is there a Certified Arborist on staff?
4. Will they tour and evaluate the property and maintenance needs before finalizing the contract?
5. Does the company carry business insurance?
6. Do they have customer references for recent work?
7. Do they participate in any professional organizations?

If a company will be making recommendations for application of pesticides, the company must have a Pest Control Adviser license. If they will be applying pesticides, they must (by law) have a Pesticide Applicator License.

**Step 7: Ask for references and contacts.** It is important to get addresses of landscapes maintained by each company. It is very important to talk to the homeowner or contact person. In addition to the obvious “what do you like” and “what do you don’t like” questions, ask how long they have used the service, how often does a manager visit the landscape to see how the maintenance staff is doing, and how the company handle complaints.

**Step 8: Hiring a Landscape Maintenance Company.** Once a company has been selected, a written agreement fully describing the services and materials to be supplied and the costs should be negotiated between the company and customer. The agreement should include timing of services where relevant. If additional services or materials are deemed needed during the life of the contract, there should be a written statement regarding customer approval for additional services and charges.

### SUMMARY:

Residential landscape maintenance can impact both the worth of the residence and the enjoyment the residents obtain from their landscape. There is no short-cut or easy way to hire a landscape maintenance company. With careful research and diligence, a landscape maintenance company just right for your landscape can be found, and costly mistakes avoided.

### Resources:

California Landscape Contractors Association ([www.clca.org](http://www.clca.org))

Green Gardener Program (<http://www.greengardener.org>)

Considerations for Developing a Lawn and Maintenance Contract (<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/LH031>)

Landscape Maintenance (<http://www.cabmphandbooks.com/Documents/Municipal/SC-73.pdf>)

International Society of Arboriculture (<http://www.isa-arbor.com/>)



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