

Landscape Irrigation Services

How to be a Wise Consumer

Irrigation system installation or maintenance work can cost thousands of dollars. Using a qualified professional is a must to get value for your dollar. But how to tell the pro from the con man? Here are some tips to ensure that your money will be spent wisely.

Like contractors who handle other property improvements, landscape contractors have various levels of expertise and experience and professionalism. A professional contractor operates with a business license and insurance. Professionals will not low ball the bid, and they will answer your questions while working up the estimate and contract.

The incautious homeowner runs the risk of "getting what you paid for" from a contractor with an unreasonably low bid, in the form of inferior workmanship and products. Contractors operating without business licenses and insurance can present additional risks to the consumer.

The Cost of a Bargain

As with any other consumer purchase, there are several unfortunate dangers to going with an unrealistic low price. If one contractor's bid-price is significantly lower than others, this doesn't necessarily mean the other contractors are "too expensive." A dramatically cheaper bid could mean the contractor is inexperienced or has missed important elements that the others have factored in. Or you could simply run the risk of getting inferior equipment and poor workmanship from unqualified employees.

Poorly designed sprinkler and drip systems, improperly installed, fail to water the landscape well. They may produce landscapes that do not look good, and in Colorado's climate extremes, they could result in dead plants. Poor irrigation systems place more dollars in jeopardy than the initial outlay for the work, because the landscaping often represents ten percent or more of a home's equity.

Inferior systems waste water. Water waste costs more, for both the property owner paying the water bill and for the community that has to develop enough water to supply wasteful properties. Water is a precious resource in the West, and the technology and expertise to create efficient irrigation systems is widely available. In the long run, an efficient, well-designed and constructed system costs no more than an inferior system that saddles property owners with high equipment maintenance, replacement costs early in the life of the system, and excessive water use.

Tips for the Smart Consumer

General -

Landscape contracting is not subject to industry regulations or inspections. Fortunately, the industry itself does offer certification and consumer guidance through local and national professional organizations. For example, the Irrigation Association offers detailed information on "How to hire a contractor" at their web site: www.irrigation.org. The Associated Landscape Contractors of Colorado (www.alcc.com) also offers "How to Find a Landscape Professional."

Use the following checklist to qualify your contractors and ensure a realistic bid for any major project:

- Ask to see the contractor's business license. A business license suggests the contractor has a professional commitment. A contractor who fails to obtain a business license may be operating illegally, depending on local ordinances.
- Ask how long a contractor has been in business locally. This will give you an idea of their knowledge about Colorado's climate and environmental conditions. If the contractor has been operating in Colorado for some time, there should be local references you can call and even visit. If the contractor has recently gone into business, then the questions should lead to talk about experience, employers, and knowledge of the area. Be wary of contractors who claim they have recently arrived from another state or are evasive about their business history.
- Do your homework. Ask for references and call them. Ask the former customers whether the contractor returned calls promptly, kept appointments, responded to concerns, and met the deadlines and goals in the contract. Always ask if they would hire the contractor again.
- Ask the contractor if you can see some landscape projects in progress. Not only is this fun, but you can judge whether the job site and crews are relatively neat and tidy. (Remember that construction work will rarely be pristine).
- Check with the Better Business Bureau for a record of complaints against the contractor. This will also give you another view on the contractor's business history.

If there are complaints, read them carefully and see how they were resolved.

- ❑ When you are satisfied that you might want to work with the contractor, get a written estimate detailing specific brands and models of parts, machinery costs, length of project, and labor costs.
- ❑ Get a minimum of three bids and if at least two are in the same price range, that is an indicator of what you should expect the costs to be. A significantly higher bid may have unnecessary "frills." Be suspicious of low and poorly detailed bids.
- ❑ The contract for the work, like the estimate, should be in writing. It should include the scope of all work to be performed, a work schedule and a payment schedule. Go to the Irrigation.org web site for a detailed breakdown of what goes into a contract, under "How to hire a contractor."
- ❑ Before signing anything, ask the contractor for written proof of liability and workers compensation insurance. "Written proof" means a letter sent directly to you by their insurance carrier. Ask the contractor for a "certificate of insurance" for liability, auto, and worker's compensation. Without these safeguards, you may be liable for accidents on your property.
- ❑ Ask about a warranty. A written, one-year, signed warranty is normal.

Tips for the Smart Consumer Specific -

The general tips above apply to any sort of significant home project contracts and estimates. Here are some specific things to consider for an irrigation project:

- ❑ Be sure to ask about recent training and experience. Consider contractors who have college training, professional development education or certification training. Crews, too, should be trained and professional. There are several national certifications to know: CIDs (Irrigation Designers), CLIAs (Landscape Irrigation Auditors), CICs (Irrigation Contractors), CLIMs

(Landscape Irrigation Managers) and CLTs (Certified Landscape Technicians) .

For more information on the various certifications, see "Understanding certification" (under the "Consumers" heading) at www.irrigation.org. You can search for certified professionals by clicking on a link in the Certification page.

- ❑ See if the business is a member of the Associated Landscape Contractors of Colorado (www.alcc.com). This state trade association offers training courses to the green industry to improve competency and professionalism. ALCC offers certification for Certified Landscape Technicians with a core emphasis on irrigation. ALCC.org provides an indexed directory of contractors that can be searched by topic (such as "Xeriscape" or "Landscape Renovation").
- ❑ When reviewing the estimate, look for parts from manufacturers with known brand names. If you see brands you don't recognize, inquire about them at your local hardware outlet or lawn and garden shop.
- ❑ Find out the basics of a home irrigation system. Go to www.ext.colostate.edu or your county Cooperative Extension office for fact sheets. Knowing the jargon will make the proposal easier to understand.
- ❑ Understand how costs work. Turf areas, gardens, flowerbeds, and shrub areas will all have different water needs. One size doesn't typically fit all. Note that the price for an entire landscape including sprinkler system and plants is usually about one-tenth the value of the property, and it can easily be more. Investing in a quality sprinkler system that will maintain the landscape value maintains your property's equity.

Make sure you get what you paid for. Choose your landscape contractor wisely, and you will have a great experience... and a yard you can be proud of.



DENVER WATER



Putting Knowledge to Work



Associated Landscape Contractors of Colorado
Professionals Grounded In Excellence