

Choosing a Good Landscape Installation or Maintenance Company

Today many homeowners have less time for maintaining landscapes. TV programs make it seem easy to have an “instant landscape” by hiring out the work. So if you want to hire out landscape installation or maintenance how can you tell if the company (or person) knows what they’re doing?

There’s no generally accepted landscaping certification. Spending more money doesn’t necessarily guarantee better results. Many homeowners lack knowledge about plants and landscapes, so it’s difficult for them to tell a good job from a bad job. What’s a poor homeowner to do?

One of the best ways to select a landscaper is to ask for a recommendation from a friend whom you know to be a knowledgeable gardener or a Master Gardener. If you don’t happen to know a knowledgeable gardener, here are some questions to ask. (Thanks to Wes Brittenham for his suggestions. Wes is a professional landscaper formerly with Waterwise Landscapes and currently with Plants of the Southwest.)

Questions to Ask

1. Do they have references? Ask for them and then **go look** at what they’ve done elsewhere. If you can no longer identify the plants they’ve pruned, don’t hire them. If the result looks like a theme park in Florida, don’t hire them.
2. How long have they been in the business? The longer the better.
3. Do they do the type of work you’re hiring them for? If they specialize in lawn care, don’t hire them to prune your trees and shrubs.
4. Do they hire seasonal labor for their crews? Most contractors hire *some* seasonal labor, but seasonal labor almost always equates to less (or no) training and no history or continuity with your landscape. This is definitely not what you want.
5. Skip this one if you speak fluent Spanish. Does someone on the crew speak fluent English? How can you tell them what you want done if they can’t understand you? This lack of clear communication creates most of the unpleasant “surprises”. Have them repeat back to you in their own words what they’re going to do.
6. If they will be maintaining your landscape, can they identify the plants and tell you how they’d prune them? If they can’t identify your plants correctly, don’t let them touch them. Of course, this requires that you have taken the time to know what plants you have and generally how they should be pruned. (I recommend Judith Phillips’ “New Mexico Gardeners Guide” to help you learn about the plants and their care – mm.)
7. Do they use lots of power tools? Most plants are damaged by hedging and shearing (think boxes and little green meatballs). Minimal use of power tools is recommended.
8. If they’re working on trees, are they an ISA certified arborist? Ask them for their ISA ID card. If they don’t have it with them, don’t let them work on your trees.
9. Do they have a workmen’s compensation certificate? Ask for a copy and then read it to verify that it is current and in force. If there is an accident, and they don’t have a certificate, guess who is liable for all the bills? (Right - it’s you).

10. Are they the low bidder? Your choice of landscaper should not be based solely on cost. Choose a landscaper based on the quality and service they provide to maintain your landscape investment over time.

Most landscapers understand hardscape - that is - boulders, patios, walkways, walls, and structures. It's unusual to find local landscapers who know anything about plants. This makes your job of selecting someone knowledgeable and trustworthy even more difficult.

As they say with the alligators and the swamp - it's important to remember the objective. With most High Desert landscapes the objective is to retain the natural look of the environment and the plants in it.

Common Mistakes by Landscapers

So if it's hard to identify a good job, is it easier to identify a bad job? The following are common examples of what I've seen in Albuquerque that homeowners actually paid to have done to their landscapes.

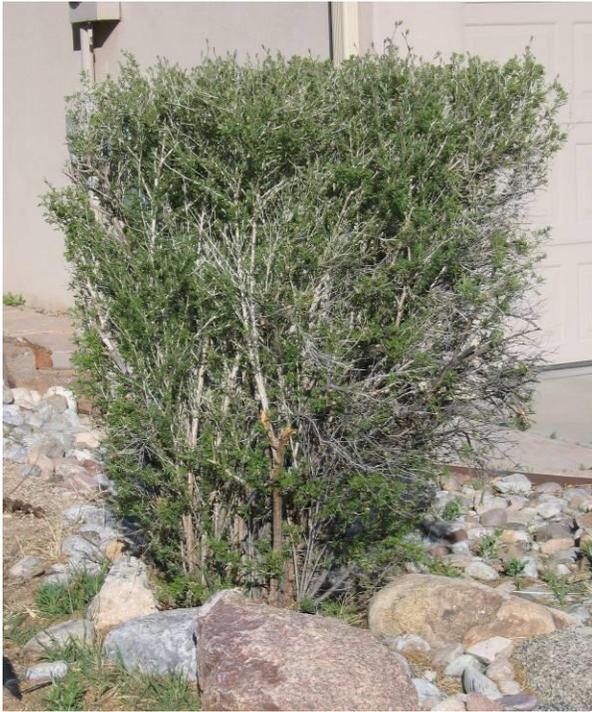
1. Planting trees too deeply. This keeps the tree from growing since the crown (the area between the trunk flare and first root) is below ground. If the profile of the trunk as it enters the ground is cylindrical and straight, then the tree is planted too low. The tree may die after several years or it will grow very slowly.
2. Leaving the chicken wire basket or burlap on the root ball. In dry areas like Albuquerque, these materials don't deteriorate. It is almost guaranteed that the tree will die after about a year or so, which is usually longer than the landscaper's warranty. Even in wet areas of the country this is now considered to be bad practice.
3. Using non-stretchable, non-deteriorating material for staking a tree and leaving the staking on for longer than one year. If trees need staking (and most don't) the landscaper should use cotton or other soft cloth at the trunk of the tree and there should be at least two stakes. The trunk needs to develop flexibility to the wind so it should be staked loosely.
4. Topping trees or shrubs - that is - giving them a crew cut. Hedging and topping create weak growth from the cut point. In larger trees this can create a dangerous hazard condition.
5. Making flush cuts on branches taken from the tree trunk. When removing branches, they should cut even with the collar - where branch meets the trunk. The branch collar is part of trunk tissue and is used to help the wound heal. A year later the wound should have a nice ring around it where the trunk has healed over the cut wood. Don't trim off lower branches unless they're in the way. Pruning should be done in the following order: dead and diseased parts, hazard branches, and finally cuts for form.
6. Limbing up a tree (cutting off the lower limbs to raise the canopy). They never grow back, so they shouldn't be cut off unless they're in someone's way and dangerous.
7. Putting drip irrigation at the trunk of the tree when first planted. Irrigation needs to completely surround the tree and it should be placed where the smallest feeder roots are, which is typically at the drip line for a growing tree. For container grown trees and shrubs this would be at the outside edge of the container.

8. Not allowing space for the mature size of the plant. This is especially important for shrubs and trees since they need more space. This error will necessitate additional pruning over the life of the plant and may cause hazard conditions when branches hang over the sidewalk, roof, or driveway. Landscapers often put plants too close together so you'll be happy with the initial look. This causes increased maintenance (and cost) because now you have to prune the plants every year or eventually remove a plant that you've already paid for. Spaced properly, you may not have to prune at all. If the gaps bother you during the first year, put annuals there!
9. Using power tools to create green meatballs and boxes. This is a sure sign of a landscaper that knows nothing about plants and just wants to work quickly. Once pruned to a meatball shape, many of these plants can never be restored to a natural shape.
10. Making a single trunked tree from a typically multi-trunked tree. Some examples of multi-trunked trees include: desert willow, New Mexico olive, Mexican elder, and crape myrtle. The apartments have an example of a New Mexico olive that's been forced into a single trunk tree.
11. Pruning spring blooming shrubs and trees when they're dormant. If these shrubs are pruned before they bloom, the blooms get cut off. They should be pruned right **after** they bloom.

Typical plants which are pruned badly include beargrass, red yucca, ornamental grasses, and Russian sage. Beargrass (*Nolina*) is in the agave family, and to prune it properly you pull out the dead stems/leaves. Poor landscapers give this plant a foot-high haircut. The plant doesn't grow like a grass and the interior stems/leaves will never grow back. Poor landscapers also cut the tips off red yucca. It's an aloe or succulent, and so should have the dead stems pulled out. Ornamental grasses are either cool season or warm season grasses. Which they are determines when you should prune them. The "season" defines when they typically grow, so you prune cool season grasses in winter before they start growing and warm season grasses in late spring before they start growing. Russian sage is a perennial that can be trimmed at or near the ground. I often see it pruned several feet high - which creates woody stems. If you don't want them to reseed, then the seed heads should be removed right after blooming. If you don't want them to sucker, then take away their water!

For the basics of gardening in Albuquerque and especially for tree care I recommend "Down to Earth – A Gardeners Guide to Albuquerque" written by local Master Gardeners. Check out the abqmastergardeners.org website or the Garden Shop at the Albuquerque Garden Center. Purchases from the Garden Shop benefit the Garden Center, a non-profit organization, and there's no tax.

Apache Plume (bad then good)



Beargrass (bad then good)



Cotoneaster (bad then good)



New Mexico Olive (bad then good)



Red Yucca (bad then good)



Rosemary (bad then good)



Three Leaf Sumac (bad then good)



Poor Placement



Silverberry is too close to the sidewalk and also pruned poorly. It's a 10' tall shrub at maturity.

Poor Placement



Spruce has a twenty foot diameter at maturity and it's in a small courtyard. It completely blocks the window behind it.