

How to Hire an Irrigation Contractor

Hiring a reputable contractor is the most important step in installing or servicing a landscape sprinkler system. Shortcuts and poor workmanship may eventually lead to system problems or inefficient water application. Most of the sprinkler system is buried underground, so high quality work from a reliable contractor is the best insurance against shoddy or incorrect work.

Although there are many reputable contractors, knowing the right questions to ask can help eliminate doubts. Consider specific qualifications and gather information before signing a contract, regardless of whether this will be a new irrigation sprinkler system or service to an existing one. Request two or three estimates from highly regarded companies. Ask references how responsive the contractor is to questions, concerns, or repairs.

A qualified contractor should be eager to explain the design and products they plan to use. A contractor who is conscious of water conservation will suggest products designed to help in this regard. The contractor should be able to give product details and explain that while such products may cost more up front, savings should be realized eventually. Although appealing, it may not be wise to go with the least expensive estimate. Take time to compare estimates and companies. If an estimate is notably lower than the others, there is usually a reason.

Tips to make an informed choice

Ask for references. Checking a reference or two will help you feel more comfortable with the contractor's ability to meet your irrigation needs. A reputable contractor will be glad to provide references.

Ask if the contractor has irrigation certifications or related horticultural certifications. Certifications require continuing education and demonstrate that the contractor is following recommended industry practices. The Irrigation Association (www.irrigation.org) offers several certifications, for example, Certified Irrigation Designer, Certified

Irrigation Contractor, Certified Landscape Water Manager, and Certified Landscape Irrigation Auditor. Related certifications are offered by Professional Landscape Network (PLANET). Certifications demonstrate commitment to sound practices and show credibility.

Request a written proposal and copy of the irrigation plan. If the contractor does not provide a written proposal and plan, do not choose that contractor. An irrigation plan is a scaled drawing of a landscape irrigation system that clearly shows the scope and details of the installation project or changes to an existing irrigation system. Ask for a final copy of the plan *after* the installation project is completed. You may need it in the future.

Ask about water management. Request that the system be designed with water efficiency in mind. The contractor should be knowledgeable about devices available that will conserve water when properly installed and programmed.

Specifically, ask about these products:

- *Rain sensors* are small devices to prevent irrigation when a specific amount of rainfall has occurred. They are required in some municipalities.
- *Smart controllers* with an on-site weather station automatically update the watering schedule, allowing for changes in water needs throughout the season.
- *Soil moisture sensors* measure the water content of the soil in the root zone before irrigation and stop the cycle if moisture is sufficient.
- *Sprinkler check valves* prevent all of the water in the pipe from completely draining out of the sprinklers after the valve has shut off.
- *Rotating-type nozzles* deliver multiple streams of water at a slow, steady rate. This slower application rate allows water to soak into the soil slowly as compared to faster application rates that encourage run-off, particularly on clay soil.

- *Built-in pressure compensating or regulating devices* provide the optimum operating pressure to the sprinklers. This eliminates misting caused by high pressures, reduces water drift due to wind, and gives water droplets a better chance of penetrating the soil.

Customer service. Ask the following questions about system maintenance.

- How should the homeowner adjust the controller schedule once new turf is established or when seasonal watering demands change?
- How does the contractor handle spring start-up and winterization of your system?
- Does the contractor perform mid-season checks and maintenance to ensure the schedule is appropriate?
- What procedures are in place for testing your backflow device and filing paperwork with the city water department? A backflow device prevents the unexpected reverse flow of water from your system back into the potable water supply. This could happen with a change in pressure upstream. Your contractor will know what backflow device should be used in your municipality.
- Who is responsible for obtaining permits or checking property lines and easements?

Insurance. Reputable professionals carry appropriate insurance policies to protect you and your property should an accident occur.

Contractor licensing. Some states require the contractor to be licensed. This provides assurance for the public's health, safety, and welfare by screening out those contractors who are not qualified. Ask the commerce department about license requirements in your state.

Required conditions of a contract. This is a guarantee of professional work and a statement specifying mutually agreed-upon standards. Insist on a written contract for your protection, regardless of the amount. The following items should be included in a contract for landscape irrigation installation:

- Names and addresses of the parties involved.
- Date of contract preparation.
- Guarantees of work and materials.
- Specified start date and an estimated completion date.

- The terms of completion, including a final inspection, the completion date, and a penalty for the project not being completed on time.
- The payment terms, such as down payment, progress payment, and balance due.
- Complete description of the work to be performed and materials to be used (including quantities and brands of irrigation equipment), and costs of materials.
- Statement that the contractor will clean up and remove debris after the job is completed.
- "Notice to Owner" explains mechanic's lien laws and how to protect yourself. A mechanic's lien is a hold against your property filed by an unpaid contractor, subcontractor, laborer, or material supplier, that is recorded with the county recorder's office. If unpaid, it allows a foreclosure action, forcing the sale of the property in lieu of compensation. A lien can result when the prime contractor (referred to as a "direct contractor" in mechanic's lien revision statutes, effective July 1, 2012) has not paid subcontractors, laborers, or suppliers. Legally, the homeowner is responsible for payment — even if the homeowner has already paid the direct contractor.
- "Notice of Cancellation" allows you to cancel the contract within three days after signing.
- Validation of any required license and certificates of insurance, not just copies.
- Statement that the work will meet the standards specified in the contract.
- Signatures of parties involved or legal representatives.
- Date of signing.

Any changes you and the contractor agree to make in the work or materials after the contract has been signed *must* be made in writing and is referred to as a *change order*. A change order should include any additions or reductions in the total job price. All involved parties should sign the change order.

Expect a final walk-through. A professional contractor will perform a final inspection with you. This should be a thorough visit that shows you how to use your irrigation system and answers questions or concerns.