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Way to Grow in Orinda
Choosing a Landscape Maintenance Contractor can be Challenging



Steve & Cathy Lambert

Is your service doing a good enough job? You might be thinking about hiring someone to care for your lawn and garden. Why pay for a professional landscape maintenance company? Most homeowners do it to protect their investment, to save time and trouble, and to make sure the job gets done right.

If you've invested in your property by improving your landscape, you can safeguard that asset and allow it to grow by hiring a well-trained and reliable maintenance contractor. Your garden needs more than just a weekly mow and blow to thrive. It also needs proper pruning, fertilizing, and irrigation system checks.

If you're like most Orinda homeowners, you are maxed out with work, family obligations, and social commitments. Time, as they say, is at a premium. Often yard work that isn't essential gets left to a chance weekend when the kids don't have baseball or soccer games. Hiring a yard service company can free up a substantial chunk of time. It is a luxury to come home at the end of the workweek to see the lawn mowed and the yard tidied.

Just the thought of operating a mower is intimidating to some, not to mention changing the oil and sharpening the blade. With so many skills to master, it's no wonder that homeowners contemplate turning the job of yard care over to an expert. That said, there's much more to properly managing and maintaining a quality landscape. It takes a whole heap of horticultural knowledge and training to know when and where to plant which annuals, how to spot early signs of disease and prevent them from spreading, how much and when to fertilize or prune in order to achieve optimum performance from your plants and trees, how and when to fertilize and aerate your lawn so it remains lush, green, and weed-free, and how to manage the irrigation system when it's in need of repairs or adjustments to watering times and amounts or spray head direction.

Is your current landscape maintenance company doing a good enough job? Your maintenance company should be the



STEVE LAMBERT
A well-maintained garden with its colorful blooms.

steward of your garden. It's their responsibility to make certain the vision and intent you and your landscape designer had for your garden is sustained through their maintenance program. As a designer, it's frustrating to visit an installed garden to find it being maintained in a manner that results in a completely different look than the client and designer intended.

Because of such mistakes, we have created Cathy and Steve's Top 9 Poor Maintenance Pet Peeves and Tell-Tale Signs that Your Maintenance Company is Not Cutting It.

1. The tree is holding up the stake instead of the reverse.
 2. Too many green meatballs. Landscape plants are all too often pruned improperly or all into the same shape. Each type of shrub has a different pruning technique and style.
 3. The hacker technique. Large-leaved plants pruned or hedged with power shears resulting in ripped and torn leaves with brown edges create hazy, dirty-looking plants.
 4. Cutting off the flowers. Pruning
- [SEE GROW page 18]




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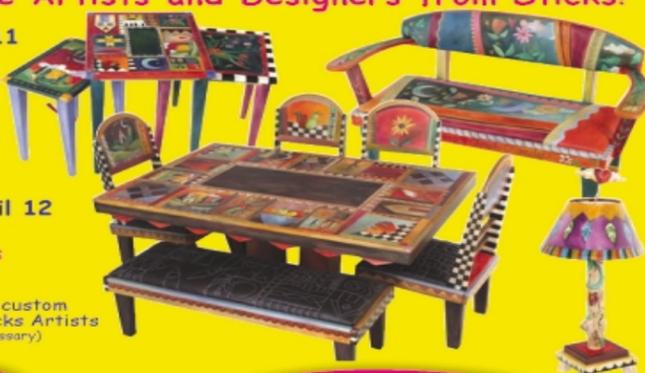
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flowering trees in the fall or winter actually removes most of the spring blooms.

5. Perennials left unchecked. Allowed to grow un-pruned, perennials will grow higher than they should and many (like penstemon) develop an unattractive naked, woody growth if they're not cut back hard once or twice a year.

6. Over blowing. We believe that blowers are absolutely necessary in modern maintenance, however, too often gardeners are given no instruction and simply walk around with the blowers on full blast blowing not only leaves but mulch, gravel and small pets, and children off the grounds.

7. Leaving the plugs behind. When aerating a lawn the dirt plugs are often left on the sod allowing them to break down and refill the holes they came out of after the first few waterings. Rake them.

8. House and window washing. This should not be a service of your landscape maintenance company. If your irrigation system is getting more water on your house and windows than on your landscape, something is amiss.

9. Bright light in your eyes. Have you ever been sitting at your dining room table wondering why your landscape light is shining right in your eyes? Well, it could have been the kids or the dog but more likely it was the yard service lawn mower.

Start with Referrals

If you need a new maintenance company, ask your designer and/or installation contractor for a referral as well as friends or neighbors with gardens you admire.

Ask each company to provide you with a list of current clients.

Get Quotes

When getting quotes or estimates from more than one company make certain that they are comparable. The best way to do

this is to ask for a quote that includes weekly hours, materials, and other services that you might require. For people who truly enjoy gardening but have limited time, we usually recommend that you hire someone who can handle the mundane tasks of mowing and blowing weekly to free you up to do the gardening chores you most enjoy.

Check their License

Landscape maintenance professionals, like all California contractors, are required to be licensed by the state. They should have either a C-27 Landscape Contractors license or a C-61 Specialty Contractors license. If they use any chemical fertilizer or pesticides, they must also possess a pesticide license. You can double check their license number by going to www.cslb.ca.gov.

Verify their Insurance

To hold a California contractor's license a company is required to have workers compensation insurance. If a maintenance company tells you they don't have or don't need workers compensation insurance because they don't have any employees, be wary. General liability insurance is not a state requirement for landscape maintenance contractors but think twice before hiring a company without it. Remember they use dangerous equipment on your property, and if an accident occurs you could be liable for damage or injury caused by your maintenance contractor. Ask for a proof of insurance certificate for both worker's compensation and general liability insurance. The general liability certificate will state the coverage limit, which should be a minimum of \$1 million dollars. Call the insurance company listed on the certificate before signing a contract to verify that your contractor is a current client. Make sure you check insurance for any company that provides you with a bid far and below the rest. This usually means they have a lower overhead, and often it is due to low or no insurance coverage.

Request and read the contract. Make sure you sign a contract that clearly spells out all hours to be worked and all materials and services provided. The contract should also state all services that can or may be provided at additional cost, and all services not included in the regular maintenance fee (i.e. tree trimming above 15 feet).

If you have any specific questions about hiring, please drop us an email at gardenlights@comcast.net.

◆ **LINES** from page 8

by Anya Ulinich. The book offers John Irving at his best in this story of Sasha Goldberg, a bi-racial Jewish girl from Asbestos 2, a small town in Siberia, who escapes from Russia to Arizona as a mail-order bride. This is a story of new beginnings that is both funny and moving.



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