

Way to Grow in Orinda

Hiring a professional landscape designer makes sense, but what level of professional do you need?

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Did you know that the home improvement that provides the greatest return on your investment is a well-designed landscape? According to several recent studies, sprucing up your yard is one of the best ways to increase your home's resale value.

In 2003, *Smart Money Magazine* reported "a mere five percent of a home's value spent on landscaping can reap as much as 150 percent in increased value, and that consumers value a landscaped home as much as 11.3 percent higher than a comparable one without. While kitchen remodeling can bring 75 to 125 percent recovery of monies invested, landscaping can bring a recovery after-sale value of 100 to 200 percent."

The national average cost of a new landscape installation is 10 percent of the value of the home and property. In our area, a typical landscape investment is closer to 15 percent of the home's value. According to a recent study by Clemson University, a well landscaped yard will provide a 13 to 17 percent increase in resale value.

In a study for *Money Magazine*, researchers considered 218 single-family residences in Greenville, SC. It was based on home sale prices and compared results with varying levels of landscape quality. Not only were the type, size, and condition of plantings considered, but also the overall design. Landscapes were rated poor, average, good, or excellent.

Results concluded that those homes with "good" and "excellent" landscapes had a 14 to 17 percent higher sale value than those in the poor and average categories. Though results may vary slightly by region, the study indicates that the monetary return on investment for quality landscaping certainly justifies the cost; better landscapes bring higher sales value.

A professionally designed and installed landscape will not only add resale value to your property, it will prove to be less expensive and provide greater satisfaction over time. In our years of landscaping experience, we've been required to replant and/or repair numerous landscapes, which

were originally done without proper planning or installation techniques. This ends up being more expensive than doing the job right the first time.

Did you design and build your own home? For most homeowners, the answer is "No, I don't have the skills to take on such a complicated project." But when it comes to landscape design, homeowners often don't hesitate to purchase shrubs, sod, pavers, and even lighting, and place them wherever their fancy dictates. The plants may or may not do well where they have been placed, and the landscape often looks haphazard and chaotic when viewed from a distance.

Many people may have the skills required to roll out sod, build a small deck, or plant colorful annuals, but if you yearn for a yard above the ordinary and want to avoid what we refer to as a "tree of the month" garden, you should consider hiring a professional landscape designer.

So then, what level of professional help do you need? Start by listing your landscape needs and desires. Next, decide on an approximate budget. How much are you willing to, or capable of, investing? Oftentimes these first two steps are in direct conflict. We see it happen all too often where clients expect a BMW yard for a KIA price tag. They want a low price, quality design and materials, and excellent service, but you can rarely have all three. Like anything else, you get what you pay for.

Other areas to consider: Do you need a simple consultation about planting in a difficult area, or do you need a full design with planting, hardscape, garden structures, water features, lighting an outdoor kitchen, or maybe even a swimming pool? Do you have drainage problems, or difficult terrain? Do you want to include any items that may require a permit?

Answers to these questions will determine what type of expert you need. There are three classifications of design professionals in the landscape industry: landscape architects, landscape designers, and landscape design-build contractors. Landscape architects usually have a college

degree and are trained and licensed by the state. They can be the most qualified to create detailed construction designs if you plan to include one or more structures, i.e. arbors, gazebos, etc. in your garden. Landscape architects have designed some of the best projects we've seen, but we have also seen some expensive and impractical designs. Prices for an architect's service can range from thousands of dollars to a percentage of the installation price (usually 10 to 15 percent).

Landscape designers are less easily defined. They are not required to have a license or state sponsored certification so the title doesn't reflect any specific qualifications. California state law limits their work to planting and non-structural design. Their training can vary widely but most specialize in residential design. Many are recent graduates of horticulture or design programs. Others are accomplished horticulturists who are considered to be artisans or exterior decorators. Many designers offer specialized kinds of plantings experience like Japanese gardens, native or drought tolerant landscapes, or perennial gardens. Their rates should reflect their range of experience. Expect to pay anywhere from \$30 to \$200 per hour for a landscape designer.

The design-build contractors are required by law to have a state landscape contractor's license, which allows them to design and install projects that include paving, masonry work, planting, irrigation systems, water features, exterior carpentry (arbors, gazebos, outdoor kitchen, etc.), and landscape lighting. There are some distinct advantages to choosing a design-build contractor. You will have a relationship with one person from the initial planning/design meeting through the completion of the installation. It will be easier to establish a realistic project budget and stay within your budget. New ideas, which often evolve during the installation process, can easily be made with consideration of impact on the original design.

When choosing a landscape professional it is helpful to keep the following considerations in mind. Does the designer have original ideas? How will they incorporate your ideas into their design? Does their style match yours? Are you looking for a designer who will hear your desires and design with them in mind, or are you starting with a blank slate and looking for someone who can give you a number of different design options? In other words, are you hiring a designer to create your dream garden or a draftsman to simply

put your ideas on paper?

It is also important to determine how well your designer knows your neighborhood. Local planting knowledge can be very important. For example, Orinda deer have a different plant appetite than deer in Berkeley. The local microclimates and planting options are much different in Orinda than they are in Danville or Berkeley. A good design should include original ideas from your designer while reflecting your desires, practical needs, and personality.

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