

# HOW to Choose a LANDSCAPE Company



for a healthy  
landscape and  
healthy environment .....



## **Why should you care about the practices of your landscape company?**

**When you hire someone** to design, install or maintain your yard, it's worth asking what they will do to keep your yard and our Northwest environment healthy.

**Some landscape practices** can be part of big problems in our environment, and they may pose a risk your family's health, and can actually damage your plants and lawn.

**Newer approaches** build plant health, reduce dependence on toxic chemicals, and conserve precious water. Give them a try – for a healthy, great looking landscape!

### **What's the Problem?**

**Pesticides and fertilizers are polluting our streams and lakes.**

Rain washes bug and weed killers from our lawns into local streams and lakes. A government study found five commonly used pesticides in King County streams at levels exceeding standards to protect aquatic life.

Quick-release, high nitrogen fertilizers feed the lawn too much too fast, make more work mowing for you, and are more likely to wash off into local lakes. There the fertilizer feeds algae and chokes out fish and other water dwellers.

**Pesticides may not be so great for you and your kids, either.**

Kids and pets come in contact with toxic pesticides in your lawn and garden. A number of studies have found increased cancer risk, especially among children.

**Pesticides and quick-release fertilizers may damage your lawn and landscape.**

Healthy lawns and landscapes grow on healthy soil. Overuse of chemicals can kill earthworms and other organisms that keep soil and plants healthy. This leads to more dependence on chemicals, higher water needs and weaker plants.

**Lawn and garden watering make up more than 30% of our summer water use.**

That's when supplies are lowest and when salmon, wildlife and people need it most. It's also when rates are highest. Much of this water is wasted through overwatering – which also invites plant disease.

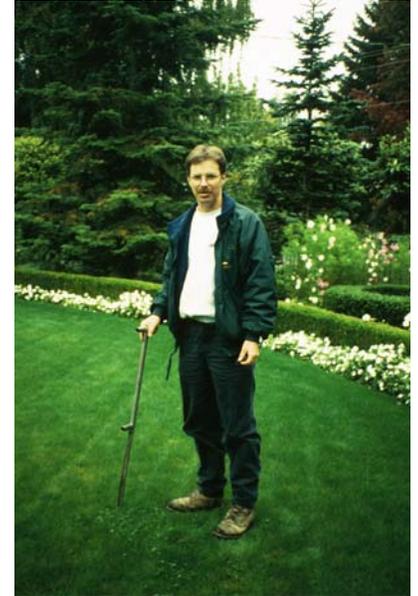
# Hiring a landscape company?

## Ask these questions:

### Building Healthy Soil

Does the company...

- Examine a core sample, and/or use a soil test?**  
Good soil is the basis of a healthy landscape. A soil test will tell a professional about organic content, what nutrients are missing and more. It's essential for diagnosing landscape problems.
- Prepare the soil properly, by tilling in compost and other amendments?**  
Deep, healthy soil is the key to vigorous, easy to care for plants. A general rule is to apply 2 to 4 inches of compost and till it in to a depth of 6 to 12 inches.
- “Grasscycle” or mulch mow?**  
Leaving the clippings improves lawn health, reduces fertilizer needs, and does not cause thatch buildup. Modern mulch-mowers leave the surface clean, too.
- Mulch beds annually with leaves, chips, bark or compost?**  
Mulch controls weeds, prevents erosion in winter and reduces summer water needs. And mulch slowly feeds the soil as it breaks down.
- Use/recommend “natural organic” or “slow-release” fertilizers?**  
Soluble or “quick-release” fertilizers can overfeed plants, and the excess can wash off into streams and lakes. Slow-release fertilizers last longer, are better for plant and soil health, and are less likely to run off. Timing is important – feed lawns in late spring and fall, but not early spring because it makes them grow too fast.



### Selecting Plants that Will Thrive

Does the company...

- Consider existing site conditions in the design?**  
Healthy landscapes fit their site. Sun and shade areas, slopes, soil types, drainage and moisture all affect which plants will grow easily on your site, with few disease or pest problems. Professionals first make a sketch map of these areas as a base for their design, and fit your desired features into these site conditions.
- Look for plants that love the Northwest?**  
Natives and other plants suited to our climate will be healthier and need much less water too. Rye/fescue blends are better turf choices in the Northwest.
- Look for pest-resistant plants?**  
Some plants are naturally more resistant to insect and disease problems, for instance roses that resist black spot or rhododendrons resistant to root weevils.
- Consider the landscape’s water needs, and select “drought-tolerant” plants?**  
Some plants need little extra water after establishment. Lawns require a lot of water to stay green, but some varieties (“Eco-lawns”) need less or go dormant well. Planting less lawn and more mulched beds is a good strategy to reduce water bills.



## Controlling Weeds, Pests, and Diseases Naturally

Does the company...

- Offer an “organic” or environmentally sensitive program?**  
Ask for details. How does it differ from their chemically-based options?
- Explain their Integrated Pest Management (IPM) approach?**  
IPM begins by preventing pest problems through landscape design and maintenance, then seeks to “manage” pests (weeds, insects and diseases) rather than “control” them. It is neither possible nor desirable to eliminate pests completely from a landscape. IPM uses a range of methods to manage pests, including cultural, physical, mechanical and biological – with spot application of chemicals used as the last resort.
- Properly identify and know the life cycles of insects, weeds and diseases?**  
A skilled professional can tell you how to identify each potential pest problem, and what its life cycle is. That’s the key to choosing the right strategy.
- Monitor regularly for pests and weeds, but spray only when necessary?**  
IPM uses regular monitoring to see if pests have exceeded acceptable thresholds. Calendar-based spraying programs are not part of an IPM program.
- Use alternative approaches first, before turning to pesticides?**  
A range of methods can keep pests and weeds down to a level where damage is minimal or tolerable.
- Consider the health and environmental impacts of pesticides?**  
Ask for information on the impacts of the chemicals they use. Do they suggest spot spraying to reduce the amount of pesticides applied? Ask to see their pesticide applicator’s license – anyone spraying for hire must have one.
- Recommend controlling weeds using hand tools, cultivation and mulching?**  
These physical controls of weeds can be efficient and effective, and less toxic.



## Watering for Healthy Plants (and lower water bills!)

Does the company...

- Make plant health and water conservation high priorities?**  
Overwatering invites plant disease. Some key practices they should recommend:
  - Fit irrigation plan to your soil type (sandy soils need more frequent water).
  - Build soil drainage and moisture retention by incorporating compost into the soil, and applying organic mulches annually.
  - Plan watering zones to meet each plant’s needs, without overwatering.
  - Water deeply, to moisten the whole root zone, but infrequently.
  - Use drip irrigation or soaker hoses where appropriate, to reduce evaporation.
- Understand and regularly maintain and adjust irrigation systems?**  
If you have an automatic irrigation system, your professional should be able to:
  - Check the system annually for leaks, and replace broken sprinkler heads.
  - Help you set the controller to water just enough: less in the May and September “shoulder” seasons, more in mid-summer (lawns need about an inch per week).
  - Show you how to skip a cycle when it’s going to rain and the extra water would be wasted, and suggest other ways to save water too.



## Other credentials to look for in a landscape company:

### Experience

How many years of local, hands-on experience do they have?  
How long has their staff been working for them?

### Education

What horticultural education does their staff have?  
Also ask about training in IPM, soils, insects, etc.

### Affiliations

Are they active in a landscape professional association, which can keep them up to date on research and new practices?  
Such as:

- Washington Association of Landscape Professionals, 800-833-2186, [www.walp.org](http://www.walp.org)
- Washington State Nursery and Landscape Association, 800-672-7711, [www.wsnla.org](http://www.wsnla.org)
- International Society of Arboriculture, [www.isa-arbor.com/](http://www.isa-arbor.com/)
- Washington Chapter, American Society of Landscape Architects, 206-443-9484, [www.wasla.org](http://www.wasla.org)
- Washington Chapter, Association of Professional Landscape Designers, [www.apldwa.org](http://www.apldwa.org)
- Irrigation Association, [www.irrigation.org](http://www.irrigation.org)

### Certification

Are they certified? WALP, WSNLA, WASLA, and ISA all have certification programs.

EnviroStars is a regional program that certifies landscapers and other professionals for their demonstrated commitment to protecting the environment.

For a list of EnviroStars-certified landscape professionals, see [www.envirostars.org](http://www.envirostars.org)

### References

What references can they provide? Check local references for jobs similar to yours.  
If a design firm, do they have photos and/or a portfolio?

## For more information:

Local Hazardous Waste Management Program in King County,  
206-263-3050, [www.lhwmp.org](http://www.lhwmp.org)

Seattle Public Utilities, *Garden Hotline*,  
206-633-0224, [www.seattle.gov/util/services/yard](http://www.seattle.gov/util/services/yard)

Find EnviroStars Certified Businesses at  
1-877-220-7827 or [www.envirostars.org](http://www.envirostars.org)



Alternate Formats On Request 206-296-4466 TTY Relay: 711

Created by Seattle Public Utilities and  
the Local Hazardous Waste Management Program in King County  
Revised 2/8/2012



Local Hazardous Waste  
Management Program  
in King County, Washington