

QUESTION & ANSWER

Working With a Landscape Company

Q In the communities where I build most of my decks, homeowners consider a deck to be just one part of an outdoor living space and expect it to merge seamlessly with the landscaping. Do you have any tips for working with landscape designers?

A Diana Grundeen, a landscape designer in Minneapolis, responds: While many homeowners expect the deck and the landscape to be integrated, they don't always understand what it takes to make that happen. Too often, I've seen homeowners hire a deck builder and a landscape architect separately, without telling either one that the other is also on the job. At best, this results in a clumsy transition between the deck and the yard. At worst, you may end up arriving at the job site to find new plants, a retaining wall, and a bunch of rocks where you had planned to dig footings.

Projects are much easier and have better results when the landscaper and the deck builder are not only aware of each other, but are working together. Be proactive and ask your clients whether they are having landscaping done as part of the project. If they are, find out if they're already working with a landscape company. Do they have a contract, are there plans drawn, is there a scheduled start date? Get the company's phone number and arrange a meeting. Even if the deck and the landscaping are to happen in separate phases, each affects the other and should be planned as such.

If your client hasn't decided on a landscape company yet, you should recommend one. This provides you with control over who you work with, and prevents "Joe's Pickup Truck Landscaping" from creating headaches for you and your client.

Network to Find Partners

When you're thrown into a project with a landscape contractor, it's natural to interact, and sometimes a long-term relationship will grow from that encounter. But it's also worthwhile to make appointments with local landscape designers just to network. Offer to buy lunch.

Make sure the companies you plan to work with have professional standards. Not all states regulate landscape designers or contractors; if your state doesn't require licensure, check whether the company is accredited by a professional group, such as the Association of Professional Landscape Designers (apld.com), the American Society of Landscape Architects (asla.org), or some local or state landscape association. You can also ask other deck builders if they've had good experiences with particular landscapers.

When you meet with a new company, discuss the type of

clients you serve and the territory you work in, as well as how you hope working with a landscape company will go. Talk about actual construction too. Don't assume that the landscaper knows how you build, or that you know how she builds, whether you're talking about footing placement or the substructure of a patio. Asking questions will build trust in each other and knowledge about the other's craft — both very useful when you meet with clients.

On the Job

There may be times you and the landscape designer will meet with a client together. That way, the designer, the client, and you can all feed off of each other's creativity. Other times you may work with the designer behind the scenes, getting input in a separate conversation and then presenting the ideas to the client. Your relationship with the designer will strengthen as you each develop a better sense of what the other can accomplish.

Don't forget that landscape designers are professionals, though they may be selling design concepts, not something tangible like a deck. You can't necessarily prevent a client from taking a designer's ideas and applying them on her own, but under no circumstances should you do the same.

Build trust by compensating the designers you work with for their insight. You can decide on compensation project by project or have a set agreement. In some cases you might pay a commission on the project; in others, you might offer straight pay for design time. You may also choose to have the company bill the client directly.

In time, your company can form referral partnerships with the landscaping companies you work with, further building those relationships and bringing in new business as well.

Diana Grundeen owns Trio Landscaping in Minneapolis.

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February Quick Vote Results

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PT 53%; Composite 21%; PVC 15%; Hardwood 8%;
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Total votes: 66