

LANDING A

LANDSCAPER

Who you gonna call to make your garden lush with awesomeness?

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY SEAN CUMMINS | ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF JAMES DAWSON LANDSCAPE DESIGN





Landscape designer James Dawson.



Not familiar with heavy machinery? That's why you need a landscaping professional!



Whether your garden is a barren wasteland of weed matting and debris for snakes and spiders to call home or a lush paradise with fountains and statues, there comes a time when you'll want to landscape your outdoors.

Perhaps you don't have the skills to do it yourself, or it just sounds like a lot of hard work you'd rather wave at with a magic cash-wand; either way, you'll need a professional landscaper. However, mentioning professionals is when the chief financial officer of the family starts to look grumpy; professionals cost a bomb, couldn't you just paint the weed matting green?

There's a broad range of options available to make even the stingiest family CFO happy; broad enough, in fact, to be really confusing and worthy of a detailed look.

WHO DOES WHAT?

I spoke to landscape designer James Dawson to find out what type of landscaper to contact and in which circumstances. He identified three general categories of them for residential work:

LANDSCAPE DESIGNERS

Designers will produce a complete design to satisfy your budget range and your features list. Along with deciding on a layout and

which plants to put where, they provide detailed specifications from which to build, without any further thought required. A designer won't just make your landscape look awesome; they'll also make it work functionally as your own space and as a small piece of the greater environment.

They're also good at making plans that can be put in place in stages, either to spread the cost over time or as an evolution for a family whose needs will change. James gives a simple example: a designer would put grass and not a barbecue where the pool will ultimately go. Designers don't implement but they can manage the implementation for you. When do you call a designer? I would say always!

LANDSCAPE CONTRACTORS

These guys do all the heavy lifting and actually build your landscape. They won't give you a design; that's left to you to provide. If you don't have a formal design from a landscape designer, a landscape contractor will often be able to help you with a layout. This is a good option when you know exactly what you want and just need somebody to make it happen. Be aware, James says, that "construction will ask for a design anyway if features are too complicated."

DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION COMPANIES

These companies cover everything from design to construction; they're a one-stop shop. Because they do both things, the design will need to fit within the company's construction abilities and strengths. This just means that if you want the ultimate in freedom of expression, a dedicated landscape designer may be in a better position to do that for you. But if you're after an option with the least amount of fuss, this is it.

There is a fourth option as well – if you don't need any construction work done apart from a few new garden beds, you really only need the help of a good gardener with horticultural qualifications. They'll be able to clear the old plants, choose new ones and put them in the right place with the right soil.

Note that unless you live somewhere like the Palace of Versailles, you won't need to find a landscape architect; these guys do large-scale, mostly government and commercial work. And charge accordingly.

WHERE TO LOOK

"Go to the associations," James says. And I would agree! Unless you have a rock-solid recommendation, head straight to your state's landscaping association to get a list of members. Association members have to meet certain professional criteria and adhere to industry standards, so you're guaranteed to get a better result and have better recourse to settle disputes.

• NATIONAL

www.aildm.com.au

www.landscapingaustralia.com.au

• WESTERN AUSTRALIA

www.landscapewa.com.au

www.walda.com.au

• VICTORIA

www.liav.com.au

• TASMANIA

www.landscapetas.com

• SOUTH AUSTRALIA

www.landscapesa.com.au

• NEW SOUTH WALES AND ACT

www.lcansw.com.au

• QUEENSLAND

www.landscapequeensland.com.au

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

- My belief is that you'll get so much more value out of your project if you use a designer.
- A good designer will recoup the cost of the design in construction savings.
- You can always choose cheaper alternatives in materials to keep costs down. (Just don't compromise the original design!)
- Pools make landscaping much more expensive.
- You probably shouldn't expect to pay much less than \$20K for a new landscape.
- If you want an immediate capital return, don't spend more than 10 per cent of the property's value on external works. Otherwise, I reckon go nuts and feel the love!



Bluebells add colour to the landscape



WINNING OVER THE FAMILY CFO

There are many reasons to employ people who've spent years studying and practising landscaping. Sure, you could have a crack at it yourself, but ask the family CFO these questions first:

1. Do you have a sound knowledge of soil chemistry and structure?
2. Do you have drafting skills? Can you produce millimetre-accurate plans to scale?
3. Do you know how and what to communicate to contractors?
4. Do you know all your council's regulations for landscaping?
5. Can you perform site surveying?
6. Can you correctly assess a site's drainage, including subsoil drainage?
7. Do you know how to level a site to ensure proper water run-off?
8. Do you understand the mechanics of retaining walls?
9. Can you identify where stairs are needed? Could you build them?
10. Do you have extensive expert plant knowledge?
11. Do you already have a well-established supplier network for sourcing materials?
12. Can you operate bobcats and other heavy machinery?

Well, dear? Hmmm? Still think we don't need a landscape professional?

Landscaping professionals have expert knowledge about plants suitable for your microclimate.



A good design incorporates a seasonally changing colour palette.



WHAT TO ASK

Once you've worked out what type of professional you need to call, you just need to call them and ask some key questions to help you decide to whom you will hand over your cash. As you ask them, listen to what your gut is telling you. As James says, "Make sure they 'get' it; you need that relationship." Just as you should bombard your prospective landscape professional with questions, so too should they be firing them at you. If they're not, they aren't getting a proper idea of what you want.

Here are some of the questions you should be asking:

HOW MUCH?

For construction and/or design, it's obviously important to get as many quotes as you can – they're obligation-free – to see what kind of costs you're up for. Ascertain whether prices are fixed or subject to time and/or materials. If your side access proves to be too narrow and you need a crane, who's going to pay for this hidden extra? Get as detailed a breakdown of costs as you can to see how thoroughly the contractor has assessed the job. Few details and instant quotes mean little consideration; can you trust that?

PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE?

Find out how much experience the landscape professional has and how many jobs they've performed that are similar to what you'll need them for.

PREVIOUS CUSTOMERS?

See if the landscape professional can give you a list of satisfied customers. Ask to see a portfolio of previous work and also whether you can visit an existing site.

MEMBERSHIPS?

Proper operators will be members of the relevant professional associations. Use our list to confirm their qualifications.





BOTTOM LINE

So, let's cut to the chase; how many clams is it going to take to make this boat float?

If you're talking about actually modifying your landscape and not just mixing up the plantings, expect to start budgeting for a minimum of \$20K. To secure a good designer, budget 10-15 per cent of the build cost. Typically, this would start at around \$3000 and increase according to the scale of the project for a domestic design.

To really understand the cost of anything but the simplest project, you need to first have a design. If you get construction quotes without a design, I'd say make sure it's a fixed-cost contract.

Landscaping isn't cheap, but the benefits are so much more than capital gains. We're genetically engineered to be outdoors; the better your landscape, the better you'll be.



THANK YOU

A big thanks to James Dawson for taking the time to give us some valuable insight into his industry.

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