

How to Find—and Keep—a Good Landscape Gardener

By Cass Turnbull

Periodically, people come up to me and say that they have a hard time finding and keeping good garden help. I can imagine it would be difficult. For one thing, how are you supposed to know if they are any good? You can't just ask them, "Are you a good pruner?" It's like asking someone if they are a good driver. Nobody says no. Personal referrals don't help much. A lot of folks, including some of your friends, like the look of mal-pruned and overplanted or mis-sited landscapes. In fact, many people insist that bad work be done—as in, "Please top my birch and shear my camellias." Lots of folks confuse *hard working* with *skillful and knowledgeable*. The Better Business Bureau can help you find out if a prospective business person is a crook, or has bad customer service, but they don't test for skill and knowledge. As for small one and two-person businesses—well, they are not likely to be included in a commercial referral service or to have an online presence.

Maybe you found the name of a good gardener, but they didn't seem interested in getting your business—they're always too busy. And they charge three times the hourly rate of the neighbor's guys.

If you want the straight skinny on how to hire and keep a good gardener, skip to the end of this article. But for some informative background, continue here.

First off, there are two different groups working in the industry. As my friend

Denise puts it, "Gardeners have dirty knees; landscapers smell like gas." These two groups work in different worlds with different schedules.

Landscapers

The mow, blow, go company, I'll call it Turfco Northwest, must schedule their visits to your yard once a week, because that's how often the grass needs to be mowed. Employees do most of their work standing up and are skilled with power equipment—mowers, string trimmers, power hedge shears, and blowers. They pride themselves on mowing efficiently and quickly, with straight lines and good clean up. The boss's dream is to acquire as many clients as possible in the same neighborhood. That cuts down the unbillable drive time. He wants to grow the business and add more employees, trucks, equipment. Every year he hires temporary workers because the workload collapses after the first freeze and the grass stops growing. The employees avoid hand weeding, or anything that requires bending over. They weed with a hoe and rake and prune with hedge shears. They like to fertilize everything as much as four times a year. They can tell you a lot about turf—thatching, red-thread, and why you need more fescue in your lawn. They rib each other at lunch and safety meetings. You suspect some of them might be smoking pot. They know practically nothing about pruning or horticulture and don't really want to. There's always a guy on the crew who

feels he is an artist with the hedge shears. He's been sculpting shrubs for years and thinks pruning is a matter of personal taste.

Gardeners

Gardeners, on the other hand, do most of their work by hand and often on their knees. They don't like to mow grass or do hedges. In fact, they want to enlarge your beds and get rid of some grass. They have small companies, and they use fan rakes, tarps, hand pruners, plastic buckets, and hand weeding tools. They like plants, not turf. They always wear a red-handled hand pruner in their holster, and sometimes even work in tennis shoes and shorts. The garden company—I'll call it Forest Friends—comes to your yard once a month for 3-7 hours because one month is the time shot weed takes to germinate, grow up, and go to seed. Sometimes a pruner will stare at plants and then disappear into the shrubbery to work on them for hours at a time. They will use power equipment but don't spend much time doing so. They don't push chemical fertilizer; they push mulch and organic products. They even move spiders so they won't break their webs. They know the names of all the plants. They are sometimes kind of flakey or a little weird or lack communication skills, either talking too much or not at all. They seem unwilling to do many things you ask them to do and are always saying things like, "the plants like this" and "that hurts the plants." You suspect they might smoke pot.

Hire

Hire one company to do mowing, leaf raking, and hedges. Hire another company to do the bed work. Get the landscape company by looking for them in your neighborhood. Ask if they belong to any professional organizations and to see their insurance card. On the other hand, the gardener company can come from anywhere. They should be a small company. They do pruning and other bed work like weeding, transplanting, mulching, pots, perennial bed management, small design improvements, composting, and raking.

Look for your gardener in the winter, when they are hungry. Hire somebody who has been in the landscape maintenance business for a few years, but maybe not twenty. For the best deal, look for somebody who has worked for a company for a few years and is just striking out on their own. Ask your local nursery, master gardener, or your friend who loves gardening for recommendations. See if the prospective gardener has attended a horticulture school. Interview three gardeners to find the one with whom you feel simpatico. Walk around the yard with them and ask questions. You want a company that does **not** want to expand. They should know the names of 80% of the plants in your yard. You should tell them you want to top a tree. They should try to talk you out of it. If they are new in business, tell them you are looking for regular maintenance ALL YEAR round. If

they've been in business for over seven years, they will say they are really busy, which they should be if they are any good. If you really want them, trick them by first asking for a consultation. After they have seen your yard, but while they are still on site, ask if they could possibly fit you in for a day of work, even if it is months away. Get the date right then. Put it in your calendar to call and remind them how much you are looking forward to their visit two weeks beforehand, and reconfirm two days ahead. Once you become a regular client, you will be on automatic. They should be if they are any good. If you really want them, trick them by first asking for a consultation. After they have seen your yard, but while they are still on site, ask if they could possibly fit you in for a day of work, even if it is months away. Get the date right then. Put it in your calendar to call and remind them how much you are looking forward to their visit two weeks beforehand, and reconfirm two days ahead. Once you become a regular client, you will be on automatic.

Keep

To retain your gardener and keep the quality of work high, I recommend the following. Slightly wince at the bill but do not argue or complain. Include a sticky with your check that has a smiley face and says "Thanks! The garden



looks great." Be appreciative. Be slightly disappointed if they call to change dates. Give a year-end cash bonus and offer cookies from time to time. Hint to the owner that you prefer that he/ she come to the yard in person and not just send employees. If they are new in business, recognize there will be a period when the prices will go up and quality will go down as they learn how to handle the rigors of managing a business. And know that there is satisfaction in having a gardener you can trust to know what you like, to know what to do, to do good work quickly and efficiently, better that you could-someone who will care for your garden better than they would their own, and sometimes even be a friend with whom to share the joys of your garden.