



THE UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA
**COOPERATIVE
EXTENSION**

College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences
College of Family and Consumer Sciences

Landscape Design

Choosing a Landscape Design Professional

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The landscape is a very important aspect of a home. Having a beautiful, creative and functional landscape requires some understanding of design principles, plant materials and outdoor structural elements. A landscape installation can be very simple or extremely complicated. Designing irrigation systems, outdoor lighting, stone walls and patios requires skills that go beyond those of the average homeowner. When the job seems too big, it may be time to call in a professional. This publication provides guidelines and suggestions for finding a garden designer.

Why Hire a Garden Designer?

Some people find it rewarding to design and install a landscape project themselves. Others prefer to have everything done by professionals. Professional people who turn these dreams into reality can be garden designers, horticulturists or landscape architects. Garden designers use plants and other elements to design and construct exterior spaces. The most important reason to hire a garden designer is to ensure certain industry standards and practical guidelines are followed in developing the plan. Established guidelines for sidewalk widths, driveways, seating walls and decks can be confusing to the novice. Just knowing all the different varieties of plants and their maximum growth potential is challenging. Though much of this information is available in publications, it may vary with the situation. A good landscape designer knows both plants and design standards and how to incorporate individual preferences into an overall design.

Types of Garden Designers

Many different types of garden designers practice in Georgia. Their level of training and experience varies. It is important to know the type of garden designer and the type of service to expect. Every state has different licensing laws that regulate what a garden designer can be called (title laws) and under what situations they can design landscapes (practice laws). The terms can be confusing.

A **landscape architect** in Georgia has received a college degree from an accredited university, worked for a certain period of time under another registered landscape architect, and passed a registration exam. This individual has received basic training in engineering, construction, plant materials and basic design. Depending on experience and personal interest, this person may or may not have extensive knowledge of plants or residential design. In addition, a registered landscape architect is trained to handle engineering problems and may even have considerable architectural knowledge, which could come in handy when designing decks or patios. The fees for the services of a registered landscape architect are typically higher than for most other design professionals.

A **landscape contractor** in Georgia may or may not have a college degree. Most have some post-high school training and many have passed certification programs such as the Landscape Professional Certification, sponsored by the Georgia Green Industry Association (GGIA) and the Georgia Urban Ag Council. Landscape contractors typically have experience installing and maintaining landscapes, so their point of view may be slightly different from that of a landscape architect. Unless they attended a college program that included landscape design, their design knowledge may be limited to what they have read or seen. Fees vary, depending on experience and market. A company that installs landscape plans they design is often referred to as a “design-build” firm.

A **landscape designer** in Georgia is someone whose experience is typically between a registered landscape architect and a landscape contractor. This person may have college training in landscape design or previous landscape experience. He or she likely works for a landscape contractor or garden center, though they may be self-employed. The fees for a landscape designer are typically lower than for a registered landscape architect.

A **garden center** may offer design services to customers. In this case, the person may or may not have college training and may or may not be a trained professional. Some of the larger garden centers employ full-time landscape architects to serve as advisors to all sales staff and to assist with larger projects. Fees vary. In some cases, design services are free when plants are purchased from the garden center.

Finding a Garden Designer

A good way to find a qualified designer is to ask for recommendations from friends, neighbors and the manager of a local garden center or nursery. Word-of-mouth recommendations may help reduce the number of designers contacted in the search. Another place to look is the yellow pages of a phone book or online by searching “landscape services.” The American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA) is the national professional organization of landscape architects. In Georgia, the Secretary of State maintains a list of all registered landscape architects at: <https://secure.sos.state.ga.us/myverification/> A listing of Georgia Certified Landscape Professionals can be found at: <http://apps.caes.uga.edu/urbanag/GCLP/GCLPselectForm.cfm>.

Each garden designer has an individual style and approach to landscape design. Some garden designers specialize in certain aspects of garden design, such as irrigation de-

sign or water gardens. It is important to find a compatible designer for your style and project goals. Allow time for the interview, either at their office or, preferably, at your home. This initial consultation is often free, but not always. Be sure to ask if there is a fee and what will be provided for that fee. Interviewing a garden designer provides a chance to meet and to learn if the chemistry is right. A landscape designer may be working with you an extensive amount of time, so look for someone who is comfortable and easy to work with. Will they listen to ideas and comments? Often a landscape designer is hired to prepare a landscape plan, and when the plan is completed, it is put on a shelf and never implemented. During the interview, discuss the project and your personal goals. It is important to ask questions. Also ask for references and to see a portfolio or photographs of previous work. Inquire about their training, education and experience. Visit nearby projects to view their work and, if possible, ask past clients if they were satisfied.

Hiring a garden designer is like hiring any other professional. A little investigating and asking the right questions can help make the experience positive. The guidelines in this publication are meant to supplement common sense and careful decision-making in finding the right garden designer.