How to start and run a gardening and landscaping business.

Introduction

There’s no doubt that the credit crunch has brought many new challenges to businesses as they seek either to expand or just stay afloat. As I write this in June 2012 the Governor of the Bank of England, Mervyn King, has just said that he believes we are only halfway through the crisis and there is still more pain to come.

However, it’s not all doom and gloom. As some businesses fail to cope and close their doors there are always opportunities for anyone with drive and desire to fill the gap.

The landscape and horticulture industry, whilst not immune from the recession, probably has a great deal more going for it than many other sectors. Fears about the environment mean we are planting more trees and plants than ever and our wild-flower meadows are now on the increase, bringing benefits to wildlife and insects, especially bees.

The downside for our industry is that everyone seems to want to start a business but there just isn’t the room to cater for all.

Whilst this book will not tell you everything about starting a landscaping and/or gardening business, hopefully my tips will help you in the process and give you a stronger grounding. The upside is, through the Landscape Juice Network forum, there are over 2,600 people either in a similar position to you or who have, at one time, had to go through the process – do drop in and ask questions.

This book is designed so that you may either read it online or print it off.

Let’s get started

To start, we’ll take a look at your reasons for wanting to go into business in the first place. We’ll also look at how to consider some of the tough questions, such as, Am I physically and mentally prepared for the weather and the financial aspects of being my own boss?

This first chapter is geared to those people who are thinking about or have recently started to trade, but I hope some of the points may be of help to anyone who has been trading for a while.

Don’t worry if this doesn't answer all the specifics, as we’ll go into greater detail shortly.

Why start a gardening business?

A plethora of TV gardening programmes have tended to create a misty and romantic notion that a garden makeover or a complete landscaping project is quick, easy, fun and may be achieved on low to modest budgets. This has unfortunately led to the unrealistic and undeliverable expectations of the consumer, who is now under the impression that gardens are quick and easy and that employing a gardener or a landscaper is cheap.

Consequently, the stark reality is that gardening is still often viewed - despite the ongoing work we are all doing on Landscape Juice - as a second-class profession. It is also significantly undervalued compared to many other skilled trades; it’s totally unregulated, hampered by the vagaries of the weather and is blighted by a common impression that everything can be renegotiated for cash.

I hope, after reading this chapter, you will form a realistic view of gardening and landscaping, with no
illusions - despite the rewards of this industry - of the challenges faced when starting and running a profitable business.

**Why do you want a garden business?**

So here we go, straight in, and here are some of the reasons why people want to enter the horticulture profession (in no particular order):

They:
* recently qualified from a horticulture college, having had a long-term aspiration to become a gardener or landscaper.
* have gardened as a hobby and/or created their own garden and cannot resist making it a career move.
* always wanted to work outdoors but never had an opportunity.
* cannot find other suitable work and gardening is a last resort.
* have children in full-time education or who have left home and they now have the time.
* worked in the industry as an employee for a short/long time and want to go it alone.
* want to be their own boss, and why not as a gardener?

**So what about you?**

Whatever your reason for wanting to go into this business, you have to determine if it's the right one. This consideration is the most important one at this stage. If your mind isn't in the right place or your motives are wrong, then there's a very strong chance that your business will fail. Bear in mind, what might be right for someone else might not be right for you, and you have to weigh up everything based on your own personal set of circumstances.

There are also many other aspects of a garden business that have to be considered at this important stage and the following is designed to put you off. If it doesn't put you off, there's every chance you're, mentally at least, equipped to get started.

**It's good to talk**

Talk to as many people as you can, whether they're people who you know already work as a gardener or landscaper or people you feel might be a potential (not necessarily of your future services) customer.

Listening to someone who has been at the stage you are at now will be a great help in focussing your mind and will stimulate further debate and flag up more pertinent questions.

Talking to potential customers will bring into focus what might be expected of you.

A good starting point is the Landscape Juice Network forum.

**Be tough with yourself**

I'm sure we've all done it: convinced ourselves that something is a good idea yet, deep down, had feelings of insecurity and doubt, knowing that whatever we’re about to try to undertake is really not in our best interests.

Sure, even faced with risk and disadvantage, some people have the ability to be single-minded enough to turn a negative situation into a positive one. Ask yourself why you want to become a gardener or a landscaper. Is it something you feel you would be good at?

Could you hack working in the outside world? Gardening might well be a great pastime when you can please yourself, pick and choose when you work, and dodge the rain and foul weather - including snow and ice - but when you come under the commercial pressures of working to a timetable and
delivering a quality service and value for money, then you have got to ask yourself seriously if you can cope, as it's a different ball-game entirely.

If you've got a mortgage or rent to pay then you need to be confident that you'll be able to meet your obligations during times of disruptive weather conditions. If you easily buckle under stress, then being snowed-in during January (as it was the case for most of the UK in the winter of 2010) and not having significant capital to meet your financial needs could be mentally debilitating. Ask yourself, Can I do this? Do I want to do this?

Are you equipped, both physically and mentally, for the demands of running your business? You'll not only have to work physically hard, carrying out the tasks on site, but you'll also have to deal with people and hold your own in what can be a harsh business environment. Remember, the client will want the best possible service for the price they've agreed to pay and you'll want to receive the best possible price for the service you've agreed to provide - it will be all down to you.

On paper, negotiating a daily, weekly, monthly or yearly schedule for selling your time and expertise seems simple. But negotiating is tough at times and you'll often feel caught in the middle. You'll have to negotiate the best possible prices and discounts with suppliers as well as resist pressure from potential clients to give away too much. Talk is cheap and it's easy to give the client the impression that they'll be getting a lot more from you than you'll ultimately expect to give. Can you stand firm? Do you want to do this?

**Setting up a business costs money**

You might have a strong plan and a certain amount of work already in the pipeline but setting up and running a business costs money.

I would suggest that, if you are setting up as a sole trader, you keep strict control over your debtors and insist, where possible, that you are paid on the day you do the work. Unless you are anticipating taking on commercial contracts, there's no real need to, or sense in, letting your clients have any form of credit.

We'll go into business plans and cash-flow forecasting in the next chapter, but before you even get as far as putting too much on paper, ask yourself, Do I have sufficient capital to see me through the first few weeks or months? There may be capital expenditure on tools and equipment (if you don't own these already) and potentially an investment in a commercial vehicle to carry your tools and materials to the sites you work.

The family car's all well and good, but do you really want to be unloading tools and equipment and hoovering out soil and muck just so you can take your family out for the day over a weekend?

**Saleable skills and knowledge**

It's the same with any profession. You can only receive the right remuneration according to the experience and skills you possess. It doesn't matter one iota if you are unqualified in some or all of the aspects of gardening or landscaping but you have to be able to deliver on your promise. You'll be foolish, bordering on insane, if you sell yourself as being experienced and skilled in certain aspects of gardening or landscaping and then expose yourself and let yourself down when trying to deliver the goods to your clients.

You also have to be aware that the price you can charge depends on the knowledge and skills you already possess. So, you have to do some research into your local gardening markets and assess what's already being charged for the service you aim to deliver. Then work out if you have the ammunition to provide those skills to receive the right compensation to create the income you need from your business.

Don't take a chance. If you're not sufficiently equipped, both skills-wise and with the necessary experience at this stage, then your business might suffer from Day One and not get off the ground.
Bad news travels fast and so does a poor reputation.

**How to plan for a business plan**

We are not going to be looking at writing a business plan, so much as identifying how writing a plan should be approached by looking at yourself and your future business from the outside facing in, rather than the inside facing out.

**What is a business plan?**

A business plan is a route map of your planned journey through a set period of future business. It's designed to explain much about a proposed or existing business in a simple way and should be a concise but brief snapshot, setting out business objectives, strategies, the market the business operates in, as well as its financial forecasts. I'm not going to re-invent the wheel at this point, so here are some excellent resources to help you with the mechanics of writing a plan:

Business Link - [Preparing a business plan](#)

The Startupdonut - [Business planning](#)

A business plan can be any size, shape or form. It matters not if you formulate a plan in your head, on a fag packet, a single sheet of paper or in a telephone-directory sized presentation - they are all plans.

**Does every business need a plan?**

No and yes. Whilst it is not necessary to write everything down, when you do so - and read it back - it is much easier to determine if you've made any errors or if what you are planning is actually viable.

Many new garden maintenance or small landscaping businesses grow organically; by that I mean they start off small, have little need for outside finance, and are just a means to provide an income for their owners, who have no real aspirations to create a large organisation.

It is these small owner-operated businesses that are often instinctively run and because they operate within a tight structure (i.e. the owner has a strict timetable of scheduled work, does not need to plan for additional staff and is not looking to expand), there is little or no perceived need to operate a business plan.

**All businesses need to make a profit**

One thing we all have to do - no matter what size of business we are - is make a profit.

A small business needs to ensure that it is making a profit and is really a business rather than a hobby.

Sole trader or husband-and-wife type enterprises may not require a full business plan (i.e. there's no need to attract external funding or investment) but it is important to isolate the two most essential elements - sales forecasting and cashflow forecasting. It's the lack of understanding of these two important elements that leads to cash shortages and business problems later down the line.

When working out an hourly rate, make sure you add a net profit into your figures.

**Having enough cash to trade**

If you are operating a small business it may not be necessary to have large cash reserves to get you up and running but, if your overall plan is to be successful, it is necessary to know what demands are being placed on resources. Bear in mind that even if you've agreed an overdraft with the bank to
cover any shortfall in the first few months or year of trading, any demands for cash you don't own will incur an expense that impacts the bottom-line net profit. Make sure that this is taken care of in the overall plan and, especially, the cash-flow forecast.

**Remain flexible**

If the recession has taught us nothing else, it should at least have taught us that the business environment can change dramatically.

With this in mind it is essential that anyone who's undertaken to work to a business plan must also be able to modify or abandon that plan should it become impossible, or negligent, to continue on the previously determined route.

**Gardening businesses face a specific set of challenges**

Any plan should always include a contingency that identifies likely areas of disruption.

The recession is one example of something that can severely disrupt your desired business path, but for garden and landscaping businesses there is a set of specific challenges that have to be built into any plan.

For example, in Year One of your new business you may have identified that there are X number of hours you can work and get paid for in the months of December, January and February. On paper, the level of income looks good but, should there be a high level of disruption caused by snow and ice, for example, then your plan becomes worthless unless there is a contingency built in.

That contingency might be that you've already planned to include working Saturdays and overtime during the spring and summer months so that you can build up some residual in the way of savings and safely abandon any working days that are called off due to the ground's being frozen or your being unable to reach your destination.

Some businesses might look to include path and drive clearance and salting/gritting as a contingency (although even a projection into this area of work might be unreliable).

**Day length**

The winter months bring shorter day lengths, so think about how you sell your time. If you arrive on site at first light and leave when it's no longer productive or safe to work, then there is every chance you'll be able to sell a full day's services. If you intend to travel between one or more jobs on a winter's day you'll have to think about how your business plan copes with the potential loss of earnings (or how you'll set an hourly rate) when you are travelling.

**Taking time out for training or education**

If you've already gone through horticulture college and have a qualification behind you, then the chances are you'll be able to get on with your new business without too much disruption. If, however, you've identified the need to top-up or widen your knowledge by taking a course, then these hours will have to be planned for.

None of us is Superman and we cannot do everything, but if you've forecast a need to work 50 weeks x 8 hours to make the kind of money you'll need to cover your costs and make a profit, then taking a few hours or a day a week from your estimates means you have to plan to make up the shortfall.

Example: you identify that you need to make £20,000 per year.

2000 hrs a year (50 weeks working 8-hour days) @ £10.00 = £20,000
Going to college for one day a week for 10 weeks means you'll have to raise your hourly rate to
£10.41 or work 80 hours of overtime during the course of the year when you are not attending college.

You'll have to add travel and sundry expenses into the equation and make the necessary adjustments to your plan too.

All of the above is by no means exhaustive and there will be crossover with other elements of starting and running a gardening business in later chapters.

You may need to take legal or accounting advice before proceeding.

### Determining your market and finding customers

So far we've tried to determine if a landscaping or gardening business is right for you by asking some tough questions. We've also looked at how to plan your business plan to give you a little help in adapting your mental approach.

The next stage is crucial. I know you are going to say that each bit of the process is of equal importance but, believe me, out of all your planning, finding where you sit on the service-provider ladder, and what type of client you need, is right at the top of the list.

Note: I've used the term 'gardener' throughout but the advice about finding your place in the market still applies to landscaping.

### What is a gardener?

It's really easy to define, isn't it? Isn't a gardener just someone who pulls out weeds and cuts grass?

I wish (and so do so many others) it were this simple. A gardener can be a mixture of so many things - providing anything from the most basic services to highly skilled specialist services – that it would be impossible to define them all on this page.

Not only that, but accurately defining a client (a process I feel very few people do) is an awfully tricky thing too. But if you are going to make your new business a success - or make an existing one better - you need to match your skills to the requirements of your potential client.

Be brutally honest with yourself and make a list of all of the personal qualities you possess and what you feel are your best assets when selling your services.

Examples are: honesty, trustworthiness, loyalty, punctuality, being hard-working. All of these are next to priceless when starting a business. Don't lie to yourself. If you are not good at keeping appointments then accept it and look to improve on it.

Now list what professional qualities you have and, again, be honest with yourself. Are you good at plant identification, pruning, understanding soil, compost, plant-root needs and plant behaviour, grass knowledge? (There are so many more you can add but I hope you get my gist.)

Your next task is to build a profile of what kind of client might have a need for your skill-set and experience.

It should be obvious that you cannot sell your services and call yourself a specialist if you clearly haven't got the experience or knowledge. If you try to do so, you'll quickly get a bad name for yourself.

If you are at the really early stages of a gardening career and you have no formal knowledge or experience, then you must pitch yourself at the market honestly. There will be clients in need of your services but lacking a diverse range of skills will mean that you probably have a narrow channel of possibilities.
It might be that your service is one of a garden cleaner rather than gardener, so advertise this fact; you can always upgrade yourself as your experience and knowledge grows. If you've previous experience then you can lever that to your advantage too.

As a garden cleaner there is no reason why you shouldn’t earn the same as a gardener, because there will be clients who value your services. The important thing is that you clearly define your area of activity.

Once you've determined where you sit in the market and identified the demography of your clients then you are in a position to research the charge-out rates for this market segment.

I cannot give specifics on the actual rates you should be charging (and we will go into how to determine charge-out rates in more detail) as there are so many regional and demographic variations but, clearly, if you are providing a small-scale tidy-up service and you are looking to charge £20.00 per hour, for example, you will quickly discover that you've priced yourself out of the market and find it hard to sell your services.

Equally, if you are an experienced gardener with a proven track record and specific skill-set, trying to sell your services to a client who just requires a basic service, and who may not have a need for these attributes, will prove equally fruitless.

Find your honest place in the market and your product—i.e. YOU—will fly.

Always keep in the back of your mind that when your knowledge and experience reaches a level where you're confident about your abilities, you WILL need to start upgrading your client base to one which is looking for a higher level of gardening skills and experience. You can also up your rates too.

When this stage comes, you might find there is some kind of emotional tie to your existing clients but always remember that misplaced loyalty doesn't pay the bills. Your client might well be getting a great service at a price that is now below the market price for your skill and knowledge range. You will either have to replace your client or invite them to take their garden up to the next level with you and pay the going rate.

**Publicising your business**

Having now determined what type of client you want to target, it's now time to advertise the fact you are in business and available.

Getting the word to reach all the right places isn't easy and you could spend a great deal of money achieving very little unless you give your advertising and public relations some thought.

There are probably two types of garden contractor reading this: domestic and commercial. The following information is a guide to how to approach advertising for domestic contracts but it can be applied to small-scale commercial contracts where the contract may have a personal slant to it. For purely commercial advertising and PR, please read the section at the end of this chapter.

**Word of mouth and a note of caution**

You've heard the saying that 'word travels fast'? Well, it's true, and word of mouth is probably the best way to advertise your business. After all, it's not just peer-to-peer, it is also a personal recommendation, and friends and family don't give recommendations lightly.

Word of mouth is also the quickest way to a PR disaster if something goes wrong with a job. It is true that word and good news travel fast but it's also true that bad news travels faster, so if you go down the route of working for friends and family, then make sure you're prepared to go that extra mile in a bid to keep your client happy.
Using the internet

The internet is evolving so fast these days that it's hard to keep track of the latest developments. Before you decide what's right for you, have a think about your market segment.

**Twitter and Facebook**

Social media is currently taking the world by storm. It's still relatively new but extremely fluid and I'm certain we're still at the bottom of a long curve of disruptive technologies that will rip up the rule book (if that's not happened already).

If you are a sole trader, it's going to be difficult to maintain a stream on Twitter but, with mobile technology, it doesn't take more than a few moments to send a tweet or upload an image from a work location. If a potential client tracks location-based posts, then there's every chance of being spotted.

Similarly with Facebook, having an account or dedicated page can be an excellent way to get your brand noticed and constantly recycled.

Social media works extremely well in stealth mode and you may not always be aware of the genuine source of an enquiry if it's generated through this method. What social media does is to create and maintain brand awareness and, as long as you remain relatively active, the potential for generating enquiries in a relaxed and passive way is enhanced.

Keep it local

If you intend to work locally, there's no point in advertising anywhere other than locally. Good places to be seen are parish magazines and local free papers.

Again, if you are staying local then I'd question if you need to spend a lot of money on having a website built for you. There are so many free or cheap self-build template and blog sites available and it'll only take you half a day, or a day at most, to produce something that can start working for you.

I started Landscape Juice as a blog in 2005 and although I would not expect you to try to replicate its content, it's testament to the fact that blogging works.

If you go down the blogging route then here are a few basic guidelines to follow:

Keep it simple - your site will function well enough with 3-5 pages but if you are a keen writer then feel free to add pages and blog posts.

Be informative - content is key to attracting search-engine traffic, so write about what you know. It's a good way to attract potential clients who share your passions for gardening or landscaping.

Be local - as I've previously mentioned. If you want to attract work locally then think locally. Centre your blog content about local stuff. Report on a garden open day at the vicarage; the local bring-and-buy sale; Scout bob-a-job week or a school gardening club. Don't forget to mention place names, people and businesses involved as these will feature strongly in a search.

Include information about local suppliers, such as your local builders' merchants, quarries or sawmill, to increase your chances of being found by potential clients who might be searching for information on or around your subject matter.

**Flyers**

I'm not a great fan of posting flyers through letterboxes. It was never that successful for me and if you go down this route then only expect an average return of 1-2%. However, having said that, there is always the chance that just one flyer could lead to a long-term successful relationship with a client.
Don't post flyers at random. Just as you have identified your potential market, you will have to apply the same process to where you target your leafleting.

If you are selling gardening services then I think you'll instinctively know where to pitch for your work. As you walk around the streets or estates, take a look at your potential clients' surroundings: the cars, the condition of the houses and what state the gardens are currently in.

There's a very good chance that if a garden is strewn with toys and rubbish and looks unloved you'll be wasting your time. If the garden is already spic 'n' span then, again, you might be wasting your time. If the garden is somewhere in between and it looks as if the home owner aspires to a nice garden and their existing surroundings suggest that they have the disposable income with which to afford a gardener or landscaper, then you could be onto a winner.

**Van livery**

Your vehicle is an ideal place to add promotional information about your services. It may cost you a couple of hundred pounds, or possibly a lot more, but after this your advert goes exactly where you do, and no better place to be seen is the street or property where you're already working.

Similarly, placing a work board outside the house where you're working (I would ask permission) sends out your message perfectly.

**Yell.com or Yellow Pages**

I'm a great believer that Yellow Pages has had its day and that concerns about the environmental damage caused by the trees being pulped, the transport pollution involved in delivery and the number of directories that go to landfill have banged a nail in its coffin. The internet has also rendered the paper directory pretty useless too, so I see little benefit.

**Yell.com** has some potential but there is little need to pay to advertise with them because there are so many free options available. If you are offered a free listing with Yell.com then take it - it'll cost you nothing, after all.

**Give talks**

If you've got the confidence, giving talks to local groups or even at a garden centre or plant nursery is an ideal way, not only to help people, but to advertise at the same time, with the added benefit that your potential clients get to test-drive your services and personality at the same time as you do theirs.

And last but not least, don't forget the specialist landscaping and horticulture social network, [Landscape Juice Network - sign up here.](#)

**Commercial advertising**

Advertising your business commercially brings a different set of challenges, not least because it often extends the geographical area that a business will have to cover, so a slightly different approach is needed.

I would say that a website is the very first thing you should create. It doesn't need to be expensive but it does need to look professional, so take time and care. Link your site to Twitter and, possibly, a dedicated business page on Facebook but, if you do go down this route, make sure you update it regularly.

Again, utilising the Landscape Juice Network is also one way to get in front of a growing number of potential clients.
A host of topics has been created already - see Advertising on the forum.

Resources:

- **www.blogger.com** - free blog software from Google
- **www.typepad.com** - professional paid-for blog platform
- **www.tumblr.com** - free blogging platform

**Involve professionals in your business affairs**

Whilst online forums are a great resource for researching how and when to start a business, it is not always the safest route to get professional help from an accountant and a lawyer. This is because no two businesses or people are exactly the same or will be working the same way, so they can evaluate YOU and advise on a structure that suits you and you only.

**Avoid family and friends helping with the books**

One word of caution: bookkeeping and accounts can seem daunting when you're new to business so it is easy to let someone else take over when it should be you who is in control.

I'm sure there are exceptions to the rule, but I'm speaking from first-hand experience here. I used the services of a friend many years ago and my accounts got into a pickle; it cost me a lot of money - as well as a back payment in unpaid tax - to put right. I eventually found a reputable accountancy company to conduct my affairs (we carried out our own bookkeeping using an accounting package) and slept a lot sounder from then on.

Here are some useful resources to help with the mechanics of starting a business:

**Inland Revenue**

- Starting in business - [http://www.hmrc.gov.uk/startingup/index.htm](http://www.hmrc.gov.uk/startingup/index.htm)
- A guide to working for yourself : [http://www hmrc.gov.uk/leaflets/se1.pdf](http://www.hmrc.gov.uk/leaflets/se1.pdf)

**Business Link**


**Understanding charge-out rates and business costs**

Setting your hourly rate at a level that is profitable is extremely difficult to get right but it is a very important aspect of any business and should get the closest of your attention.

Make a howler with your calculations and trading will come in below your expectations and, if you are relying on profitability for expansion, you could easily waste a whole year as your competitors, who may have been more diligent, pass you by.

That is why I have produced a series of simple tools that will assist in understanding and applying the costs to your operation so that you can trade profitably.

It does take a bit of work and thinking but, when your business and personal life depend on it, it could be the most valuable time you have ever spent.
For someone who is looking to start a small gardening business, I have produced a simple spreadsheet, **calculating your hourly rate**, which helps to explain how a charge-out rate is achieved.

I have also added a formula, **Treating your travel costs as a cost of sales**, for turning your fuel costs into an hourly rate so that you can apportion costs accurately to each project, rather than setting a rate as an overall overhead.

The advantages are, you can identify if a job is going to be worthwhile to price for or if you can be competitive enough. The example I have highlighted, which details 840 miles at a cost of £600 for a six-week project, provides evidence that a competitor who is within a couple of miles of the project will complete the job sooner and without the fuel costs.

You will have to make your mind up if you can compete or if, to remain competitive, you are willing to absorb the cost or try to reduce the time on site, with the potential for a loss in quality.

Many garden-related businesses take a guess and do not really know if they are pitching at a profitable rate or not; they just rely on cash flow to keep them going. The problems start when the work slows or a long stretch of poor weather reduces this constant flow of cash and leaves them vulnerable.

You need that fat, which profit will provide, to cushion against catastrophe - get this right and you will be a force to be reckoned with.

**What does landscaping cost?**

*It might seem odd, writing a chapter from the point of view of a potential client, but putting yourself in their mindset will help you to understand what your client is thinking. You have to read this as if YOU are the consumer of your services.*

If you are planning to have your garden landscaped, you will need to do your homework on the potential costs involved.

If you are looking for an industry standard charge-out rate or a set cost-per-metre or, perhaps, a menu of garden features, then you are going to be disappointed because such things do not exist.

It is fair to assume that, as a consumer, you are looking for the best possible service at the lowest possible price but, if you are looking for a deal based purely on price alone and you do not take the skill or the experience of your contractor into consideration, then you could be on a slippery slope.

**What is a landscaper?**

Before engaging the services of a landscaper it is worth considering what a landscaper is and what a landscaper does.

Once again, there is no clear single definition of landscaper. Someone who landscapes might just specialise, for example, in one aspect such as laying paving stones, without having knowledge of constructing lawns or understanding planting.

However, some landscapers - especially those who have college training, extensive experience and have been in landscaping for a long time - can have a diverse range of skills and a good all-round knowledge of many aspects of the trade. They may also be self-taught.
Before you engage with a landscaper, you will need to consider what it is exactly that you want doing before making your final decision. For example, asking a single person who specialises in dry-stone walling to put up a fence adjacent to the wall that has just been built might prove to be less than satisfactory if the stone-waller does not have experience or knowledge of fencing.

Similarly, if you have employed a planting specialist to provide an extensive planting list and plant up your garden, this person’s specialism might not extend to laying flagstones. You, as the consumer, need to consider these aspects before giving the go-ahead.

Larger landscape firms will often employ personnel that have multi-skills and/or specialisms in one particular trade.

Research

It always pays to do extensive homework. After all, you are more than likely to be entering into a transaction that will be in the £00's if not £000's.

Ask to see a recently completed project - even better, two or three. If the contractor has a website, spend time reading their supporting information. If it is littered with spelling mistakes, devoid of photographs and there are no client testimonials, then consider other supporting information.

Are there any client testimonials supplied in typed or handwritten format? If testimonials exist, then make sure that they are dated, have an address and a signature. Anyone can write a false testimonial and sign it off as ‘A.S. From somewhereshire’.

One of the most efficient methods of finding the right landscaper is a referral from a friend. If you know someone who has just had their garden completed by a local reputable firm, you would be advised to talk to them in the first instance.

Your friend will be able to give you an indication of value for money, the level of service that they have experienced, the efficiency and professionalism before, during and immediately post construction, and if there have been any issues that caused the landscaper to return to site.

Cost

This can be the tricky part because there is no industry standard that you can refer to. An individual landscaper with less than five years’ experience may well be 50% cheaper than the cost of someone who has extensive experience and long service.

Similarly, a landscaping company employing several key staff may be considerably more expensive than a single person at first glance, but their skills and level of experience may exceed those of a smaller operation and therefore you might benefit from a greater all-round service.

Further reading - [What does a gardener charge?](#)

About Phil Voice

I started my gardening business on 21 May 1984, aged nineteen. I ran it for over 20 years and sold up in 2004 to move to France.
During my time expanding and running my landscape construction and garden maintenance business I employed many people, built hundreds of gardens and won awards for my work.

In France I have renovated a farmhouse and built a separate house but during this time I also started www.landscapejuice.com and www.landscapejuicenetwork.com. Both sites are intended to provide a helping hand to individuals and SMEs with starting and running their business.

Now I am delighted to condense some of my top tips into this valuable e-book to help you along the way. If you have any questions, please feel free to email me phil@landscapejuice.com.

I hope you enjoy my book.

Disclaimer

This book should be used in conjunction with other business tools and resources.

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