

# ask

## the landscape professional

# Welcome to my weekly series!

Linda K. Lillie of Sprigs & Twigs

Feel free to send me questions you'd like to have me answer and I will do my best to address the ones of most general interest.  
Email or mail your questions to: [info@sprigsandtwigs.net](mailto:info@sprigsandtwigs.net) or Linda Lillie, Sprigs & Twigs Inc, PO Box 245, Gales Ferry, CT 06335

Linda K. Lillie is the President of Sprigs & Twigs, Inc, the premier landscape, tree care & lawn care company in SE Connecticut for the last 17 years. She is a 1995 graduate of Connecticut College in Botany, a Connecticut Master Gardener and a national award winning landscape designer for her design and installation work.

**Question of the Week:** *I had an absolutely awful experience with a landscape contractor last year; can you give me some things to look for before I make the same mistake again?*

### "LINDA'S TOP 10 TIPS FOR HIRING A LANDSCAPE COMPANY"

Almost every day, I visit distraught customers that have previously hired landscape contractors who have absolutely no idea what they are doing. Unfortunately, if you hire the wrong company, not only is it an expensive mistake, they can cause damage that will take years to recover. Before you hire any company, follow these ten steps to help keep you out of trouble.

**#1 Ask to see a landscape contractor's Connecticut State Home Improvement Contractors license** - Landscapers are required by law to have a HIC license and the license number must be included in their advertising and on their trucks. If you don't see the HIC # (or if the "landscaper" doesn't even have a business name on their vehicle) don't let them near your property. However, the HIC license is not a competence test where the contractor must pass an exam or demonstrate competency. It just means the contractor can be held accountable for his workmanship by the state. Contact the CT Department of Consumer Protection for more information. There is, however, a bill being discussed now in the CT State legislature that would require landscape companies to have competency licenses like arborists, architects and other professions. Until that bill passes however, anyone with any skill (or not) can call themselves a landscaper.

**#2 Ask for a Certificate of Insurance that shows their Workers Comp and Liability coverage** - you must do this! If a worker of an uninsured landscaper has an accident and gets injured on your property, you will be held personally responsible because your homeowners insurance will not cover it! The main reason a contractor doesn't have Workers Comp coverage is because it costs him money. Chances are high he is also paying his people cash under the table. His prices will be low, but the risks to you and your assets are extraordinarily high.

**#3 Don't assume that any landscape contractor knows what they are doing** - in landscaping, it's all about training, education and experience. Unfortunately, the barriers to entering the landscape business are low - someone can buy a truck, trailer and some equipment, put their name on it (or not) and off they go whether they know anything or not. It's up to you, the homeowner, to check them out thoroughly before letting them near your property. Check multiple sources of information. How long have they been in business? What advanced training or college degrees do they have? Do they have a web site? Do

they have references you can visit and call? Are they registered with the Better Business Bureau and what is their rating? Call the Better Business Bureau and ask. Call the SECT Chamber of Commerce. Do they have experience in doing the type of project you need done? If their answers are negative, don't let them near your property. Make the contractor convince you he's the right one for the job.

**#4 The lowest price is almost always your worst choice** - Landscaping is not a commodity like produce where you can shop for the lowest price. The landscape company you want to hire is one that has trained, educated, insured professionals that know what they are doing. They will not have inexperienced, minimum wage workers, or beaten up, rusted equipment. Their people will look presentable on your property and they will be respectful to you. The best company and the right company for you will never have the lowest price.

**#5 If you are interested in a planting project make certain the company knows their plants and has a trained designer** - believe it or not, there are many, many landscape companies that know nothing about plants or how to plant them. The Northeast's biggest wholesale nursery will tell you that every day they have "landscapers" come in and ask for things like "something that blooms in June" without having a clue about characteristics of the plant, where it does best or how and where to plant it. Often, you see these companies plant way too closely together, too close to the foundation or too deeply in the ground. I often see plants that are shade plants that have been planted in full sunlight. I see landscape cloth and dyed toxic mulch everywhere, put down by unknowledgeable contractors. It's very upsetting and a tremendous waste of your money. Sprigs & Twigs rips out and replaces landscapes every day that had they been designed and installed properly, would last for the life of the house. So what can you do? Check a landscape contractor's web site, training and experience. Test them. Walk them around your yard and ask them plant questions, ask them about some of the things you have read in my weekly articles. You'll quickly find out if they know their plants and proper landscaping practices.

**#6 Good landscape companies will guarantee their work including their plants** - if a company is not confident enough in their work to offer a guarantee; be careful.

**#7 If a landscape company can start your project immediately in May or June be very suspicious** - these are the "High Season" months for good landscape companies, who in many instances are booked solidly with work and are doing projects arranged for as long ago as last year. If a company can start right away, assume that other people know something that you haven't discovered yet and be leary. Haste, in this case could cost you big. If you are contracting for work now, be patient, it is worth waiting for the right company. Smart customers start planning their projects months in advance; Sprigs & Twigs is actually doing design work now for 2014 projects.

**#8 Good landscape companies always call you back** - if you haven't gotten a return call in a reasonable time, give them a second call, because even the best companies aren't perfect and sometimes calls get missed, especially during the busy season. There are many companies though that won't ever call you back, which amazes me because it's so unprofessional and disrespectful. You should tell as many people as will listen to you about your experience with those companies. Those firms have actually done you a big favor.

**#9 Make sure a landscape contractor's work is on a detailed contract that you review with them before you sign off** - Connecticut law requires that you be given three copies of a contract that contains very specific language regarding your right to cancel among other things. Do not sign any informal looking documents that do not contain that language. Consult with the Connecticut Department of Consumer Protection. Good companies know all about the correct way to do this.

**#10 Hire a local company-invest back in your community** - there are real advantages to SE Connecticut when you hire local companies. Their employees live and work here and your landscape investment not only adds value to your property, but actually helps stimulate the local economy.

# Sprigs & Twigs

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Sprigs & Twigs is dedicated to providing quality work on both residential and commercial properties and operates in

full compliance with the items listed above. Our Connecticut licensures include Home Improvement Contractor # 577341 and Arborist License # S-5902. For more information, visit [www.sprigsandtwigs.net](http://www.sprigsandtwigs.net)

