

How to choose a landscaper

What turf, paving and retaining walls actually cost per square metre, and why the buried work decides the price

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Landscaping quotes are almost impossible to compare, because different landscapers price in different units - per square metre, per day, per job - and because the half of the work you cannot see is where a cheap quote is cheap. Drainage, base preparation and retaining wall footings are the difference between a garden that lasts twenty years and one that lifts and drops after two wet winters. A retaining wall over a certain height is also not a landscaping job at all: it is engineered, permitted building work.

What it should cost

Natural turf supplied and laid runs roughly \$15 to \$40 per square metre, paving about \$50 to \$180 per square metre depending on the material and how deep the base is, and retaining walls around \$250 to \$850 per square metre of wall face by material and engineering. Soft landscaping - turf, garden beds, mulch, plants - averages about \$50 to \$80 per square metre, and a full garden makeover commonly lands around \$50 to \$150 per square metre all up. Design work, if you want drawings and a planting plan, is usually quoted separately.

The lines that decide whether the total holds up are the boring ones: excavation, spoil removal and cart-away, drainage and ag-pipe, retaining wall footings and drainage gravel, and the disposal of everything dug out. Irrigation and garden lighting are almost always quoted separately and can add several thousand dollars. Ask what each material's design life is - treated pine sleepers are cheap and can be gone in a decade, while concrete sleepers and masonry cost more and last far longer.

What the law requires

A retaining wall that holds back a surcharge, such as a driveway, a building or a neighbour's higher ground, needs engineering design regardless of its height, and walls above a common threshold also need a building permit and council approval. Because Tasmania requires building work that needs a permit to be carried out under a licensed building services provider, a landscaper usually cannot legally build a structural retaining wall, deck or pergola on their own licence. Ask who signs the design and who holds the licence, before you accept the quote.

Before anything is dug, an underground services check is free and mandatory common sense - it protects the gas, water, power and telecoms lines under the garden. If the house was built or renovated before 1990, disturbing soil and old fibro fencing or sheds can release asbestos; removal of more than 10 square metres of non-friable material requires a licensed removalist, and friable material requires Class A and a licensed assessor. Pool fencing must comply with the relevant standard and is inspected through the council. Ask for public liability insurance of at least \$10 million to \$20 million, and workers compensation cover if the crew are employees.

Red flags

A retaining wall quote with no mention of footings, drainage or engineering.

The cheapest turf on the quote, with no line for soil preparation or watering in after laying.

No spoil removal line item, which usually reappears as a surprise charge once the hole is dug.

A fixed price for hard landscaping quoted without a site level survey or a look at the slope.

No written quote, or a written quote that is really an estimate and says so only later.

Any suggestion to prop sleepers against the boundary fence for a wall holding back a neighbour's ground.

What good looks like

Separates soft landscaping from hard landscaping in the quote, so you can see what each part costs.

Checks soil, slope, drainage, sun aspect and existing services before pricing anything.

Says plainly when a wall needs an engineer, and provides the design or names the engineer.

Prices spoil removal and cart-away explicitly rather than hoping you will not ask.

Names the trades they will subcontract - irrigation, electrical, concreting - and confirms who holds those licences.

What to ask

- "Is this a fixed quote or an estimate, and what is excluded - spoil removal, topsoil, drainage, irrigation?"
- "How deep is the base under the paving, and what is it made of?"
- "How high is the retaining wall, and who designs and certifies it - is an engineer or building surveyor involved?"
- "Have you checked for underground services before excavating?"
- "What turf variety is it, where is it grown, and how long between cutting and laying?"
- "How is drainage handled, and where does the water go when it leaves the site?"
- "What is the maintenance schedule, and what warranty do you give on plants and on the construction?"

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