



CONSUMER EDUCATION SERIES

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Gardener or Landscaping Contractor - What's the Difference?

Whether building a fence or deck, laying a patio or walkway, trimming trees, or putting in a swimming pool, you'll likely need help beyond what a weekly yard maintenance company can provide. Look for legitimate landscaping contractors who are licensed by the Contractors State License Board ([CSLB](#)) and hold an active [C-27 Landscaping](#) specialty license. Be wary of anyone offering dirt cheap prices to spruce up your yard – he or she just might be unlicensed and uninsured.

Any construction project that is \$500 or more in combined labor and material costs requires a state-licensed contractor. Put your mind at ease and only hire licensed contractors who have met state standards for knowledge, experience, and business practices.

Gardeners who routinely maintain yards (mowing, weeding, shrub trimming) generally are not required to hold a state license unless they install construction-related extras or perform repairs that exceed the \$500 limit. Some projects, such as those that include artificial turf, vinyl swimming pool liners, or irrigation systems, may be performed by a [C-61/D-12 Limited Specialty/Synthetic Products](#) contractor.

Common landscaping projects that **require** a license are:

- Artificial turf
- Awnings*
- Decks*
- Drainage systems
- Fences*
- Gazebos*
- Irrigation systems
- Landscape lighting
- Outdoor cooking center/fireplace*
- Patio covers*
- Patios, walkways and retaining walls*
- Plants and sod
- Swimming pools, spas, and hot tubs**
- Tile*
- Trenching
- Tree trimming (for 15 feet high and above)
- Water features*

*C-27 Landscaping contractors who undertake these projects may only perform the work in conjunction with a larger landscaping project.

**C-27 Landscaping contractors who undertake pool, spa, or hot tub projects also must hold a [C-53 Swimming Pool](#) specialty license, or subcontract with a contractor who holds a valid C-53 license.

Remember these helpful tips:

1. Only hire state-licensed contractors.
2. Check the contractor license number online at www.CheckTheLicenseFirst.com, www.cslb.ca.gov or by calling (800) 321-CSLB (2752).
3. Get at least three bids, three references from each bidder, and review past work in person.
4. Make sure all project expectations are in writing and detailed.
5. Only sign the contract if you completely understand the terms.
6. Confirm the contractor's bond, workers' compensation insurance policy for employees, and ask about liability insurance to cover accidental property damage.
7. Don't pay in cash; and never pay more than 10 percent down or \$1,000, whichever is less, unless the contractor has a blanket performance and payment bond on file with CSLB.
8. Don't let payments get ahead of the work.
9. Keep a job file of photos and all papers relating to your project, including all payments.
10. Don't make the final payment until you are satisfied that the job meets all contract expectations.

Remember to look for the contractor license number in all advertisements and contracting documents, as well. Anyone who is not state-licensed must include in their ads "not state licensed;" but that also means the person cannot provide work that is going to cost \$500 or more in combined labor and material costs.

If you or someone you know may be a construction scam victim, submit a [CSLB complaint form](#) (either online or by mail) to CSLB or call (800) 321-CSLB (2752).

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