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Landscape Questions to Consider

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Congratulations! You are about to save a number of headaches, misunderstandings and mistakes that commonly result in expensive change-orders and work being completed late on many construction projects. I developed this questionnaire after noticing how many designers make their recommendations without thoroughly understanding their clients' needs and how expensive this habit can be to you!

I'm giving it to you now so that you can come to our first meeting prepared to make great decisions and save money by doing so off the clock. It can also be a great focal point for communicating with a partner so that everyone involved is on the same page. All of my recommendations will be directly related to what you share about your priorities and preferences. Please be thorough and know that every mistake avoided at the design stage can save thousands of dollars later. We will go over your answers together as part of your first billable hour on site.

Summarize what is most important to you about your Landscape:

Site/house Data:

- 1) If you are on a Septic System do you have a map showing the location of the septic tank and drain-field? (Note: There are special landscape techniques required to avoid damaging your drain-field.)

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- 2) If you are on a sewer line, do you know if the pipe is sound? It can be easier to replace some sewer lines that need regular cleanings to remove roots as part of or BEFORE your landscape project.
- 3) Are you aware of zoning restrictions, setbacks or other legal restrictions which might affect your landscape?

- 4) Do you know where all utility cables are located?
 - a) Gas line
 - b) Water lines
 - c) Sewer/Septic transfer line
 - d) Power main and any auxiliary
 - e) Phone
- 5) Do you have plans drawn to scale of the property and where the house sits on it (if so, please bring a copy to our meeting)?
- 6) Do accurate stakes mark all property corners?
- 7) Do you have good relations with all of your neighbors?
- 8) May I contact them to communicate what we are doing and explore cooperation in areas of joint interest such as joint boundary plans?

- 9) Are there hidden things not apparent? (Such as buried stumps in areas, drainage problems in the winter, hard pan just below the surface in areas etc.)

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- 10) Which animals frequent the property: (Ask your neighbors if you are new to your home.)
- a) Deer
 - b) Rabbits
 - c) Other
- 11) Are there any existing features to the landscape you would like left unchanged? (A tree you really like etc.)
- 12) Are you planning structural changes to the house?
- a) Decks or patios
 - b) Garage/ Remodel
 - c) Other
- 13) Will the house be repainted the same colors? If not, which colors?
- 14) What is your water set up?
- a) Do you pay for it per unit?
 - b) Is the hose water filtered also if you have a in house filter system?
 - c) Do you have good pressure?
 - d) Are you on a community well?

Your Preferences:

- 1) Who in your family will be actively participating in the design process?
- 2) What atmosphere or style do you want your garden to have?

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- 3) Do you prefer informal, semi-formal or very formal?
- 4) Would you like to attract any form of wildlife?
 - a) Deer
 - b) Rabbits
 - c) Birds
 - d) Butterflies
- 5) Would you like a water feature?
- 6) Is fragrance important to you?
- 7) Options for seasonal interest:
 - a) The whole garden could be geared to be spectacular in 1-2 seasons
 - b) Separate beds could be geared to be spectacular in different seasons
 - c) Each area in the landscape could be quieter with something happening year round
- 8) Do you have favorite plants you want to include?

- 9) Are there plants you dislike?

- 10) Do you have color preferences:
 - a) Colors you Dislike:
 - b) Favorite Colors:

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- 11) Do you have pictures that capture pieces of what you want in your garden? Please bring a few to our meeting if you have them.
- 12) Are there particular areas in the garden you want to make special?
- 13) How many years before you want your landscape to feel mature (this question refers to plant size mainly)?
- 14) Circle the materials and techniques you like and might want:
- a) Outdoor lighting:
 - 1. Are you interested in more expensive LED light bulbs where available? These last much longer, use less energy and are five times the cost of normal halogen bulbs.
 - 2. Would you prefer lower cost largely invisible fixtures with the focus being on the light or more expensive decorative features as a visual feature?
 - 3. Lights can be controlled at no extra charge by the timer that comes with the low voltage power supply or with an optional wireless switch or hardwired switch inside the house.
 - b) Stone walls (local fieldstone or more expensive decorative rock)
 - c) Natural stone Groupings
 - d) Bark/ Chips (A 2-3" cover helps protect the soil from
 - e) Groundcover
 - f) Wood, Brick, Concrete, Pavers
 - g) Gazebo
 - h) Outside speakers and/or TV (where and controlled from where)
 - i) Other:
- 15) Are there materials or techniques you want to avoid?

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16) Would you like to create a designated space in your garden or home for meditation, relaxation and/or spiritual renewal?

Our Relationship:

1) Do you want to be actively included in smaller daily design revisions as we install?

2) Is there anything important to you that would make the process of designing or installing more comfortable for you?

3) Is this your first landscape project?

4) Have you worked with a landscaper before?

5) What did you like and dislike about the experience?

6) Several areas of landscaping fall under county or city jurisdiction, such as height of retaining wall, road access, wetlands, grading, electrical. These are your responsibility as a client to obtain or not as you prefer. Would you like me to act on your behalf to obtain any needed permits?

Your Practical Needs:

1) Storage place for tools and bicycles?

2) A place to conceal the garbage cans?

3) Screening to block a particular view or create privacy from neighbors in areas?

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- 4) A flat play area for games?
- 5) A wind screen?
- 6) An area you want to add more shade?
- 7) Space for vegetables or herbs?
- 8) A composting area for a heap or worm bin?
- 9) Site for a hot tub?
- 10) Easy wheel chair access? (If so, where to?)

- 11) How many cars do you want to comfortably park?
- 12) Are there other things (boats etc.) you plan to store on the site?
- 13) dog run/ animal shelter?
- 14) Do you want a fire pit?
- 15) Do have/ have plans for cat, dog or outside pets?
- 16) Will young children have unattended access to the landscape?
- 17) Do you need water, phone, propane, cable, a security system, intercoms, or electricity anywhere else on the site?
- 18) Do you want to install solar panels now or allocate a space for future solar panels? (An area of approximately 400 square feet of panels can create a net power surplus for many Marin homes).
 - a) On the roof of existing buildings.
 - b) As part of the roof of a new structure.
 - c) On the ground.
- 19) Do you want an automatic irrigation system?
 - a) Drip or spray in bed areas?
 - b) An onsite weather station linked to your irrigation controller? (This costs \$500.-\$2,000. and has been estimated to save about 30% of water and reduces maintenance. Marin municipal water

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district may offer you a rebate to partially pay for this as part of their program to encourage “smart timers” and save water.

- c) An optional remote for your irrigation controller.

Landscape Cost/Investments:

This includes anything outside the foundation footprint including garden sheds, driveway paving, drainage systems, outdoor lighting, forestry, trails etc.

- 1) Do you want a dollar for dollar return on investment in your landscape when you sell?
- 2) What do you want to pay for yearly maintenance once established:
 - a) All landscape related materials (includes annuals, bark etc.)\$
 - b) Paid help (if any): \$
- 3) How many hours do you want to spend maintaining your landscape each week? *(You will need to spend double this time for the first two years to establish the garden. If more than one person will be doing maintenance give a break down for each person per week.)*
- 4) Total you are comfortable investing in the installation of your landscape over time *(Landscape is defined here as anything outside the foundation footprint, including sheds, driveways, lighting, swimming pools and hot tubs): \$*

[[[Note about this question: If you do not want to double your design costs and want to be assured of staying within a certain dollar amount it is vital to have clarity about this amount (and preferably agreement within your family) prior to beginning our first consultation, as all of my suggestions will be affected by this number. A great design idea is useless to you if it costs more than you are willing to spend to install or maintain it.

To offer information that may be helpful to you in arriving at an amount:

- *Realtors and appraisers I have spoken with generally agree that investing 10-15% of the total value of a house on a typically sized lot in tasteful landscaping is important in maximizing real estate value.*

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In many cases a good amount of that money has already been spent in existing landscaping, although not always tastefully. That is the rule and there are always exceptions. I built a house for myself and put 30% of the total cost of land/home in landscaping and it sold above appraised value for full price in a stagnant market because the buyer fell in love with the way the landscaping and home were integrated.

- *You will generally get a much higher return on investment when you sell by fixing problems other people would have a hard time imagining how to fix. Examples of that might include creating extra parking on difficult lots, terracing a steep slope or solving drainage or lands-slide issues.*
- *Overall, labor is more expensive in Marin than materials creating an average split of 60% labor, 40% materials. This gives you the option of saving 60% in any area you would enjoy doing the work and feel capable of doing so. I am happy to consult with you to support you in saving money in this way, should you wish. I will need to know this prior to doing the design, as it affects how far your budget will go.*
- *In areas where the work is being done primarily for your personal enjoyment and well-being the value of a particular landscape feature is entirely subjective. If this is the case you might reflect on the pleasure you imagine that each landscape feature would bring you and what dollar value you place on that pleasure. Specific pictures from books and magazines can be helpful here. If for example, you love a photograph of a beautiful stone water-feature that involved craning in large granite boulders for a total cost of \$35,000.00, does it bring you enough enjoyment to be worth that? Would you still enjoy it if the stones were smaller, local and it only cost: \$7,000.00? No decision exists in a vacuum and well-being can be created in many ways. When the goal is your well-being it can be helpful to also consider non-landscape items that you could buy with a similar amount of money. What would make you happier: A \$10,000.00 two week vacation in Hawaii at a luxury hotel, a weekend spa treatment for \$3,000.00 or a \$35,000.00 water feature? These are very personal questions we each must sort out for ourselves.*

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- *Remember, if money becomes a source of stress around this project you can always decide to do nothing new, tear up anything you don't want, stir up the soil and sprinkle wild-flowers in the fall. They cost a few hundred dollars, are no maintenance and your health and well-being are more important than ending up in a garden magazine or impressing the neighbors.*

5) If doing this work in stages how do you see it breaking down:

- a) Now:\$
- b) Year Two:\$
- c) Year Three: \$
- d) Yearly thereafter: \$

[[[Note about stages: Anything can be broken into stages, based either on the sequence that will be the most efficient to install (this saves you money) or the order of priority that is most important for you functionally or visually. That being said, there is often a 10% savings associated with the efficiency of doing things all at once. In addition material inflation costs and the cost of complying with ongoing additions to new building and landscape codes often results in a 3% increase in any given item per year. In some cases, particularly in smaller gardens, the cost of doing things in stages can be as much as 30% higher.]]]

6) Are you interested in doing any aspects of the installation yourself? If so, what:

7) Are there specific dates for beginning/completion you wish to work around ?

Please gather photos of things you like and don't like. I've created a library of over 1,000 Marin landscape photos grouped by category to help you find things you like at: <http://www.mysticallandscapes.com/Images-of-Marin-Gardens.html>

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Your Values:

*This portion of the questionnaire will help me understand not just what is important to you, but how important it is to you. As a consultant my goal is to suggest things that reflect **your** values. And in many instances your values will be in a natural tension with one another. You want to save money and you want to benefit the environment but the environmental option costs more money: What do you choose? Based on how you answer these questions I will make appropriate recommendations. If more than one person is involved in the project please both fill in this form.*

Using a 1-10 scale, let me know your priorities by ranking each of the following between 1-10, with 10 being the most value you can imagine and 0 being no value. It's important not to give more than three or four of these a 10 as what I'm looking for is the choice you want to make when two values are in conflict:

Name 1	Name 2	Values:
		Saving Money Now.
		Increasing resale value.
		Lowering maintenance.
		Keeping overall cost to a certain budget.
		Actively participating in the project.
		Providing wildlife habitat.
		Looking cool by contemporary standards.
		Pleasing to my personal taste.
		Exceptional workmanship.
		Good rapport with contractor.
		Maintaining neighbor good will.
		Personal health.
		Privacy.
		Safety/Security in the Landscape.
		Pleasing my partner/spouse.
		Learning and building landscape skills.
		Work completed by a deadline.
		Minimizing intrusion on daily life.
		Spontaneity and fun with the project.

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		Following the letter of the law/permits.
		Consideration for neighbors.
		Creating a sacred space.
		Saving money long-term.
		Environmental sensitivity.
		Other:

Note anything else important to you here:

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A Successful Project

Winning is a team sport when it comes to working with a professional. The most important role that you play on the team is helping your professional see you and your values clearly. Of course everyone wants to save money, have things done yesterday and have the most amazing garden. What's important in giving you the best project we can is to knowing your priority sequence. For example: Is your #1 that it has to come in under \$10,000, #2, it has to be done by October 1st and #3 as nice as it can look in that timeframe for that money? Or are you: #1 It HAS to look a certain way and you will raise the budget and add time to the project to get that look?

There are many natural tensions within any construction project so the important thing I need from you is knowing what comes first, second and third. The clearer you are about your number one value, the more I can not only respect that value in my actions, but advise you when something you are doing or requesting is taking you in the other direction, such as holding up the project by not making a decision about tile color, when you have expressed that your top value is finishing as soon as possible.

I need your cooperation to give you what you want. In order to do that it's ideal for you to ask how a decision you are making affects your key priorities before requesting it. For example: "Dane, I'd like choose a specialty tile. Since my first priority is getting done by Oct 1st. can you get that tile and still be on time?" If I say it's iffy, then you can pick a locally available tile or quadruple the tile budget by having six hundred pounds of tile overnighted. This kind of communication is crucial for staying on track with your top priorities.

One of the reasons I wrote my book: *Successfully Landscaping Your Marin Home*, was to help clients and students in my classes develop more knowledge so that we can strategize with shared working assumptions and information. It's not at all required, but it will likely improve your awareness of what and why things are being done and how to work together to read the book. That's why it is complimentary to all clients. Please ask for a copy if you don't have one.

Thanks for inviting me to join you on your winning team.

Sincerely,

Dane Rose