

## Hiring the Right Firm

1. Insist on visiting completed custom projects. Also, visit projects that are under construction. Seeing the projects in person will give you a sense of the company's craftsmanship and viability, and weed out contractors who are not credible. Beautiful swimming pool and landscape pictures are great, however, you must be sure that they belong to the company you are interviewing and are not just deceitful advertisements.

2. Research Landscape design firms on the Internet. Search by name and see what recent information was posted. A simple Google search will go a long way in avoiding bad contractors. Check for current licenses, better business bureau standings and rip-off reports.

3. Only accept bids from firms with the best credentials. You wouldn't let a proctologist perform brain surgery on you! Certified Building Professional is the top credential for custom swimming pool builders. Certified Landscape Architect credentials can be confirmed on the New Jersey Division of Consumer Affairs website, [njconsumeraffairs.gov](http://njconsumeraffairs.gov). If you're looking for an outdoor kitchen, fireplace or unique swimming pool, you will want to see numerous examples of each component. For example, a stone masonry expert will have thousands of feet of natural stone patios or veneered walls for you to view. He may also claim to be custom pool builder, but without the right expertise, his work may result in people getting injured or killed because safety standards were not kept!

4. Use a contractor who will perform the work themselves. Avoid losing control over sub contractors whose quality may be questionable. Subcontractors may not be in business a year from now and they tend to be harder to hold accountable for future problems. A "We do it all" claim implies there are little if any outside contractors used on the job. To protect yourself, make certain you get a list of any subcontractors listed in your contract prior to signing to avoid grey areas.

5. Select a financially secure contractor. Avoid large upfront payments; no more than 5% should be due at signing. Have set milestones based on completion of work. Always ask for vendor references to check their financial status and to ensure you are not investing in a sinking ship!

6. Watch out for misleading information. If any part of the presentation or contract seems deceptive, avoid that swimming pool or landscape design firm.

7. Make sure your contractor has the right insurance. It is imperative to be named on a certificate of insurance for liability and workers comp. For custom pool builders, it is essential that they hold a swimming pool policy or

endorsement! If it is not listed, the contractor is not covered and as a result, you are now liable. A landscape gardeners policy will not cover pool construction.

8. Avoid the “free” design trap! If you have ever done any sort of home renovations or new construction, you know that if you have a poor set of plans, your extras end up costing you more than the original contract! Professionals get paid to do their due diligence. A good set of plans prepared by a Certified New Jersey Landscape Architect will include the necessary detailing to avoid the “unforeseen” pitfalls and unexpected expenses. Remember, a free design means pay more later.

9. Hire a luxury pool or landscape company that has the owner involved in the day to day construction process. The best customer service comes from an active business owner. Don’t buy from a salesman. After he has made the sale, he is gone and is harder to hold accountable.

10. Make sure your contractor has a good and fair contract with little or no grey areas. A good contract should include start and finish dates, payment schedules, termination agreement and warrantee information. Also, agreements for dispute resolutions should be clearly defined.