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How Can I Find A Reliable Contractor For Spring Repairs?

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A weekly question/answer column

How Can I Find A Reliable Contractor For Spring Repairs?

Leona K. Hawks answers:*

Inexperienced and unqualified contractors can cost thousands of dollars, especially if the work has to be redone. The first step in finding a reliable and reputable contractor is to develop a list of possibilities.

- Ask friends or relatives for names of contractors who have done satisfactory work.
- Find out where local contractors purchase their materials and ask for recommendations.
- Survey local real estate agents. They often know the reputable builders who work in the community.
- Once you have your list of contractors, you need to determine their reputation and quality of work. Talk to all of the contractors on your list to determine if you could work with them. If you don't like their personality, you surely won't like it after working with them for awhile.
- Ask the contractors how long they have been in business. What responsibility does the contractor assume for the work of their subcontractors? Who will be responsible for correcting problems? Does the contractor belong to the local builders association and are they affiliated with the National Association of Home Builders? Does the contractor carry workers' compensation and liability insurance? Does the contractor have any registered complaints at the Better Business Bureau?
- One very important way to check out contractors is to talk to their clients. Ask the contractor to provide names of people who would be willing to talk with you. Take the time to talk to the people and inspect the completed projects.
- When you talk to the clients, be sure and ask them these questions: Did they finish the project on schedule and at the agreed price? Would the client hire that contractor again? Was the client satisfied with the quality of the work? Did the contractor do what was promised in a timely manner.
- Find out if the contractor is licensed. Membership in the National Association of Home Builders, the National Home Improvement Council or the Remodeling Contractors Association does not guarantee quality or reliability, but it may be an indicator of stability as well as experience. The Home Builders Association, the Department of Commerce, Occupational and Professional Licensing, Contractors Division in Salt Lake City and most city building inspectors can provide lists of licensed contractors.
- Once you have decided on three or more contractors who are qualified, ask each to submit an official bid on how much the project will cost. Ask for bids from at least three contractors. Bids prepared properly can take considerable time. If a contractor is bidding

against a large number of other contractors, they may not want to waste their time. It is a good idea to inform the contractor how many other bids are being obtained. During the bidding process, pay attention to how well the contractor sizes up the project. Does the contractor take measurements, ask questions and make suggestions?

- After getting the bids, compare them. Deciding who gets the bid should be based on the detailed plans and specifications, how well you can communicate with the contractor, and the ability of the contractor to do a quality job. The contractor should state exactly what must be done and where, and the kinds of materials that will be used. The bid should be well organized and clear.
- Once you select the best contractor, don't forget the contract. The contract should be in writing. The contractor will usually draw up the contract. Read it very carefully and make sure you understand it. If necessary, an attorney should be consulted. Remember that after you hire a contractor, you have three days to back out of the deal without a penalty. Items to include in the contract:
- Who is to obtain and pay for the necessary permits?
- By what date will the work be started and completed?
- Will the contractor provide a written warranty of workmanship?
- Any promises made by the contractor.
- What quality, brand and grade of materials will be used?
- Exactly what work will be done?
- What damages will be paid to the homeowner if the work is not completed on time?
- Who will clean up and remove debris from the job site?
- What provisions are included for protection of property near or in work area, including landscaping, driving over trees or damaging the sidewalk?
- Rights as far as owner making changes, which will include a change order and agreement on the cost of the changes.
- The amount the owner will pay to the contractor.
- If applicable, an agreement that the work shall conform to local and state codes.
- Written agreement that frees the homeowner from all liens that may be placed against the job for failure of the contractor to pay for materials, labor, equipment, etc.
- The schedule of how and when payments are to be made. It is best to pay as work progresses. Don't pay for work before it starts. Hold back the final payment until you are sure all of the work for the contract has been completed to your satisfaction.

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