

The Waukesha County Patio Project Planner

What to settle before a contractor walks your yard

There are no prices in this planner and it is not trying to talk you into a larger project. It is the set of questions worth answering before anyone walks your yard, because most of what separates a good quote from a bad one is decided before a contractor arrives - and because on clay ground the answers change what gets built underneath.

1. Work out how the space gets used

Almost every regret comes from this being assumed rather than discussed.

- ☐ How many people on the biggest evening you realistically host
- ☐ Dining at a table, lounging, or a fire-pit gathering - or a mix
- ☐ Whether cooking happens out there or food is carried from indoors
- ☐ Whether children use it, and whether that changes the layout
- ☐ Which door it connects to, and where people will actually walk
- ☐ Where the sun falls in late afternoon, which is when it gets used

2. Find out what your ground is

Do this before collecting quotes, so you can judge how each contractor responds.

- ☐ Dig a hole about a foot deep and fill it with water
- ☐ Drains in an hour or two - workable ground
- ☐ Still holding water the next day - clay, wet ground, or both
- ☐ Note where water already pools after a heavy storm
- ☐ Note which way the lot falls, and where that water ends up
- ☐ Check whether a downspout discharges near the proposed area

3. The four base questions

Ask every contractor these. The answers explain most of the price difference.

- ☐ What depth are you excavating to, and why that depth here
- ☐ What base material, and to what compacted depth
- ☐ Is it compacted in lifts, and how many
- ☐ Where does water in the base drain to
- ☐ Is separation fabric included between clay and base
- ☐ What edge restraint is used at the perimeter

4. Locate what is already in the ground

A public utility locate does not cover anything you or a previous owner installed.

- ☐ Request a public utility locate - free, and non-negotiable
- ☐ Identify irrigation zones and any heads inside the work area
- ☐ Agree whether heads are capped, moved, or the zone reworked
- ☐ Trace invisible fence - shallow, unmarked and easily cut
- ☐ Point out private lines to a shed, garage or garden lighting
- ☐ Flag any tree you want to keep, before the layout is fixed

5. Find out which office governs you

This county has many separate municipalities, each with its own rules.

- ☐ Confirm which city, village or town your address is actually in
- ☐ Ask whether a patio at grade needs a permit there
- ☐ Ask what the rear and side setbacks are, and about easements
- ☐ Ask whether there is an impervious surface limit for your lot
- ☐ If near water, ask the county whether shoreland rules apply
- ☐ Check whether your subdivision has covenants requiring approval

6. Plan for winter, not just summer

The hardscape spends half the year being shovelled, ploughed and de-iced.

- ☐ Identify which areas will actually be salted in winter
- ☐ Choose those areas on salt tolerance rather than appearance
- ☐ Ask the supplier how the unit responds to de-icing chemicals
- ☐ Keep cleared surfaces flat - blades find every high point
- ☐ Decide where cleared snow gets piled, and what it melts onto
- ☐ Plan to top up joints each autumn before the first freeze