

# Selecting The Right Plumber

6 Steps That Ensure You  
Won't Get Ripped Off!



Provided By

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PLUMBING

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## **How to Find a Good Plumber in the Greater Orlando Area**

So you have decided that it is time to bring in a professional for plumbing work in your home. Whether you need a plumbing repair or are installing new plumbing fixtures (adding a bathroom), plumbers are expensive and there's no way around that. Fortunately, there are ways to ensure that you get the most value for your money. This guide includes several things to consider when making this important decision.

## ***Steps to Finding a Good Plumber***

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1. Check to make sure that they have a valid contractor's license.
2. Get two or more references.
3. Ask how long they have been in business.
4. Get at least two bids for the job to make sure they are not totally ripping you off.
5. For small jobs, find a plumber who will give you pricing over the phone.
6. Get flat rate estimates so you know the total you will pay beforehand.

**WARNING:** *Don't fall for the "hourly rate trap"!*

The first and often only thing that consumers consider when comparing plumbers is their hourly rate. People figure that they should hire the reputable firm with the lowest rate. Sounds simple and direct, but it doesn't always work.

The error is in the perception of 'reputable'. For most people, if they have heard a company's name many times over the years, they feel that the firm must have an established reputation. Unfortunately, this is often untrue. In the plumbing field, in particular, several of the most highly promoted companies have the worst track records. This is why it's important to get specific references from others or to go through a prescreened plumbing service.

The second problem with the hourly rate is that it is difficult to compare rates because of the many ways plumbers count their hours. Travel time is a factor that should be considered. Plumbers spend a good part of their day driving from job to job. They must be compensated for this time.

The best way to select a plumber is on his overall ability to deliver customer satisfaction consistently. Customer satisfaction takes into account all of these issues and constitutes an accurate indication of value received.

The best place to start asking about plumbers is your family and friends. Other good sources of referrals include contractors, real estate agents and your local plumbing supply store. Your city may even be able to provide a list of recommended plumbers who are familiar with the codes in your area. When asking for referrals, be sure to check the type of job the plumber was called in to accomplish. Also, determine if the plumber specializes in residential or commercial work.

## ***Good Questions to Ask Referrals***

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### **Were they courteous and polite?**

This is a very important consideration. The entire experience, from beginning to end, needs to be as stress-free as possible. Plus if the plumber enjoys their job, the work quality and attention to details will be better. The customer's attitude can and will affect the entire job. Hopefully this will be the first question you ask. If the answer to this question is "no" then DO NOT go any farther, you don't want to work with that person.

### **Were you happy with the quality provided by the plumbing contractor?**

Everybody has their own ideas of quality, so you should take a look at finished work and judge for yourself. Pay attention to gaps between fixtures and counters, walls, or floors. Can you see open spaces where pipes protrude through floors or walls? Are the fixtures tight and was sealant applied. Whether the work is in an unfinished basement or crawlspace, or in a living/working area, proper planning and adherence to local codes always leads to better, more reliable results.

### **Did the plumbing contractor protect working surfaces or areas?**

For exterior jobs this includes concrete, siding and plantings. For interiors protecting cabinetry and countertops is a major concern, but don't forget about the drywall, plaster, flooring, and carpet. If a plumber was sloppy with one-customer chances are they will be sloppy with all of them. If you are left to clean up after your plumber, this will cost you more time, money, and frustration.

### **Is a warranty included?**

If a warranty was included, find out if it has a reasonable amount of time before expiring. Any plumber offering only a 1-year warranty is questionable. Plumbing receives stress from winter freeze and summer heat. The effects of a single year may not become immediately apparent. Always request 3-5 years and verify how they address labor AND materials. Simply telling you about their warranty isn't enough. Get it in writing and understand its limitations! A good plumber is happy to stand behind his warranty. Good plumbers use quality materials and know their level of expertise. If a plumber will not offer a warranty, this is a problem and you should walk away.

## **How to Hire a Plumber**

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Think about the last time you purchased a car. Chances are you didn't go to the yellow pages, choose a dealership at random, and buy your car from the first lot you visited. Many times, though, this scenario describes the way homeowners find a plumber --they look in the phone book and call the plumber with the largest ad or the first one listed. But much like purchasing a car, finding a qualified plumber requires research and comparison shopping.

### **Ask Questions**

When you have narrowed the list, ask two or three plumbers to your home to survey the job and provide a written estimate that includes a materials list. The contract should spell out the scope of the project, any items that are excluded and the payment terms.

### **What Quality Materials Will They Use?**

When obtaining a quote, one of the most important questions to ask your plumber is the type of materials to be used. Remember, a plumbing part defect has the potential to cause water damage to your home or create an indoor swimming pool in what once was your basement.

Don't let your plumber install products made with inexpensive and inferior materials. Ask for quality materials, often with recognizable brand names that offer manufacturers' warranties to the consumer. You may pay more for these parts initially, but you will be glad you did if there ever is a problem or parts need replacing.

### **What Is Their Record For Reliability And Proven Performance?**

Many homeowners who are calling in a plumber to replace a leaking copper pipe don't know there are alternative materials on the market. Why would you let a plumber make a repair with the same material that has already failed? Ask your potential plumbing candidates whether they use any of the proven superior alternatives to copper such as FlowGuard Gold CPVC pipe and fittings.

Made of durable chlorinated polyvinyl chloride, these pipe and fittings offer a number of benefits over copper pipe. Mainly they will never scale, corrode or pit which will help eliminate the risk of future failures and costly re-piping. As compared to metallic systems, FlowGuard

Gold CPVC systems also virtually eliminate condensation, significantly reducing the risk of costly drip damage to walls, structure and contents. From a health standpoint, the CPVC alternative offers the added benefit of maintaining water quality since there is no metal to leach into the tap water.

### **How Long Have They Been In Business?**

Ask each plumber how long he or she has been in business and if you have not been personally referred, ask to speak to several people who can vouch for the quality of their work and whether they completed the work on time and within budget.

### **Will They Be Responsible For Permits?**

Be sure to ask the plumbing professional whether they will be responsible for obtaining all necessary permits.

### **Ask About Their Safety Commitment**

Accidents can happen with almost any home improvement project. So ask your prospective candidate what steps he or she will take to prevent injuries and property damage. A common problem when installing copper pipe is a solder torch that gets too close to dry wall or wood joists in tight spaces. Non-metallic alternatives, like CPVC pipe, are solvent cemented (not soldered), so the risk of fire is eliminated.

### **Ask About How and When They Will Keep the Work Area Clean**

Ask the plumber how he or she intends to leave the work area once the job is completed. You don't want to be cleaning up after a plumber for hours after they've left your home. Also, ask about disruption during the project. For instance, if the plumber uses CPVC pipe, you won't have to worry about metal/copper filings to pick up or oil that may spill on your carpet and flooring.

### **Ask About Pricing**

Compare prices, but remember the cheapest quote isn't necessarily the best plumber for the job. An experienced, qualified plumber may charge more for the work, but could save you money in the end by doing the job right and using the best materials.

### **How Do They Plan To Prepare The Work Area For Plumbing?**

Proper planning is the key to a quality plumbing job. Make sure your contractor has a clear plan for prepping, plumbing, finishing and sealing, AND cleaning up.

### **Will The Crew Be Dedicated To One Job Until Completion?**

Contractors need to keep their crews busy. One way of doing that is to book several overlapping jobs – great for the crew, bad for you. The result is that they will begin prep work on the agreed upon start date, then some or all of the crew will leave to prep and work other jobs, delaying the completion of your project.

### **Are All Crew Members on the Contractor's Payroll?**

While this is less of a problem with small size of residential plumbing jobs, many contractors supplement their crews with casual (day) labor. These workers are paid in cash, not by paycheck, and therefore are not covered by the contractor's insurance.



## **The Next Steps**

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### **Get Quotes**

Invite plumbers to look at the job and ask for a quote in writing. In the quote, also ask them to specify the time it will take to complete the job. It's tough to try and live in a house with a non working bathroom, not to mention if water to the whole house has to be turned off to complete phases of the job. Make sure the contractors are quoting on the same specifications – number of fixtures, supply and drain pipe routing, and whether or not they are securing the municipal permit.

### **Execute a Contract**

Execute a contract specifying the work to be done, total cost, payment schedule, start date and estimated completion date. Make sure the contract includes the paint brands and colors to be used in each location, as well as the number of coats. Make sure the contract specifies that the plumber is responsible for cleanup and the removal of paint from all surfaces (windows, floors).

# **Things to Look For in a Qualified Plumber**

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There are a number of qualifications which can set a professional plumber apart:

## **Insurance**

Be sure that the prospective plumber you are considering is fully insured, having both workers' compensation and liability insurance. Your selected plumber should be able to provide you with a copy of his or her insurance policy. Ask to see a current copy at time of hire AND on the day the job starts. Pay particular attention to the expiration date of the policy.

## **Better Business Bureau**

Contact your local Better Business Bureau to ascertain if any complaints have been filed against your potential candidate. Keep in mind that home improvement contractors are the number one complained about industry. For this reason, the existence of complaints alone is not as important as is how and if the contractor responds to filed complaints. There's always someone who isn't happy. As long as the complaints are addressed and closed in an appropriate timeframe, then you can consider the contractor. Use Angies List [www.angieslist.com](http://www.angieslist.com) to see what others have to say about this contractor. If a plumber has good reviews on Angies List then it is a good bet they will do good work for you too.

## **Safety Commitment**

Accidents can happen with almost any home improvement project. Ask your prospective candidate what steps he or she will take to prevent injuries and property damage. Again if a plumber is good at his work he or she will be able to answer this question with ease. They exercise attention to detail and are cognizant of safety while working.

## **Clean Up**

Ask the plumber how he or she intends to leave the work area at the end of each day, and after the job is completed. You don't want to be cleaning up after a plumber for hours after they've left your home. Also, ask about disruption during the project.

# Money Saving Tips When Hiring a Plumber

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## Minimize Plumbing Needs

An entirely different approach to saving money on plumbing is to reduce the need to call them at all. The most common plumbing calls have to do with drains. Many homes have one or two problem drains and several that never need any attention at all.

One common drain problem is the buildup of grease. You can counteract this by doing things to reduce the grease build up. Experiment with the available products and you may find you can stay one step ahead of a clogged drain indefinitely. Some people have found success with just pouring boiling sudsy water down the drain periodically.

Hair is another common factor in many plumbing problems. In most cases, hair can be trapped in some sort of screen or drain cover. Talk to your plumber next time he's there and ask about suggested ways to prevent the hair from getting in the drain. It's much easier to gather hair off the screen periodically than it is to deal with a clogged pipe.

Another costly, but preventable, problem is frozen pipes. Make sure that all your pipes are in heated spaces. If any are not, make sure they are well insulated. Each fall, when the weather turns colder, disconnect and drain your garden hoses, turnoff the indoor cut-off valve located near the faucet, and open the outdoor faucet. If there is no cut-off valve, consider installing one. Any water left in pipes exposed to below-zero temperatures will freeze.

## Buy Your Own Plumbing Fixtures

A popular and effective way to save money on plumbing calls is to buy your own fixtures. Traditionally, plumbers sell you the toilets, sinks, and faucets that they install. Typically they'll get the items at a discount and charge you full price. In part, this is to make money and in part this is to cover the costs of dealing with purchases, returns, and storage.

In recent years, however, some of the home center stores now charge you prices that are even lower than the contractor prices that plumbers pay their suppliers. There are many instances where you will do better buying your own fixtures, providing you have the time to invest in shopping around.

While this approach can save you big bucks, there are three caveats to keep in mind. First, many fixtures that appear to be great buys are poorly made or are missing adapters, installing kits or other components that normally come with similar products. Shop carefully.

Second, if you supply the fixture and the plumber installs it and something goes wrong, there is likely to be some confusion as to whose responsibility it is. One way to get around this is to check with the plumber up front about what brands or lines he recommends and then buy those brands.

Checking with the plumber up front also gets you around the third problem. Every product or line of products has its own installation quirks. Choosing a fixture that is familiar to your plumber assures that you will get the full advantage of his expertise and experience. If instead, you choose something he's never worked with, expect that you'll be paying for some on-the-job learning mistakes.

### **Reduce the Plumber's Chargeable Time**

Often the easiest way to save money and time, this is an easy step that is often overlooked. Before you call a plumber, go through your home and check every faucet and fixture. Make a list of everything that drips, runs, and is clogged. Then, when you get the plumber out, have him take care of all the problems at once. You'll avoid additional trip charges, set-up time and the hassle of scheduling multiple visits.

Anything you can do to save the plumber time will also save you money. Be organized. This means having a written list of specific items you want addressed. If you're not sure what the problem is, have a list of symptoms. Clear the work area. Handle some of the clean up yourself.

### **Install Water-Saving Plumbing Fixtures**

Water and sewage treatment cost money. When you reduce water consumption, you can save on both counts. If you have an older water-guzzling toilet and it starts to need repairs, give serious thought to replacing it entirely.

This is also true for faucets and showerheads. Anytime these need attention, consider replacing them with new, water-saving units.

### **Remodel the Smart Way**

If you are planning more substantial remodeling work, make sure you get at least three quotes. More than likely, each plumber will have different suggestions. Listen to their suggestions and reasons, and decide which ideas make the most sense to you. A good rule of thumb is to discard the cheapest and most expensive quotes. The cheapest will have underestimated and will sting you for it later and the most expensive doesn't really want your business, probably because they have work up to their eyeballs already.

Keep in mind that small business plumbers will be much more affordable because their overhead is lower.

Always get a fixed price for the job and make sure that model numbers are clearly indicated in the contracts you sign. If the plumber installs the wrong fixture and you can't figure out whose fault it is, you can have a real problem.