

Concrete Driveways - What a Homeowner Should Expect

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Your driveway is like the welcome mat to your home, so it's important that it makes a positive statement by providing a durable and attractive surface for you and your guests. It's also important that you have a good understanding of what's reasonable and obtainable when it comes to buying your concrete driveway. If your expectations are significantly higher than what most contractors expect to deliver, the stage is set for disappointment and conflict for both parties.

As a homeowner, you have a right to expect your concrete driveway to present a clean, attractive appearance and to serve with little or no maintenance for many years. You can reasonably expect the edges of the driveway to be straight and level, the surface of the driveway to have a consistent texture and appearance, and for joints to be installed at the proper spacing and depth to control random cracking. With regard to materials and workmanship, you should receive a driveway that contains a quality concrete mix that is handled, placed, finished and cured according to recognized industry specifications. The driveway should be laid out according to your plans, and it should have a minimum, consistent thickness of at least 4 inches.

Your contractor also has expectations and requirements that you need to be aware of. The contractor has a right for the project to be clearly defined so that a proper proposal can be prepared. If you make changes in the project, no matter how small they may seem to you, your contractor has a right to adjust the proposal. Your contractor expects to be paid in a timely manner, and to not be held hostage by issues that were not clearly expressed in the proposal prior to the commencement of the project, or by conditions that are not under his direct control (such as weather, existing or discovered jobsite conditions, and other contractors or trades that might affect the project).

As the project owner, keep in mind that driveways are installed in less than laboratory conditions, and that your contractor is working with literally tons of material. Conditions may arise that neither you nor your contractor can control, like an afternoon thunderstorm, and this will affect the contractor's ability to perform the project as planned. In such cases, you need to recognize that the contractor is not at fault and work with him to resolve any problems that may arise. In this example, the rain may necessitate that the slab be covered with plastic to prevent major damage to the concrete - but this could lead to areas of discoloration on the surface, or to an inconsistent surface texture that is less than your original expectation. At this point, you and your contractor need to be on the same team or these problems may land you both in court.

Sometimes problems occur even when the contractor has followed all the proper guidelines and procedures. For residential concrete, the most common problem in this category is random cracking. While proper jointing procedures will control cracking in the vast majority of cases, even properly jointed concrete can crack in places other than the joints. Homeowners need to understand that such cracks are not indications of serious problems in most cases. Most of these cracks are simply un-planned joints - they are no more a threat to long-term service and durability than the joints that were intentionally installed. Obviously, no one wants random cracks because they detract from the appearance of the concrete, but they are rarely a reason to call for a federal investigation. If you decide that random cracks are something you simply cannot live with, tell your contractor up front and specify this in your agreement with him, as well as what actions will be taken if random cracks occur.

Another example of an unrealistic homeowner expectation is color. This is particularly true if you are using colored concrete for part of your project. Again, remember that we are talking tons of material, not a single gallon of paint. If the final color of your bedroom wall is off by a shade, it's fairly simple to re-paint. This is not the case with concrete, and it is unrealistic to expect any contractor to exactly match the color from a brochure or sample. Even in plain concrete, there can be color variations, especially if your project requires more than one load of concrete, or if concrete placements are made on different days. These slight variations almost never indicate a problem for the concrete. Most of these variations are minor and most will fade over time, but they can and do occur. As an owner you need to be aware of this, and adjust your expectations accordingly.

Many of us say we want the very best - absolutely no random cracks, perfect color consistency, high performance concrete, perfect surface texture, and an iron-clad warranty - yet we will only pay the lowest price. This is the ultimate in unrealistic expectations, whether you are talking concrete driveways, carpet, or cars. As with any important transaction, it doesn't hurt to remember two basic principles: If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. You get what you pay for.

So how can you make sure that your expectations are reasonable, and that you clearly communicate them to your contractor? Here's a suggestion. Start by looking at driveways in your area. Make a list of the ones that really appeal to you, and maybe a note or two about why you like them.

If at all possible, make a visit to your favorites and get out of the car to get an up-close look (ask permission if the home is occupied!). Look closely at things such as joints, surface texture, color consistency, edges and so forth. In most cases you will find some small defects, maybe even a random crack or two. Keep this in mind when evaluating your own driveway and remember that these driveways are the ones that caught your eye, even with their imperfections. This

process will help you adjust your expectations based on real-world examples, and should help you clarify what things are most important to you.

Be sure to ask about the contractors that installed your favorite driveways - calling them first would be a good place to start your contractor search, and you already know a little something about the quality of their work. Be sure to ask all your contractors for jobs that you can inspect so you will know firsthand about the quality of their work, and don't fail to share your newly realistic expectations (in writing, of course) with all the contractors you invite to bid on your project.