

Questions For Contractors

When interviewing contractors, many homeowners struggle to know what to ask. Here's a comprehensive list organized by category. Not every question will apply to every project, but this framework covers the critical areas you need to explore.

Experience and Qualifications

"How long has your company been in business, and has it always operated under this name?"

Longevity suggests stability and reputation. According to Better Builders, contractors who regularly fail to meet standards don't survive long in the construction industry. Be cautious if a contractor has operated under multiple business names—this can indicate attempts to escape a poor reputation.

"How many timber frame projects have you completed? Can you show me photos and provide references for projects similar to mine?"

Generic experience isn't enough. You need timber frame-specific experience. A contractor who has built a hundred conventional homes but only one timber frame project doesn't have the expertise you need. Ask to see photos from multiple angles showing integration of the timber frame with the building envelope, finish work around timbers, and overall craftsmanship.

"Are you licensed, bonded, and insured? Can you provide proof of current coverage?"

Licensing requirements vary by state and sometimes by project size. In North Carolina, for example, any project exceeding \$30,000 requires a licensed contractor. Verify your state's requirements through your state licensing board.

For insurance, Better Builders recommends contractors maintain:

- General liability insurance of at least \$2 million
- Workers' compensation insurance for all employees
- Commercial vehicle insurance

Request certificates of insurance directly from their insurance company, not copies the contractor provides. An insurance certificate should name you as an additional insured party for the duration of construction.

"Are you a member of any professional associations like NAHB or NARI?"

While membership isn't required, it demonstrates commitment to professional development and ethical standards. These associations maintain codes of ethics and often provide continuing education that keeps contractors current with building practices and codes.

Project Management

"Who will be my primary contact throughout the project? Will you be on site daily?"

You need a specific name and contact information for the person managing your project day-to-day. According to NAHB guidance, the contractor (or their designated project manager) should visit the site daily to verify progress, quality, and schedule adherence. If the contractor won't be on site daily, you need to know who will be and their level of authority to make decisions.

"How do you handle scheduling of subcontractors and manage the construction timeline?"

Professional contractors use scheduling software or detailed charts to coordinate multiple trades. They should explain their process for managing the critical path—the sequence of tasks that must be completed on time to avoid project delays. For timber frame projects, they should specifically discuss how they coordinate around the frame raising.

"What project management tools do you use to keep projects organized and clients informed?"

Modern contractors increasingly use project management platforms that provide clients with access to schedules, budgets, photos, and documents. Patrick A. Finn, a design-build firm, describes their client portal: "A message board where you can communicate with your design-build team's project manager to share information and ask questions; A folder with important paperwork such as invoices, contracts, proposals, and project drawings; Lists of all client selections."

Even if they don't use sophisticated software, contractors should have a clear system for tracking progress, changes, and communications.

"How do you handle change orders? What's the process and typical timeline for pricing and approval?"

Change orders—modifications to the original scope—are common in construction. The contractor should have a formal process: written documentation of the change, pricing before work begins, timeline impact assessment, and your written approval before proceeding. Verbal change orders are a recipe for disputes.

Team and Subcontractors

"Do you use employees or subcontractors for most of the work? Who are your key subcontractors?"

Neither approach is inherently better, but you need to understand their team structure. Carolina Timberworks notes that their timber frame crews "are not subcontractors, but employees: they're professionals and will work safely, show up on time, with all the tools they need, work long hours—even under miserable weather conditions."

For subcontractors, ask for names and companies. Research them independently—are they licensed in their trades? Do they have good reputations?

"Are all subcontractors licensed, bonded, and insured?"

Your contractor's insurance may not cover injuries to uninsured subcontractors on your property. Verify that all trades carry appropriate licenses and insurance for their specialties.

"Have you worked with [your timber frame company] before? If not, how will you coordinate with them?"

Prior experience working together streamlines coordination. If they haven't worked together, your contractor should have a plan for communication and scheduling with your timber frame company.

Financial and Legal

"What is your payment schedule?"

Typical payment schedules include:

- Down payment (10-20% to secure materials and scheduling)
- Progress payments tied to milestones (foundation complete, frame erected, dried-in, etc.)
- Final payment (usually 10%) upon project completion and your approval

Never pay the full amount upfront. Never make final payment before resolving punch-list items.

According to industry standards compiled by HomeAdvisor, contractors typically charge 10-15% of total project cost for their services, with materials representing about 40% of total costs.

"How do you handle unexpected costs or issues discovered during construction?"

Sometimes genuine surprises occur—unexpected soil conditions, hidden structural issues in remodels, or code requirements that weren't apparent during planning. Your contractor should explain their process for handling these situations: immediate communication with you, clear documentation of the issue, proposal for resolution including costs, and your approval before proceeding.

"What warranties do you provide on your workmanship?"

Most states require a one-year warranty on workmanship, but many quality contractors offer longer terms. Material warranties come from manufacturers, but labor warranties come from your contractor. Get warranty terms in writing as part of your contract.

"What's your process for handling disputes or disagreements?"

Professional contractors should have a structured approach: direct discussion to resolve issues, escalation to formal mediation if necessary, and arbitration as a last resort before litigation. The process should be documented in your contract.

"What happens if you can't complete the project for any reason?"

Contractors sometimes face circumstances that prevent project completion—business failure, health issues, or other problems. Your contract should address this scenario, including how project documentation and materials will be transferred to a new contractor.



Communication and Process

"How often will we meet to discuss project progress? What should I expect for communication frequency?"

Weekly meetings are typical for active construction phases. Your contractor should also be available for questions between meetings with a reasonable response time (usually within 24 hours for non-emergency issues).

"How do you document decisions, changes, and project progress?"

Professional contractors maintain detailed records: daily logs, photo documentation, meeting notes, and decision documentation. This protects both parties if disputes arise and provides a clear project record.

"Can you provide examples of your project documentation from previous jobs?"

This question reveals organizational habits. Quality contractors should be able to show you examples of their scheduling systems, budget tracking, and communication documentation (with client details redacted for privacy).







