

How to Hire a Lawn Care Company

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Homeowners have increasingly turned to lawn maintenance companies to provide lawn mowing, fertilizing, and pest control services. Because there are so many companies listed in the phonebook, this factsheet is intended to help inform consumers on the best strategies in choosing a knowledgeable and professional lawn care company.

Investing Time Before Money

Once it is determined that a lawn care service is needed, you must establish what kind of lawn is desired. The “perfect lawn” and even the “near perfect lawn” require higher inputs of fertilizer, water, and pesticides. These “high-input” lawns can sometimes pose unnecessary environmental risks. Are you willing to compromise “perfect” for a nice lawn with a weed or two? Will you accept the potential for some insect damage for fewer pesticide applications?

It helps to become an educated consumer. Learning the basics of lawn care before beginning the company selection process will provide you with adequate information to talk knowledgeably with lawn service professionals. Most aspects of residential lawn care are covered by a series of Rutgers Cooperative Research & Extension fact sheets that have been written with the “do-it-yourself” homeowner in mind. In addition to covering what to do, they explain the reasoning behind the components of lawn care.

Matching Services to Your Needs

Learning about the various aspects of lawn maintenance—soil testing, fertilizing, liming, seeding, dethatching, weed and other pest control—can help determine which lawn care services will be required from contractors. Some people may only desire lawn mowing or fertilizing and liming, while others may need a more complete service that includes pest control, core aeration, dethatching, and seeding. Determine what your expectations are for your lawn and its care, and identify a company that can match their services to your needs.

To hire a lawn care service, develop a short list of companies that provide the services desired. Ask relatives, friends, and neighbors for referrals. Then set up appointments to discuss your needs and find out how the company can meet them. A company representative should visit the site to assess needs. The more extensive the number of services to be contracted, the more extensive the interview needs to be and the more questions that need to be asked. Consider the following questions and topics:

General:

- Does the service company recognize that all lawns are not the same and have different requirements based on sun/shade, soil texture, and grasses grown? For example, maintenance of a zoysia lawn is different than maintenance of a bluegrass or tall fescue lawn.



- Does the company offer exactly the same program to all clients?
- Does it offer the option of a reduced fertilizer or pesticide-free program?
- Does the company offer both liquid and granular formulations for needed pest control or fertilizer applications?

Fertility:

- Does the service suggest or require a soil test for pH (acidity) and nutrient levels initially, then every 3 or 4 years? Limestone is often a necessary input, and needed amounts can't be known without first performing a pH test. Soil testing is also the only way to determine phosphorus and potassium levels (fertilizer components) and the appropriate fertilizer analysis needed.
- How is the fertilizer program determined? Nitrogen application rates should be based on maintenance practices such as irrigation, clipping removal, grass species, and site conditions.
- When does the company apply fertilizer? Research has shown that cool-season lawns benefit from a fertilizer program that provides most of the required nitrogen in late summer and fall.
- Is a limited fertilizer program offered for shaded lawns or low maintenance lawns or a summer-only fertilizer program offered for zoysia lawns?

Pest Control:

- How is the control program—for weeds, insects, or diseases—determined? Is it based on the particular situation of each lawn or is it a generic program that applies pesticides whether or not there is a problem, such as on a calendar-based schedule?
- Are spot treatments for pests offered, or are applications always made to the entire lawn?

- What resources does the company have or use for problem diagnosis?
- Is an Integrated Pest Management (IPM) approach used that assesses problems in the context of all aspects of the lawn's care? Does a qualified representative monitor the lawn for problems?
- If you are doing some maintenance yourself, will the company provide written guidance on practices such as watering and mowing?
- Many lawn problems can be complex and difficult to solve. How does the company handle a persistent problem? Does the company offer any guarantees?

Reseeding, Overseeding, and Renovation:

- What steps does the company recommend in improving a lawn? Does the company offer renovation and/or seeding services?
- Does the lawn care company take time to diagnose the overall situation? For example, insects and disease can cause thinning of lawns and may need to be controlled with the use of pesticides. However, the thinning may also be due to poor light quality that can be alleviated with the use of a shade tolerant grass species.
- Does the company use high quality, pest resistant cultivars appropriate to the growing conditions whenever seeding or reseeding a lawn?
- Will the company recommend the use of alternative groundcovers in areas where the shade is too dense for an adequate lawn or where a slope is too severe for mowing and maintenance?
- If you are reseeding the lawn, will the company work with you and alter its weed control practices so that the young grass isn't damaged or killed?

In addition to lawn care practices, you should also ask questions about the business in general:

- How long have they been in business?
- What are the management and staff qualifications or areas of expertise?
- For pesticide applicator services, is the business registered with the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) as an applicator business?
- Is the company insured? Documentation can be requested.
- Will they provide customer references for recent work?
- Do they participate in professional organizations?
- Are they a NJ Certified IPM Provider? Have their employees received training in Integrated Pest Management? Does the management check employee work?

If the lawn care company will be applying pesticides for insect, disease, or weed control they must by law have a valid NJ Pesticide Applicator Business License, employ Licensed Applicators or Registered Operators, and provide the consumer with a written notification or copy of:

- Proposed date(s) of application.
- Brand name(s) of the pesticide(s) to be used and, if available, the common chemical name of the active ingredients.
- The label instructions that relate to the customer or general public safety.
- A Consumer Information Sheet that includes the name, address, and telephone number of the

applicator business, telephone numbers of the NJ Department of Environmental Protection, National Pesticide Hotline (Oregon), and the NJ Poison Information and Education System.

Hiring a Lawn Care Company

Once a company has been selected, a written agreement that fully describes the services, materials to be supplied, and the costs and payment schedule should be decided. The agreement should include timing of services where relevant. If additional services or materials are needed during the life of the contract, there should be a written statement regarding customer approval for additional services and charges.

Additional Resource Information:

RCRE Fact Sheets

For current fact sheets and other publications, please contact your county Rutgers Cooperative Research & Extension office located in the blue pages, under "County Government" in your telephone directory, or visit our website, www.rcre.rutgers.edu.

Professional Organizations:

The New Jersey Turfgrass Association (NJTA), PO Box 340, Milltown, NJ 08850-0340, 732-821-7134, South Jersey office: 41 Lupton Avenue, Woodbury, NJ 08096, 856-853-5973, or online at www.njturfgrass.org/.

The New Jersey Nursery and Landscape Association, (NJNLA), 605 Farnsworth Avenue, Bordentown, New Jersey 08505, call 1-800-314-4836, via email njnla1@aol.com or online at www.gardennj.net.

The New Jersey Landscape Contractors Association (NJLCA), PO Box 604, HoHoKus, New Jersey 07423-0604, call 201-703-3600, or online at www.njlca.org.

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