

Tips on Choosing a Lawn Care Service

U.S. homeowners are turning to green industry professionals in record numbers, spending \$11.6 billion on their lawns in 2003, up 12 percent from 2002, according to a national Harris Survey. These same homeowners projected that they'd spend even more on their lawns in 2004. (Green industry services include lawn care, landscape design/construction/installation, landscape management, and tree care.)

"These are impressive numbers, and year after year, lawn care and landscape maintenance continue to be the top services hired by homeowners," says Tom Delaney, director of government affairs for the Professional Landcare Network (PLANET). "Homeowners benefit from the economic and environmental benefits of turf and save time by hiring a lawn or landscape service. When you factor in that a well-maintained property can add up to 15 percent to a home's value, you quickly realize that hiring a service is a sound investment."

In addition to fertilizing and maintenance, a professional can tackle the more difficult aspects of lawn care, such as identifying and controlling lawn problems, using the proper equipment, and choosing the right products for your lawn.

Hiring the right service takes a little effort, but the rewards of a thick, healthy lawn are substantial. PLANET offers these tips to help you select a professional service:

1. **Determine what you want from a lawn service.** Lawn care companies provide a range of services, including mowing, maintenance, aeration, seeding, landscaping, fertilizer and pest-control applications, and care of ornamental and small trees. Decide what services and products are appropriate for your needs and budget.
2. **Find out which companies provide service in your neighborhood.** Before looking in the Yellow Pages or answering an ad, ask your neighbors who use a lawn care company for a recommendation. It's a great way to determine a company's reputation and the quality of service it provides.
3. **Ask for a lawn inspection and a free estimate for service.** Companies that quote a price without seeing your lawn are only guessing what your lawn might need. Quality companies will only offer estimates after seeing exactly what they are going to be working with.
4. **Ask about the price system and what services are included.** Prices are based on a property's total square footage, minus the house, drive, and any other area that is not in turfgrass. The average cost is \$6 – \$8 per thousand square feet, depending on the market and lawn complexity. A service provider may offer a yearly contract, seasonal contracts, or be available on an on-call basis. Decide which level of flexibility best suits you. Also, clarify what happens if

you have a problem between scheduled visits. Is there an added charge for service calls? However, don't use price as the major deciding factor — customer service, satisfaction, and results are all very important considerations.

5. **Consider annual costs as well as the cost per application.** Generally, lawn care companies allow you to pay after each visit or bill on a monthly basis. Having a yearly plan for services, however, is important to estimate when and how much you will be paying for lawn care. If you are signing an extended contract with a company, ask if there is a discount for paying the annual cost upfront.
6. **Make sure you have a complete understanding of what “results” mean with the company before work starts.** Get an explanation of what the service can and can't do. You do not want to find out well into a contract that you have a different concept of the definition of results than your provider does. Find out what kind and amount of visits/services are included in the proposed program, approximately when visits will occur, and what results you can expect. Clarify how scheduling for visits occurs. Ask questions and get a statement of services in writing.
7. **Find out what is, and is not, guaranteed.** Some services may offer a performance guarantee. Others may offer refunds if they fail to meet your expectations. Guarantees are usually limited to service providers returning to correct problems *if* the customer is a full-service customer. Get guarantees in writing.
8. **Make sure that the lawn care service is licensed.** Every state has licensing requirements for commercial lawn care companies treating your property. Call your state's Department of Agriculture or Environment or visit their Web site for details on what your state requires. Insist on proof of state-required licensing from the company you are interviewing;
9. **Insurance and certification.** Every state is different, but lawn care providers usually are required to carry a state-mandated level of liability insurance and appropriate workers' compensation coverage. Most states require some level of certification through its regulatory agency. Confirm this upfront when you request a service estimate.
10. **Safety factors.** Almost all lawn care products must be registered with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and your state. After a product has been applied, some states require posting a sign that recommends avoiding contact with the turf until the product is dry. Whether posting is required or not, it is a suggested practice to follow.
11. **Professional membership.** Be sure the company is affiliated with one or more professional green industry associations and is active in the community.

Professional organizations keep members informed of new developments in pest-control methods, safety, training, research, and regulation. Most associations have a code of ethics that their members must follow and affiliation with a professional group indicates that a company strives for quality in its work. Ask whether the company belongs to PLANET. Better yet, ask if its staff has is PLANET Certified. PLANET certification ensures that they have the knowledge, techniques, and commitment to quality to expertly deliver the services you need.

- 12. If you want further information on the company's service record, contact your local Better Business Bureau (BBB).** Your regional BBB often has information on companies in your area. Go to *bbb.com* to find out information on specific companies.

The lawn care service you select will become your partner in maintaining a beautiful, healthy lawn. In addition to providing specific services, it will be able to advise you on proper mowing and irrigation techniques, becoming your partner in getting greater enjoyment from your home and increasing property value. You will create a personalized resource to turn to with concerns or questions about your lawn.

PLANET
Professional Landcare Network
950 Herndon Parkway, Suite 450
Herndon, VA 20170
(800) 395-2522
LandcareNetwork.org

The association of members who create and maintain the QUALITY OF LIFE in communities across America.