Selecting a Lawn Care Service

Maintaining an attractive lawn can be an overwhelming task for some homeowners lacking turfgrass management training. Professional turfgrass managers often spend years becoming educated on turfgrass management. They also attend continuing education programs to keep up to date on the latest management techniques. Professionals understand that creating a quality lawn requires a general knowledge of soil types, fertilizers, mowing heights, irrigation and insect, disease and weed management.

For individuals wanting a quality lawn but not wanting to invest the time to learn the art of turfgrass science, hiring a lawn care service may be an option. Services provided by lawn care companies allow homeowners to enjoy more leisure time while enjoying a well-maintained yard.

Selecting a lawn care service to maintain your lawn can be a difficult task. There are numerous companies located throughout most urban areas that provide lawn care services. The type of services these companies offer will vary and may include mowing, fertilizing and pest control. Before you begin shopping for a lawn care service, decide what services you want.

Services Provided

After a decision is made about which lawn services you need, do a little homework on local lawn care companies. One issue you will want to be aware of during your search is the amount of work they are willing to provide. Some companies will be available as needed. Others will only offer a number of visits to apply pesticides or perform set cultural practices. Determine what level of service you prefer and which company will provide that service. Be aware however, the increasing amount of service will usually have an accompanying increase in cost.

Most lawn care companies will provide one of three levels of service.

**Partial Lawn Care:** Partial lawn care usually involves a company that provides only one level of service. A pest control company will provide both pest control and fertilizer applications but usually will not perform cultural practices such as mowing and edging. If you are sensitive to chemical exposure or want to maintain your lawn using less toxic methods, there are pest control companies that specialize in this area as well. Lawn care services that are not licensed to apply pesticides will usually only perform manual labor, usually called 'mow and blow', and may apply fertilizers.

If you would like to maintain your own lawn by taking on the responsibility of mowing and edging but do not feel comfortable applying pesticides, then a pest control company that applies fertilizer, insecticides, fungicides and herbicides would be a good choice. On the other hand, if you prefer to diagnose turfgrass problems and apply pesticides as needed but do not want the time constraints of mowing, edging and aerating, a 'mow and blow' company may be your choice.

**Total Lawn Care:** A company advertising itself as a total lawn care service will not only mow, set your irrigation schedule and perform needed cultivation practices but will also diagnose pest problems and apply pesticides as needed. These companies should have well trained employees with knowledge of pest identification and safe pesticide application. In South Carolina, any individual that applies pesticides on a landscape for a fee must obtain and maintain a commercial pesticide applicator license. They can be identified by the yellow South Carolina shaped decal (issued by the Department of Pesticide Regulation) on their vehicle.
**Total Landscape Management:** Companies that advertise themselves as a total landscape management company will take care of all plant material located on site. In addition to turfgrass mowing, edging and irrigation scheduling, they should also include any cultural practice needed such as aerating, thatching or topdressing.

They should be able to diagnose and control pest problems on your turf, shrubs and trees. They should take care of all pruning responsibilities including shrubs and trees. These companies should develop and implement a fertility program for all your plants and should base this on soil test results. The company should have a certified arborist on staff for all your tree work and should be following all state laws.

**Selection Guidelines**

To assist you in choosing a lawn care service, the following guidelines will be valuable in your decision making.

**Services:** Determine exactly what you are looking for in a lawn care service. Review the above information on levels of service, then contact several companies and find out what service they are willing to provide. You may also ask friends and neighbors who have such a service for recommendations.

If you are looking for a company that will take on the responsibility of mowing, ask how often they intend to service your lawn. Find out what their policy is for weather delays and missed service dates.

Be sure you know the extent of service they provide such as edging and cleanup. You may also ask if they are willing to take on additional work such as bed mulching or thatch removal.

Ask about the company's equipment inventory and what they plan to use on your lawn. Some lawn care services only use large, sometimes heavy equipment for mowing and pesticide application. On some sites, the use of large equipment can cause compaction and rutting. If this is a possibility on your lawn, make sure the company has and will use smaller pieces of equipment to avoid damage.

**Expertise & Training** Select a company that listens to your concerns about your landscape. They should be able to provide answers on how to effectively resolve problems. They should also provide you with a method you can use to quickly contact them to register a concern.

Verify the amount of training and expertise the employees of the company have. They should have all the recommended state licenses and should be trained on a regular basis about new horticultural techniques. Ask the company if they are licensed and insured and ask to see proof.

Ask if the company and its employees are members of local, state and national trade associations. Being a member in good standing with these organizations shows the company's dedication to continuing education.

**Contracts:** It is important to obtain a written service agreement spelling out the responsibilities of the lawn care service and those of the homeowner. Do not accept any contract for service over the phone. Many companies provide free onsite evaluations to determine the level of maintenance and pricing.

Ask if the service is automatically renewed each year. If it is, ask for an annual written confirmation. Ask about the company policies on cancellations if you decide to end their services. Ask if there are any penalties and how and when cancellation of service needs to be done.

**Pesticide Use:** Ask to see the details of the management plan the company intends to follow and how many site visits they schedule. Many chemicals are only applied as needed to control a pest outbreak. However, other chemicals, as well as fertilizers, are applied on a timely basis. Ask the company to inform you of what chemicals are used and when. You can check these recommendations against those of Clemson University.

Be sure the company will provide you advanced notice of any chemical or maintenance practice they are about to perform. This will allow you time to secure lawn furniture, equipment, pets etc. The company should also tell you how long to remain off the site after any chemical application.
Ask "mow & blow" services whether they reset mower heights for different turfgrasses and at what height they will cut your lawn. Check this against recommended mowing heights in HGIC 1205, Mowing Lawns. Also find out if they clean equipment between lawns. Mowers and other equipment can spread weed seeds and disease organisms if not cleaned properly.

Many companies will provide labels of the products they are applying to your lawn. Ask if they will provide this information on request or at least inform you of the chemical name. For more information about pesticide labels, see HGIC 2750, Reading the Pesticide Label.

Make sure the company is an environmentally responsible company. Check if they apply pesticides only when needed, according to label directions, and that they dispose of all pesticide containers properly. See HGIC 2751, Pesticide Safety and HGIC 2754, Pesticide Container Disposal for more information.

Ask if the individual applying any pesticide has a Commercial Pesticide License or will be working under the direct supervision of someone who does have one. This is required by South Carolina state law.

Be sure you will be given specific instructions on what actions need to be taken once a pesticide or fertilizer is applied. Some of the applied products will need to be watered in while others will not need immediate irrigation.

If the company will be putting up notification signs about pesticide use, ask who will remove them and when they should be removed.

References & Records
Do some research on the company. You can contact the Clemson University Department of Pesticide Regulation at 864-646-2150 or at http://www.clemson.edu/public/regulatory/pesticide_regulation/index.html to see if the company has any pesticide related violations. You can also check with your local Better Business Bureau to see if any complaints have been filed against them.

Finally, ask the company for all recent references from their local clients.

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This information is supplied with the understanding that no discrimination is intended and no endorsement by the Clemson University Cooperative Extension Service is implied. All recommendations are for South Carolina conditions and may not apply to other areas. Use pesticides only according to the directions on the label. All recommendations for pesticide use are for South Carolina only and were legal at the time of publication, but the status of registration and use patterns are subject to change by action of state and federal regulatory agencies. Follow all directions, precautions and restrictions that are listed.