



Tips on Choosing a Lawn Care Service

U.S. homeowners are turning to lawn, landscape and tree care professionals in record numbers, spending an all-time high \$17.4 billion on outdoor "home improvement" in 1999. More than 26 million households hired a green professional, a 23 percent increase over the previous year, and that number could rise to 29 million in 2000, according to a Gallup survey.

Green Industry services include lawn/landscape maintenance, landscape installation/construction, landscape design, and tree care.

"These are impressive numbers, and year after year, lawn and landscape maintenance continues to be the top service hired by homeowners," said Tom Delaney, executive vice president of the Professional Lawn Care Association of America. "Homeowners benefit from the economic and environmental benefits of turf, and save time by hiring a lawn and landscape service. When you factor in that a well-maintained property can add anywhere from 5 to 15 percent to a home's value, you quickly realize that hiring a service is a sound investment."

In addition to fertilizing, 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 product for your lawn.

Hiring the right lawn service takes a little effort, but the rewards of a thick, healthy lawn are substantial. PLCAA offers these tips to help you select a professional lawn care 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 ornamental and small tree care.
2. Find out which companies provide service in your neighborhood. Before looking in the yellow pages or answering an ad, ask your neighbors for a recommendation. It's a great way to determine the reputation of a company and the quality 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.
4. Ask about the price system and what services are included. The lawn care company may offer a yearly contract or a simple verbal agreement giving the customer the right to discontinue service at any time. Find out what happens if you have a problem between applications. Will the service calls be free or is there a charge? However, do not use price as a major factor - comfort, satisfaction and results are the most important considerations.
5. Consider annual costs as well as cost per application. Many companies allow you to pay after each treatment and may offer a discount if you pay the annual cost up front. Prices are based on the total square footage of the property less house, drive, and any other area that is not in turfgrass. The average cost is \$4 to \$6 per thousand square feet depending on the market and difficulty in treating the lawn.
6. Have a complete understanding with the company before work starts. Get an explanation of what the service can and cannot do. Find out what kind and amount of treatments are included in the proposed program, approximately when they will be



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- applied, and what results can be expected.
7. Find out what is, and is not, guaranteed. Some services may offer a guarantee of performance. Others may offer refunds if they fail to meet your expectations. Guarantees are usually limited to the provider returning to correct problems if the customer is a full-service customer.
 8. Make sure the lawn care service is licensed. Every state in the U.S. has some licensing requirements for commercial lawn care companies. This means that the company has at least minimal working knowledge of what they are doing. Customers should insist on proof of state-required licensing. Call the state Department of Agriculture or Environmental Department for details.
 9. Insurance and certification. Every state is different, but most require a lawn care provider to carry a state-mandated level of liability insurance and appropriate workers' compensation coverage. Virtually every state requires some level of certification through the regulatory agency in that state. This should be confirmed up front by the provider when a service estimate is requested by the potential customer.
 10. Safety factors. Almost all lawn care products used must be registered with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the state. Some states require posting a sign after product application recommending you avoid 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 lawn care associations and is active in the community. Professional organizations keep members informed on new developments in pest control methods, safety, training, research and regulation. Most associations have a code of ethics for members to follow. Affiliation with a professional group indicates the company strives for quality in its work. Ask whether they carry the Symbol of Good Practice showing membership in the Professional Lawn Care Association of America (PLCAA). More and more lawn care professionals also carry the CTP (Certified Turfgrass Professional) designation from PLCAA and the University of Georgia, considered a national industry standard that a lawn care professional has passed a written exam on the principles of turfgrass management.
 12. If you want further information on the company's service record, contact your local Better Business Bureau.

The lawn care service you select will become your partner in maintaining a thick and healthy lawn. In addition to providing specific services, they will be able to advise you on proper mowing and irrigation of your lawn. If you have concerns or questions, call your lawn care service first.

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