

Lawn service contracts

Lawn care services perform some of the time-consuming and complicated tasks of lawn maintenance. These may include analyzing, fertilizing, and seeding the soil; controlling and killing weeds and pests; and caring for trees and shrubs. Companies may provide services an average of four to five times during the spring through fall. You also may want these firms to regularly mow your lawn.

Sometimes, in order to hire these companies, you must sign expensive and long-term contracts. It is important, therefore, to know exactly what you want from a lawn care firm. The following information may help you decide whether to hire a lawn care service and, if so, how to find the one right for you.

How do you choose a lawn care service?

If you decide to hire a lawn care service, consider the following suggestions.

- Talk with others who have used lawn care services. Find out which companies have done a good job and why.
- Talk with representatives from several lawn care firms and get estimates. The lowest estimate may not necessarily provide all the services you need.
- Remember that each lawn is different and that your lawn does not necessarily need the same treatment as your neighbor's. Some companies may offer a free lawn analysis. Make sure you are getting "custom" service.
- Even the best lawns have weeds, insects or diseases. Ask to see evidence of specific and real problems before you agree to any treatment.
- If a company uses pesticide, the business and their applicators are required to hold certain licenses and certifications. Check to see if the company is licensed as a pesticide application business by the state agriculture department. All commercial people who apply or supervise the application of pesticides must be licensed and certified. Certification assures that the person applying pesticides is trained to handle and apply pesticides. To become certified, the applicator must pass a written exam given by the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection. Therefore ask if the applicator is currently licensed and certified by DATCP, or check with DATCP's "Pesticide and Certification and Licensing Program" at (608) 224-4500.
- Check with our office, the Bureau of Consumer Protection and the Better Business Bureau to see if any complaints have been lodged against the company.
- Find out if the company has liability insurance to cover any accidents that might happen while work is being performed in your yard or while pesticides are being applied.
- Ask if the company belongs to a professional pest control association or a professional lawn and landscape association. This membership may help keep members better trained and informed.

Fast Facts

- Ask for recommendations from neighbors who have used lawn care services.
- Talk with representatives from several lawn care firms and get estimates.
- Check to see if the company you are interested in is licensed.
- Find out if the company has liability insurance.
- Read your contract carefully.
- See if there are extra charges for special services.
- Find out if the work is guaranteed.

What should you look for in your contract?

If you select a lawn care service, you should put all your agreements with the company into a written contract. You may want to keep the following information in mind before you sign any contract.

- Read your contract carefully. Know what specific services and lawn problems are covered and what are not.
- See if there are extra charges for special services, such as fertilizing, disease control, or reseeding.
- Find out if the work is guaranteed. If it is, get the guarantee (or warranty) in writing. Know what the guarantee includes and excludes, and how long it lasts. For example, if you believe a seeding job produces little improvement; will the company come back and

reseed for free during the same growing season?

- Know how long the services will be performed. Must you renew annually or are services scheduled indefinitely? What are the costs of renewal and how much might they increase? Many lawn care service contracts require written notice to cancel. Find out how you cancel the contract you are considering.

If pesticide treatment is offered, what should you look for?

Lawn care companies often provide pest, disease, and weed control services. This usually means the company will use a pesticide on your lawn.

Pesticides are used to control different kinds of lawn pests. For example, insecticides are used to kill bugs, herbicides kill weeds, and fungicides kill fungus.

Before you agree to pesticide treatment for your lawn, consider the following information.

- Although pesticides can control unwanted weeds and insects, ask how the treatment may also affect organisms that create a healthy soil for your lawn.
- If pesticides are going to be used on your lawn, find out what specific lawn problems are being addressed.
- Before pesticides are applied to your property, you must be notified that you can receive pre-application information. It must include the following:
 - 1) Chemical or brand names of pesticides.
 - 2) Labels of the pesticides being applied (review labels before any application).
 - 3) Date the application is to be made (may be given verbally if you approve).
 - 4) Address, telephone number, and contact person for the business.
- Find out about the harmful characteristics of the pesticides. Be aware of effects to young children,

pregnant women, older people, and household pets.

- Inquire about the availability of less harmful compounds.
- Commercial lawn care companies are required to post red and white pesticide warning signs in the lawn. Fertilizer-only applications do not need to be posted.
- DATCP administers the Landscape Pesticide Advance Notice Registry which is a way for nearby homeowners and renters to be told in advance of commercial landscape pesticide applications. If one of your neighbors lists your address on the registry, the business will notify the registry members.
- Ask for alternatives to pesticide applications. Many companies now offer a more "organic" and less chemical approach to lawn care. Keep in mind that if the business and applicators are using organic pesticides, they still must be licensed and certified by DATCP.
- Ask about ecological effects, including danger to non-target species and the possibility of groundwater contamination.

Post-application information

If you contract for a pesticide application, the following information must be given to you by the pesticide applicator when the application is completed:

- Date and time of application.
- Applicator's name and license number.
- Applicator's telephone number or employer's telephone number.
- Chemical or brand name of the pesticide that was applied.
- Concentration and amount of pesticide applied or the amount of product per unit area treated and the total area treated.
- Notice that a free copy of the pesticide label is available upon request.
- Precautions you should take, such as when you can use the treated areas again.

Commercial applicators are required to post warning signs which state "Pesticide Application, Please Keep Off." Signs should remain in place at least until sunset of the day following the application.

When can the treated area be used again?

The information provided by the applicator at the time of application will tell you when you can use the treated area.

At a minimum, you should not enter a lawn that has been treated with pesticides until the sprays have dried or the dust has settled.

For product information beyond the pesticide label

Contact the National Pesticide Information Center: 1-800-858-7378, <http://npic.orst.edu>.

To report suspected misuse of pesticides or to obtain further information

DATCP's Agricultural Resource Management Division regulates the use of pesticides in Wisconsin. You can talk with pesticide experts and get answers to your questions about pesticides, pesticide laws or how to file a complaint concerning possible pesticide misuse by calling the Lawn Care Hotline at (608) 224-LAWN (608-224-5296) or (608) 224-4500. Ask to talk with a pesticide specialist.

To report contract or guarantee problems

To file a complaint concerning a contract, guarantee (warranty) problems, or to check on the number of complaints against a lawn service company, contact the:

**Bureau of Consumer Protection
2811 Agriculture Drive
PO Box 8911
Madison WI 53708-8911**

**E-MAIL:
DATCPHotline@wisconsin.gov**

WEBSITE: datcp.wisconsin.gov

Toll-free in WI: (800) 422-7128

(608) 224-4976 FAX: (608) 224-4939

TTY: (608) 224-5058