



# Selecting a Professional Lawn and Landscape Maintenance Company

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*Using a landscape maintenance company offers a viable option to maintaining your landscape on your own, and care should be taken to ensure a reputable company is selected.*

As a homeowner, you must care for your lawn and landscape. This means ensuring proper mowing and pruning, fertilizer and pesticide use, cultivation, irrigation, and overseeding or reestablishment of turf and other plants. However, if you would rather not perform any or all of these tasks, you have the option to hire a professional to do the work for you. Consider the following six points.

### **What are the benefits of hiring a professional company?**

- You can shift responsibility to a professional, and increase your own leisure, volunteer, or work time.
- Reputable companies are very familiar with contemporary recommendations, products, and technologies for proper turf and landscape management, and are well equipped to care for your green spaces.
- You won't have to store and properly dispose of unused chemicals. Fertilizer and pesticides are not sold in the perfect amount for your lawn—you'll almost always have too little or too much.
- You won't have to purchase or care for specialized equipment.
- Other benefits vary by company and the level of service provided. Some firms offer only partial services

such as mowing, irrigation system installation and/or maintenance, or fertilizer and pest control. Others may offer a range of services, including comprehensive landscape maintenance during the growing season and snow removal in winter.

### **What is a reasonable price to pay for lawn care?**

- On average, homeowners maintaining their own lawn spend \$100 to \$150 per year on fertilizer and pesticides for a ~5,000 ft<sup>2</sup> lawn.
- This figure does not account for the cost of a lawn mower, string trimmer, a fertilizer spreader, a sprayer, purchasing or renting cultivation and other equipment, fuel, equipment maintenance, irrigation equipment, or labor hours spent servicing the lawn.
- A reasonable price for lawn care ranges from \$300 to \$500 per year for fertilizer and pest control applications (not including mowing, tree and shrub pruning, snow removal, etc.).

### **Service packages**

#### *What to expect*

- Most companies offer different tiers of lawn care service based on the number of fertilizer applications per year, and the number and type of pesticide applications. Some companies offer weed control as a base option and add disease control at a higher price point.

- Some companies agree on the expectations of their clients upfront and implement the necessary management strategies to meet or exceed expectations.
- Both are reasonable business models if the original contract of included services (and any negotiated changes) are conveyed in writing.

### *Limitations*

- No service package or company is perfect. It may take one growing season to become familiar with your landscape and adjust management accordingly.
- Your landscape is a living, dynamic system, and every growing season produces different challenges and results.
- Unforeseen circumstances arise, and there truly are difficult-to-control pests for which we currently have limited management strategies.
- A program with four fertilizer and pest control applications per year may not always eliminate insect, weed, or disease issues in your lawn. Problems may arise periodically, and might go unnoticed since a company representative may only visit your property every six to eight weeks.
- If contracted services include mowing, a representative from the company usually visits your lawn weekly. This will increase the company's familiarity with your landscape.

### **What's required of you?**

- Carefully select a company to care for your landscape and allow it to complete contracted tasks.
- Realize that lawn care operators cannot perform miracles.
- Communicate. Most conflicts between firms and their clients arise from miscommunication over expectations or provided services. Be willing to walk your property with company representatives.
- Do your part for your lawn. Mow and irrigate appropriately if services are not contracted, and report problems to the company.

- If you've only contracted fertilizer and pesticide applications, it's unreasonable to expect a company to solve all problems. In this case you've only hired an applicator, not a turf and landscape manager.
- Don't blame a company for poor growing conditions. If factors such as temperature, precipitation, solar intensity, humidity, etc., are not ideal, turf may decline regardless of management.

### **How do I select a reputable company?**

- Do your homework. Create a list of needs and previous issues with your lawn that you would like the contracted company to resolve. This way, you will know that each eventual bid fits your needs.
- Prequalify several companies by reviewing the *Selection Criteria* and using *Tables 1–3*.
- For your mutual benefit, only ask the companies that best fit your needs for estimates, and agree on a deadline for a completed estimate or separately contracted tasks.

### **Selection Criteria**

#### *Flexibility*

- Does the company offer different programs for different turf species that account for your expectations?
- What products are used? Does the company offer alternatives or actively rotate pesticides used?
- Are additional services provided upon request (e.g., additional applications for tough weeds or extended growing seasons, tree pruning, seasonal clean-ups, leaf and snow removal, perimeter pest control for your home, etc.)?
- Is the equipment used appropriately sized to care for your landscape?
- Are the payment options satisfactory?

#### *Communication Strategy and Response Time*

- Will the company communicate in person or via a call, text, email, or social media? Establish a communication strategy upfront.



- How quickly will a technical representative respond and inspect a reported lawn problem, and how soon can remedial action begin?
- Remember, response times may be longer during summer when companies are busier.

### *Expertise Level*

- Pesticide applicators should be licensed by the Nebraska Department of Agriculture. Don't assume applicators are licensed because they operate in your area or another state. **Ask to see their Certified Pesticide Applicator license**—they are required to carry it.
- Is the company a member of the National Association of Landscape Professionals, the Nebraska Nursery & Landscape Association, the Nebraska Arborists Association, the Nebraska Turfgrass Association, or other professional organizations?
- Do employees regularly attend continuing education events offered by Nebraska Extension or community colleges?
- Do owners or employees have certificates or degrees from technical schools or universities?
- How many years of experience does the owner or chief operator of the company have?
- Can a company representative explain why certain applications or management strategies are necessary, or why they may not improve your lawn?

### *Reputation*

- Have you seen the company working in your neighborhood? If so, do personnel appear professional? Is the equipment in good working order?

- How long has the lawn care company been doing business locally?
- What do the company's references say about its service? Ask for names and addresses of satisfied customers.
- Ensure that inexpensive introductory prices aren't followed by mandatory increasing services and costs that you don't want. **Read the fine print.**
- Contractors with one or more employees are required to register with the Nebraska Department of Labor. They should have workers' compensation and liability coverage. They also should be able to provide a Certificate of Insurance that indicates the expiration of coverage to prospective clients. There are, however, exemptions for sole proprietors or partnerships.

### *Environmental Stewardship*

- Does the company use management strategies that enhance the environmental impact of your lawn?
- It's illegal to use pesticides in any manner not listed on the label.
- Fertilizers and pesticides should be precisely applied, only to the lawn. If fertilizer, pesticides, or grass clippings get onto sidewalks, driveways, or in roadways, they must be swept back into the lawn to reduce potential impacts on water quality.
- Are very low levels of weeds spot-treated, rather than treating your entire lawn?

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