

Selecting a Lawn Maintenance Service



Maintaining an attractive lawn area within a landscape requires attention to every aspect of turfgrass culture. While North Carolina is an attractive place to live, it presents unique challenges to growing a quality turf. Many people forego turf maintenance themselves and hire a lawn maintenance service. Selecting one that will fulfill expectations and provide quality service can only be accomplished if a person has an understanding of the different types of services offered and the options available.

Types of lawn maintenance services

There are three basic types of lawn care service—partial lawn care, total lawn care, and total landscape maintenance. Cost and the services offered should be taken into consideration when selecting a company. Naturally, the more services a company provides the more it will charge; but, there are common denominators to help make the selection.

Partial lawn care. This type of lawn care service is used by many homeowners and commercial property managers who want to achieve healthy, attractive lawns. Generally, firms that offer this limited service only apply chemicals to the turf, mainly herbicides and fertilizers, although some may offer complete pest management options, including all weed, insect, and disease control. The home- or property-owner is the one responsible for mowing, irrigation, and other cultural practices, such as aerification and reseeding. Ultimately, success depends on the homeowner or manager performing routine turf maintenance according to recommendations made by the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service in its publications. These recommendations can be obtained from a local county Extension office or online at www.TurfFiles.NCSU.edu.

People who use a partial lawn care service may find that actual amounts of

fertilizer applied to the turf by the service are a company secret. However, fertilizer should be applied at rates similar to those recommended by the N.C. Cooperative Extension Service. For a high-quality lawn, applications should be made at the higher application rates in accordance with the calendar Extension has developed for the specific type of turfgrass being grown. These publications can be obtained from a local county Extension office or online at www.TurfFiles.NCSU.edu.

Integrated Pest Management (IPM) is a philosophy of dealing with pest problems that uses a variety of approaches. While sound IPM strategies rely on a combination of approaches, one strategy, pesticide application, is often necessary to produce a high-quality turf in North Carolina due to the high incidence of weeds, insects, and diseases that attack turfgrasses. Here, as with most IPM strategies involving pesticide use, a key phrase is, "Less is better." A lawn care technician should be able to identify the target pests being treated and should not just apply a pesticide as "insurance" in case a pest problem might occur. In addition, he or she should apply pesticides at the correct rate and time of year. For example, pre-emergence herbicides are often applied in the spring to prevent the emergence of crabgrass and other weeds. Exactly when to apply herbicides and at what rate are

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based on many years of research. One or two preemergence herbicide applications are preferable to four or five postemergence herbicide applications. In many areas of North Carolina, summer disease problems can be anticipated; treating these preventatively actually means using lower pesticide application rates, rather than waiting until the disease problem has become severe.

Make certain the lawn care service technicians have been licensed by the state of North Carolina and can provide a current copy of their pesticide applicator's license. A license is required for anyone who applies pesticides as part of a company's services. Many people mistakenly believe that commonly used herbicides such as Roundup are not part of a pesticide program. But these products are also regulated under state guidelines, similar to the guidelines for insecticides and fungicides.

Selecting a partial lawn care company can be as simple as checking with neighbors or friends who utilize a service to find out how the company has performed in your area. Most lawn care companies use similar approaches in terms of pest control strategies and fertilizer application rates and timing. However, the quality of the service can vary widely, based on the dedication to detail provided by the technician.

Total lawn care. Companies that provide total lawn care are often hired by commercial property managers, businesses, and homeowners to manage all the turf on a particular property. Usually these firms mow, trim, fertilize, and apply pesticides. Irrigation system operation and maintenance also may be a part of their service. The extent of the services a company provides is usually based on a written contract. The quality of turf produced is totally the firm's responsibility.

Selection of a total lawn care company should be made on the basis of bids, with maintenance specifications determined by the client. Turf management practices should follow those recommended by the N.C. Cooperative Extension Service. Information on writing specifications can be obtained from N.C. Cooperative Extension Bulletin AG-679, *Tips on Writing Turf Contracts and Landscape Maintenance Specifications*. Firms should be able to provide a reference list of previous and current jobs, and the client should investigate the performance of the company under consideration.

Total landscape maintenance. Complete care of all the landscape for a particular property can be provided by some companies. Clients who utilize these services are interested in more care than is provided by total lawn care companies and usually have no provisions within their organizations for providing any portion of the landscape care or management. A landscape maintenance company's services might include lawn care, maintenance of trees and shrubs, planting and care of annual flowers, and upkeep of other landscape

plantings. These firms are responsible for the total appearance and upkeep of the landscape. A landscape maintenance service company should be chosen much as a total lawn care company is chosen—with bids and written contracts.

Selection considerations

Here are some guidelines for selecting a turf maintenance company:

- Expect a consultation that will include a survey of the landscape by the lawn applicator, agronomist, or horticulturalist. A description of services and treatments should be included, and the price should be determined.
- Make certain the program will meet local needs for fertility, mowing, and pest management. N.C. Extension Service recommendations should be followed for maintenance practices. Contact the local N.C. Cooperative Extension Service office to obtain publications on turf maintenance, or find them online at www.Turf-Files.NCSU.edu.
- Look for a lawn maintenance firm with capable personnel who can promptly and courteously answer your questions. Ask the contact person how much training and experience he/she has with N.C. turfgrasses. Some companies have been known to initiate business and hire people with no previous experience or educational background in lawn care, pesticide application, agronomy, or horticulture and without the proper licensing. Many people relocate from cool-season turfgrass areas and are not familiar with North Carolina's turfgrasses and pests or with the maintenance required. It takes years of training for an individual to correctly identify turfgrass and weed species, insect and disease problems and to thoroughly understand turfgrass cultural practices.
- Ask if all personnel are licensed for pesticide application. This is critical because many of these materials may be harmful to humans, pets, and nontarget landscape plants if applied incorrectly. "Just" a pesticide application will not suffice. The correct pesticide applied at the correct rate and for a specific pest problem are essential components of any safe, effective pest management program.
- As with all commercial businesses, some lawn service companies are better than others. Find out specific companies' reputations within the community. Some have better maintenance programs than others and more satisfied customers. Ask the companies for references you may contact to verify results.

Contracts and cost

Contracts may be written or verbal, on a yearly or monthly basis, very detailed or very sketchy. Make sure you understand the pricing system and know what services are included. Look at the cost of the total program. Compare prices for fertilization; pest manage-

ment and cultural practices, like mowing (if included); aerification; and reseeding.

Have the salesman or applicator explain pesticide applications to you. More is not always best. Be wary of those companies whose service provides preventative controls for all pests on a year-round basis. Heavy pesticide applications may kill only beneficial predators that normally keep disease organisms and damaging insects in check.

Lastly, be careful of oversell. There is no such thing as a weed-free, trouble-free lawn. A high level of turf quality can be achieved but not as easily as is sometimes portrayed. North Carolina's climate and soil conditions require keen attention to cultural details.

Plants can be under water stress and therefore prone to pest problems within a matter of days in some regions of the state. Find out if you can expect service when requested within a reasonable time if problems arise once the contract begins.

Summary

Lawn maintenance companies can help to provide a high-quality turf in North Carolina. But keep in mind that a partial lawn maintenance program is no better than the care given by the client outside the maintenance contract. If not mowed and irrigated correctly, even lawns that receive proper fertilization and pest management will not produce the desired high quality turf.

Recommendations for the use of agricultural chemicals are included in this publication as a convenience to the reader. The use of brand names and any mention or listing of commercial products or services in this publication does not imply endorsement by the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service nor discrimination against similar products or services not mentioned. Individuals who use agricultural chemicals are responsible for ensuring that the intended use complies with current regulations and conforms to the product label. Be sure to obtain current information about usage regulations, and examine a current product label before applying any chemical. For assistance, contact a county Cooperative Extension Service office.

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5,000 copies of this public document were printed at a cost of \$687, or \$0.14 per copy.

Published by
NORTH CAROLINA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE

COLLEGE OF
AGRICULTURE & LIFE SCIENCES
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