

QUESTIONS TO ASK LAWN CARE PROVIDERS

Many residents are looking for a lawn care company whose products and services are organic or environmentally friendly. Unfortunately these terms are sometimes used indiscriminately. Despite their use of synthetic chemical fertilizers and pesticides, some lawn care companies claim to be organic or environmentally friendly. When choosing a company to care for a lawn, be open about your needs and concerns. Ask the following questions to gain a clear picture of a company's practices and ethics. Demand thorough and honest answers. If you don't get them from one company, try another.

Do you have a pesticide-free lawn care program?

This clear question cannot be misinterpreted. Demand a "yes" or "no" answer. Some companies offer both pre-set and customized programs that range from 100% pesticide-free to spot spraying weeds to broadcast spraying. Sign a mutually agreed upon contract with your company to guarantee pesticides will not be used on your property.

One area of confusion is the term "organic". Organic has two different meanings. Scientifically speaking, organic refers to a compound that contains carbon. The second meaning refers to a process of food cultivation without the use of chemical pesticides or fertilizers, and is a well-established process in organic agriculture. This second definition is the one adopted by genuine organic lawn care companies. Some companies spray pesticides and claim to be organic because the lawn care chemicals they are using do contain carbon. This leads to confusion among consumers. Read brochures carefully and ask questions.

How will your programs contribute to healthy soil?

Chemical lawn care companies focus on the plant, not the soil. If you are serious about organic lawn care, you must learn about your soil and restore its health. Unhealthy lawns are often the result of unhealthy soil. Find a company that believes healthy soil results in healthy plants.

If your lawn has been dependent on pesticides, be prepared to be patient. It will take time to renew the health of the soil to support a healthy natural lawn. If your company is professional, soil renewal will be a high priority.

Are your products non-toxic?

Some companies claim the products that they use are organic because of carbon content, not because they are non-toxic. If you want to avoid pesticides, ask your lawn care company for a definition of the term organic, and insist on non-toxic products.

What methods of weed control will you use?

Some companies may recommend a pre-emergent application of corn meal gluten. This is a relatively non-toxic material that will stop weed seeds from sprouting. The truly healthy lawn will require only compost as it develops healthy soil with a natural balance of soil organisms to nurture your grass and plants. How will your company deal with those weeds you definitely don't want- thistles, e.g.? If you are prepared to tolerate some alternative growth in your lawn, let your lawn care provider know.

What types of fertilizers do you use?

Many adjectives are used to describe fertilizers: organic, organic based or chemical; liquid or granular, slow release or quick release. Organic lawn care companies use slow release organic fertilizers such as kelp (seaweed), rock dust and compost. These safe and natural products provide both macro and micronutrients while improving soil structure and biological activity.

Many lawn care companies use fast release chemical synthetic fertilizers in either liquid or granular form. These products release their nutrients quickly, creating excessive top (blade) growth at the expense of root development. This unbalanced growth weakens your lawn. Quick release fertilizers also leach away, along with your hard-earned money, without being used by grass plants. This effect is especially true of sandy soils. Unused nutrients pollute ground and surface water.

Do you provide advice about ongoing lawn maintenance?

Lawn maintenance without chemical pesticides and fertilizers requires knowledge. Regular maintenance is just as important as the occasional visits from your lawn care company. Companies committed to organic lawn care will provide you with information about beneficial cultural practices such as mowing high, correct watering and overseeding with hardy grass species.

Will you adjust the cutting schedule to the growth rates of the lawn as it changes over the season?

For example, early in the season, grass requires cutting frequently, maintaining a 3" high lawn. As the rate of growth slows down during the season and during dry periods, it doesn't need cutting as frequently. Will the care provider only cut the grass as necessary? Your grass won't need cutting every Wednesday, e.g.

Using a mulching mower, will you leave grass clippings on the lawn?

Grass clippings can provide needed compost, reducing your external compost and fertilizer needs. They break down easily, returning nitrogen and other nutrients to the soil. Clippings from a regular mower can be used also, as long as piles of clippings don't form. Gently raking any piles to spread them out enhances their ability to decompose.

What costs can I expect?

Some companies have higher rates for organic care, and some maintain the same rates as chemical care, or less. Initial applications of fertilizer may be expensive, but given that you are no longer using herbicides and fungicides, ongoing care should reflect labour hours, not chemical additions.

Finally...

Read the small print. Some companies use innocent sounding terms like weed management instead of herbicide applications. Ask your company for a full explanation of any ambiguous words or statements. Reliable companies welcome questions and provide honest answers.

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See also: [Natural Lawn Care](#) and [Top Ten Tips for a Healthy Lawn](#).

Learn more about natural lawn care by digging into resources at the Stratford Public Library!

19 St. Andrew Street (519-271-0220) (www.stratford.library.on.ca)