

Get growing

Finding lawn-care help can be as easy as a walk around the block

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Maybe you've got allergies.

Maybe your mower is broken.

Or maybe you just hate cutting the grass.

Whatever your reason, spring is the time to start looking for a landscaper, before the grass gets so high that your neighbors complain.

"Now is when people start calling us," said Jill Wright, co-owner of Wright's Lawncare and Landscaping Inc. of Milton.

Homeowners are looking for everything from weekly grass cutting to a complete overhaul of their landscaping, Wright said.

The key to hiring a professional is to know what you want done before you pick up the phone.

Survey your lawn and your flower beds. Ask yourself whether you like what you see. If not, decide how much work you are willing to do yourself and how much you are willing to pay for improvements.

"People are either gardeners or they are not," said Steve Keulmann, owner of Old Country Gardens in Brandywine Hundred. "If they are not, they usually call a service."

Care for your lawn

Americans spent about \$38 billion on lawn care, landscaping and tree care in 2003, according to the last survey done by the trade association Professional Landcare Network, which represents more than 4,000 companies. There are about 75,000 landscaping companies in the U.S., said spokeswoman Vicki Bendure. That number includes many single-person grass cutters who work only during the summer.

But finding a lawn-care service can be as easy as a walk around the block -- which is what many people do, said Keulmann, who sells lawn-care products and plants at his

business but does not provide grass-cutting services. They spot the best-looking lawn in the neighborhood, get the name of the gardening company and call for an estimate, he said.

Usually, a homeowner can save money by hiring his neighbor's gardener, said landscaper Drew Schmidt. It is cheaper for a landscaping company to serve several homes in the same neighborhood, Schmidt said.

"If people want to get a better price and better service, they should get four or five neighbors together and say 'this is what we want,' " Schmidt said. "Absolutely, we would be able to bid it much more competitively."

The majority of companies do basic yard work, such as weeding, feeding and general cleanup during the spring and fall. However, some of them specialize. Happy Lawn, of Chadds Ford, Pa., provides only fertilizer and weed and pest control services, said company Vice President of Operations Dave Thompson.

In recent years, a handful of firms has begun offering organic lawn care, said Jason Cupp, treasurer for the Professional Landcare Network.

Many customers ask for organic or chemical-free products, but change their minds when they find out how much more it costs, said Thompson. Happy Lawn offers organic fertilizers, but not organic weed or pest-control products because they don't work very well, Thompson said.

Schmidt, who owns Blue Spruce, said about half of his customers tell him not to use any chemicals on their property. Some are simply concerned about paying extra for a chemical feeding, but many are worried about the health impact of herbicides and pesticides, he said.

Many larger companies offer contracts that last from six months to one year and include a spring and fall cleanup, mulching, fertilizing and regular cutting.

Jim Whittacre, owner of Grass Roots Inc., of Wilmington, said he renews about 500 contracts every year at about this time. Most of those contracts cost between \$1,500 and \$2,000, with the payments spread out over 10 or 12 months.

Whittacre said he no longer advertises because his new customers usually are referred to him by his previous customers.

Getting the opinion of a neighbor or friend is the best way to hire a lawn-care company, Whittacre said.

"Word of mouth means a lot."

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