

QUESTIONS TO ASK LAWN CARE COMPANIES

As public concern about pesticides increases, more and more lawn care companies may be advertising their products and services as organic or environmentally friendly. Unfortunately these terms may be used indiscriminately. Despite their use of synthetic chemical fertilizers and pesticides, many 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. There are many to choose from.

Do you have a pesticide-free lawn care program?

This clear question cannot be misinterpreted and needs a clear "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.

A company that posts the familiar warning sign after a visit is using toxic chemicals as part of their program. Pesticide is an umbrella term for all pest control products and includes: herbicides (weed killers), insecticides (kill insects), and fungicides (kill fungi and diseases).

How will your programs contribute to healthy soil?

Chemical lawn care companies focus on the plant not the soil. If the company is serious about organic lawn care, they must learn about your soil and restore its health. Unhealthy lawns are often the result of unhealthy soil. For more information on how to maintain a healthy lawn, visit the Naturally Hamilton website: www.naturallyhamilton.ca

Do you assess a lawn for problems before applying pesticides?

Using a pest control product before determining whether there is a problem does more harm than good. The typical 4-times-a-year spray program is often unnecessary and a waste of your money. Organic lawn care companies focus on working with you to create and maintain a healthy lawn that is naturally pest-resistant.

What types of pesticides do you use?

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.

Organic has two different meanings. Scientifically speaking, organic refers to a compound that contains carbon. Some companies spray pesticides while claiming to be organic simply because the lawn care chemicals they are using do contain carbon. This leads to confusion among consumers.

The second meaning refers to a process of food cultivation and garden cultivation, free 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 and the process you want your lawn care company to practice. Read brochures carefully and ask questions.

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 compost, kelp (seaweed), and rock dust. These natural products provide both macro and micro-nutrients 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 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?

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, watering deeply, no more than once a week and over-seeding with mixture of hardy grass species.

Finally ...

Read the fine 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.

Lawn Care Professionals

Actively Promoting Alternatives to Pesticides for your Lawn and Garden

<p>The Environmental Factor Inc. Mark Ciaglia 17 Pinehurst Drive Hamilton, ON L8T 4J1 905-297-0518</p>	<p>Creative Organics Lawn & Garden Paul Fiorentino/Greg Burghall 3472 Hannibal Rd. Burlington, ON L7M 1Z6 905-319-7664 (Burlington) 905-975-9143 (Hamilton)</p>
<p>Healthy Lawn Care Services Jeffrey Lowartz 992 Garner Road East, R.R. #1 Ancaster, ON L9G 3K9 905-648-8077 1-800-311-1100</p>	<p>In The Garden Gerard Parker 16-11th Concession Road East, R.R. #1 Freelon, ON L0R 1K0 905-659-4342(Burlington) 1-866-233-6433 (Oakville)</p>

More Resources

Sweet Grass Gardens

Ken Parker, 470 Second Line, Six Nations of the Grand River, 519-445-4828 www.sweetgrassgardens.com

William Dam Seeds

Box 8400, Dundas, ON L9H 6M1 905-628-6641 www.damseeds.com

Natural Insect Control (N.I.C) www.naturalinsectcontrol.com

(Adapted from a Toronto Environmental Alliance fact sheet)

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Contact www.naturallyhamilton.ca for more information on natural lawn and garden care.