

Beware of

Home repair scams

Home repair swindles ranked among the top ten scams in Ontario last year and the crooked contractors are likely to resurface during the coming season, experts predict.

"Dozens of people were taken for thousands of dollars by home renovation swindlers in each of the past several years," says Dave Mitchell of the Ontario Ministry of Consumer and Commercial Relations (MCCR). "There's no reason to believe they won't be hanging out their shingles again this year."

In one of the most common renovation scams, unethical contractors inflate prices far above normal market levels. Other traditional rip offs include running off with customers' downpayments or convincing homeowners to have unnecessary repairs done. Some contractors simply disappear without finishing the work required.

Following an investigation by MCCR, four men were fined and ordered to make restitution for their part in a home repair scam last year.

The ministry has had equal success with prosecutions of other renovation swindlers in the past, but Mr. Mitchell says enforcement must be backed up by public awareness of the problem if the scams are to be stopped.

In many instances, if the homeowners had shopped around with a few different companies and done a bit of investigation, they

wouldn't have lost money, says Mr. Mitchell, head of the ministry's Investigation and Enforcement Branch.

"It becomes obvious whether a price is exorbitant or not when you have other quotes to compare it with," he explains. "And if someone's lied to you about the condition of your roof, you'll find out about the deception in a hurry when an honest contractor looks the house over."

Many of the consumers swindled in the past would normally have shopped around for the best deal, but the con artists used high pressure tactics to push them into signing contracts on the spot.

Be wary of contractors canvassing door-to-door offering "today only prices" or claiming they can give you a great deal just because they're "working in the neighborhood," Mr. Mitchell advises.

"And don't fall for the old line, 'We can fix your roof for \$50 today, but if you wait much longer, it'll need \$1,000 worth of repairs,'" he said. "Maybe it's true, but get a second opinion. It's just possible your roof doesn't need repairs at all."

Unfortunately, comparison shopping won't help you avoid all the pitfalls. Some unethical contractors

may quote the best prices on legitimate work. But once they get the job, the swindlers grab the deposit money and are never seen again.

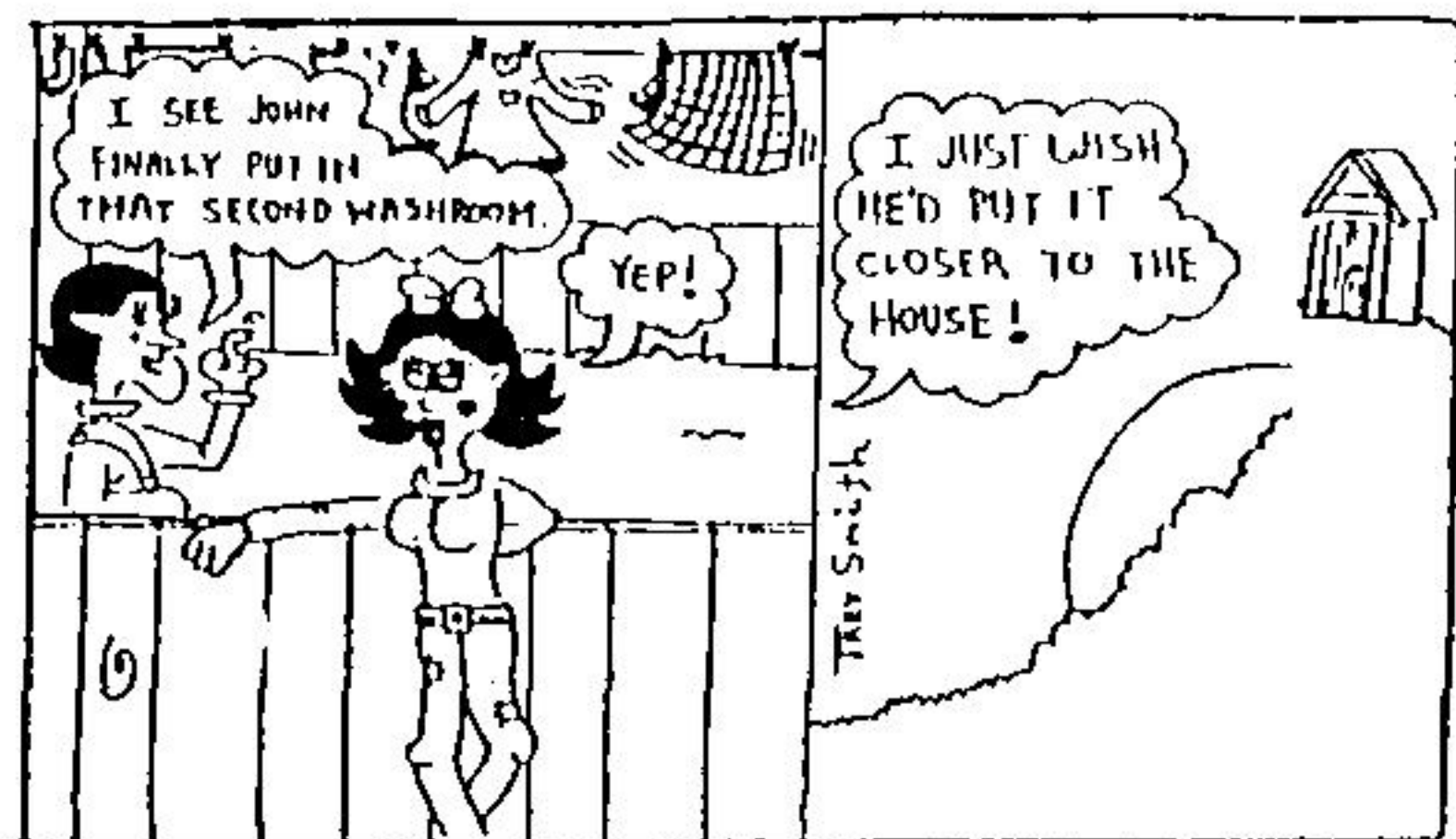
The best way to guard against this and similar rip offs is to get friends or neighbors to recommend a company they've hired in the past.

Consumers should also be sure to confirm that the contractor is registered and bonded under the Consumer Protection Act. Before signing a contract, ask the seller for his registration number and verify it by calling the nearest Consumer Services Bureau of the ministry.

For further security, keep deposits to a maximum of about 10 percent.

Contracts for large jobs may involve progress payments — installments to be made as each stage of work is completed. This provides protection in the event the company goes bankrupt before finishing the job. It also helps ensure a crooked contractor can't run off with full payment for a job that was never even started.

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Don't under nourish plants

By TOM CAVAN
Herald Special

After picking up fresh stock like evergreens, flowering shrubs and trees, you'll notice the fresh, almost edible appearance of your newly purchased nursery stock has in comparison to established older plants in your garden.

Well, if this is the case, your plants are under-nourished. Growers control fertilizer and water to attain that fresh strong appearance. You can pick up the appearance quite easily by feeding your plants.

After you have cultivated and cleaned your plants you can mix in garden fertilizer into the soil or use fertilizer spikes. Incorporating this into the soil at the drip-line of your trees and shrubs will give them food at the crucial time when new branches are being formed.

The drip-line of a plant is the edge of the side branches. Directly below those tips under the soil surface, are the feeder roots.

Where the grass grows to the base of your trees and shrubs, tree spikes and root feeders allow you to send the fertilizer down below the sod so its roots don't rob the tree of its spring breakfast.

No, you don't have to feed them every day, but a season's feeding is similar to one day in our lifestyles. First feeding takes place in spring to encourage larger, healthier branches. A second feeding should (sum-

mer lunch) take place prior to mid-June.

This second feeding will encourage strong flowering and hardening of the branches.

This second feeding should not take place after mid-June because the growth encouraged by this feeding requires time to fully develop itself and will have the ability to harden to overwintering.

Now you're asking yourself — at feeding has to be done before mid-June, what's for dinner?

A third feeding takes place the same time that your fall fertilizer your lawn and for the same reason, for root development only.

This fertilizer must be low in nitrogen so as to not encourage top growth. By root feeding with a high phosphorous fertilizer (high middle number e.g. 10-52-10, 5-10-5, 7-14-7 or just bonemeal) you meet this requirement.

Phosphorous is a key ingredient in root development and nutrient availability.

This fertilizer serves the same purpose as a bulb fertilizer, producing strong roots for next year's growing season.

GARDENING TIP:

Water your fertilizer well so it can be readily available to those hungry plants.

—Courtesy Cavan's Garden Centre

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