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Givin' you the dirt: landscaping

By SEAN JAMES N.P.D. PRESIDENT OF FERN RIDGE LANDSCAPING

Spring is just about here, and many of us want to hire a contractor for an outside project. It really doesn't matter what work you have on your list - gardens, patios, driveways or pools. The guidelines are all the same. You have to choose a contractor who you are comfortable with, and who will produce the type and style of work you desire.

Let's look at three factors: quality, reliability and speed/availability. Speed and availability are connected, just wait and see.

Remember you have to live with the finished product for years. The most common complaint is that the job didn't last. Either the methods were bad or the product was faulty. Find out how the job will be carried out. Ask a lot of questions. Whether the price seems too high or too low, ask for an explanation. A good contractor knows the answers and will take the time to inform you. This also tests his knowledge and how helpful he

will be throughout the process. A project rarely remains the same from beginning to end. It will evolve. It is important that you and the contractor are comfortable communicating. It helps if you share the same aesthetic sense. As mentioned, you'll have to live with it. Make sure you'll like it. It's not like paint that you can just paint over. Once it's done, it's done.

When it comes to judging reliability, the best method is to ask around. Ask people whose opinions you respect: friends, neighbours, co-workers or even someone you trust at a garden centre. They'll know from experience.

Initially speed seems to be something that people are very concerned with. Folks want to know how soon the contractor can start and how soon he'll be finished. Often a good contractor will be booking a month or more in advance. Be patient. Try to get assurances that the crew won't leave the job, barring weather delays, until the job's done. Beyond

that, it takes as long as it takes.

Tip of the Month
If your grass looked dead last October, it probably is - last year was a terrible drought. The best course to re-establish your turf is to overseed and top-dress in mid-April. This involves levelling the soil with new, screened topsoil. Lightly roll the area and then touch up the grading.

Next, overseed with the right grass seed. For sun, use Tall Fescue or Perennial Rye. For shade, use Chewings Fescue. Avoid Kentucky Bluegrass for all its disease and bug problems. (Now may be the time to think about planting groundcovers instead of re-establishing high maintenance turf.)

Finally, cover the seeded area with one-half-inch of compost which is available from the dump or certain garden centres. Peat moss can also be used although it is less environmentally friendly. Grass seed must be covered to properly germinate.



Dr. Bug's Bugbytes

by ROBERT CAMERON



Prevent the bite of West Nile virus

In a talk that I gave on February 26 of this year, I said that it appeared that there were more cases of West Nile virus than we had been led to believe in the fall of 2002. Within a few days of this talk, following the CTV news-magazine W5 program, it became apparent that there were more cases (1000+) and human deaths (12+) than had been previously reported.

What can you do to help protect yourself and your family? The first thing is to make your own mosquito management plan. Start with an assessment of your property. Look for any possible mosquito breeding sites. Make a list of these or, if you have a larger property, mark down sites on a copy of your property survey plan. There are two types of breeding sites to inspect for. The first is water from snowmelt pools in which spring mosquitoes breed. The second is permanent standing water, or water from summer rains, in which summer mosquitoes breed. Currently it is believed that summer mosquitoes, especially *Culex pipiens*, are the main vectors of West Nile virus.

Shallow, stagnant, still water provides an ideal breeding site for mosquitoes. They are not able to

breed in deep water, or in swift moving streams and rivers. Summer mosquitoes use a variety of sites including: shallow ponds, ponds with heavy weed growth around the edges, wheel ruts or depressions, ditches, culverts, drains, septic fields, catch basins, eavestroughs, unused swimming or wading pools, bird baths, rain barrels, plant trays, old tires, cans and buckets, tarps and even toys.

Mosquito control should be aimed at the larval stage. Once you have identified potential breeding sources, try to eliminate as many as possible. Fill in wheel ruts and shallow depressions. Clean ditches so that water will flow through without pooling. Remove vegetation growth from around pond edges, have the edges graded to a steeper angle or have them dug out. Place gravel or sand around pond edges. Add aerators or fountains to ponds to cause water movement. Add mosquito-eating fish to larger ponds.

Chemicals for controlling larvae are called larvicides. These can only be applied to water that does not flow out of your property. Two of these, Vectobac and Aquabac, contain a bacterium, B.t.i., which is specific to mosquitoes and is not

harmful to people, pets, other organisms or the environment.

Adult mosquitoes avoid being out in the direct sun. Cutting long grass, weeds and brush reduces resting sites. Make sure all screens are in good repair and fit tightly. Consider screening in porches or gazebos to create a place where you can sit out in the early morning or at dusk. Use personal protection as your first line of defense: wear light coloured, loose-fitting, long-sleeved shirts, long pants, and a net-type bug hat; avoid activity outside at dawn and dusk during peak biting season; and use a biting insect repellent that contains DEET.

Hand-held sprayers or foggers that contain chemicals such as pyrethrin and malathion can be used for controlling adult mosquitoes, but their results are very temporary and localized.

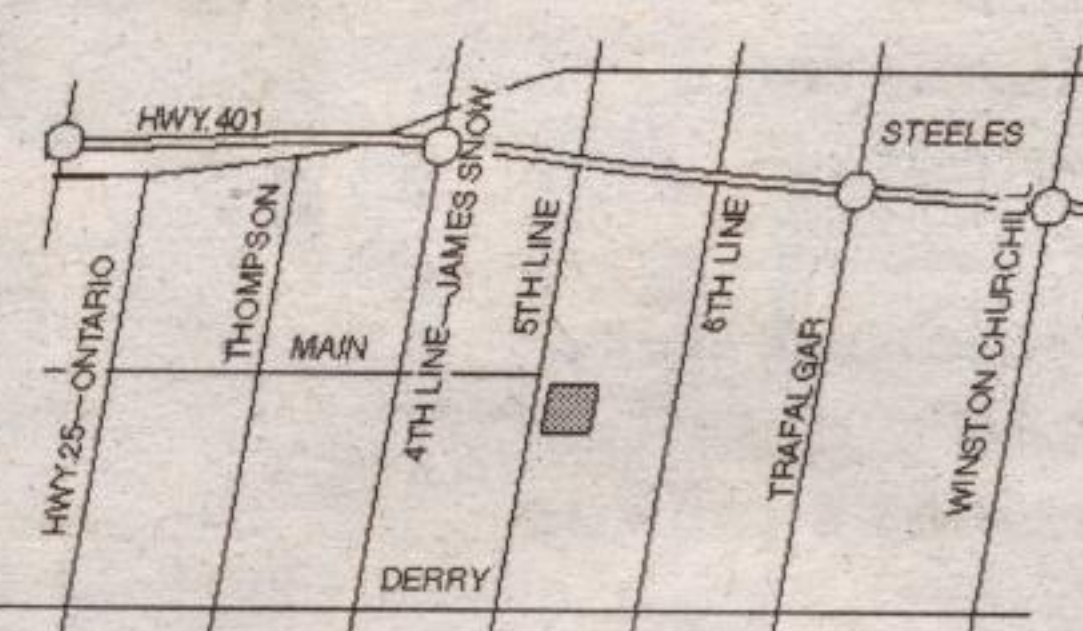
This should provide the basis for your mosquito management plan. You can carry out the survey and treatment program yourself, or hire a qualified pest control company to do it for you. The important thing is to implement a plan early in the season: It is too late in August or September when West Nile virus reaches its peak.

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