

**Tips for Hiring a Contractor**

Whether you're restoring an old house, adding a room or two for a growing family or simply getting new storm windows, hiring a competent contractor is crucial for making your home-improvement venture a success. But before you hire one, it's a good idea to do your homework. That way, you can avoid the pitfalls - work left undone, bad communication, overpaying, and poor or incomplete work - that could arise if you're not cautious when you hire a contractor.

**What a Contractor Does.** A general contractor manages and oversees all aspects of the project. He or she orders supplies and pays suppliers, gets building permits and schedules permit inspections and, depending on the size of the job, hires and supervises subcontractors such as plumbers or electricians. Sometimes the contractor provides architecture and design assistance as well.

**Questions to ask a prospective contractor**

1. How long have you been in business? A well-established company usually has been in business for at least 5 years.

2. Are you licensed? Check with the Town and Region for the contractor's licensing requirements and make sure the prospective contractor is qualified.

3. Do you have insurance? All contractors must have insurance in order to get permits. (Permits are necessary for even the most simple jobs, like decks.) If the contractor asks you to get the permits, it's possible that he or she is uninsured. Hiring an uninsured contractor spells disaster. There's a huge risk that the work won't pass building inspections, and you could be held liable if someone gets hurt on the job or if your property is damaged.

4. Will subcontractors be used? If subcontractors will be used on your project, ask to meet them. Make sure they're licensed and insured.

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*Giving You the Dirt* BY SEAN JAMES, N.P.D., PRESIDENT OF FERN RIDGE LANDSCAPING  
**Mowing Heights - Why's and Wherefore's**

Now granted, June and July were extreme BUT the lessons should be the same. How we cut grass determines not only how well the turf looks but how well it will survive stressful conditions and compete with weeds and insects.

In general, Halton is lucky in that we have several knowledgeable, conscientious lawn mowing companies but don't assume that just because someone is a professional, they know what they are doing. Watch out for companies which reduce the mowing frequency. Alex Down of A.R. Down Landscaping says "Beware of Joe Blow who only cuts every three weeks just to save money." This will harm grass by allowing tall weeds, (and taller weed grasses such as Couch Grass & Barnyard Grass) to establish. Also, mowing infrequently will cause the shoot density, which means the number of grass plants per foot, to be lower. This promotes weeds since thinner turf allows weed seeds to germinate.

Mr. Down adds that often, "These guys are cutting at two inches which looks horrible in the long run. The customer doesn't realize how much damage is being done and then complains that there are too many weeds and the turf looks brown and is burning off so quickly." (In fairness, cutting too short is often done at the customer's request.) Even a mild drought will cause turf mowed too short to show stress.

It's important to realize the relationship between mowing height and root depth. The higher you mow the deeper roots grow. The deeper the roots, the more drought resistant the turf will be since it can reach deeper water. Mowing in the spring at 2-1/2" and in the summer at 3" is good for the turf.

Sharp mower blades will help as well. Not only will the grass blade be able to heal faster and fight fungal infection but it won't look brown and shredded either. Grass varieties such as Perennial Rye have very strong leaf blades which tend to resist mowing unless the blades are sharp. This

gives the lawn a gray-brown hazy look. Perennial Rye is an excellent grass because it resists drought well and remains green throughout the summer. It also has a fungus living inside which helps it actually repel Chinchbugs. The other excellent drought-tolerant grass is Tall Fescue which has an incredibly deep root system. Both of these are sun grasses. For shade use Chewings Fescue.

Try to avoid bagging the grass. Yes, it does look better right away but if you're mowing often enough, the extra cuttings won't be a problem. If you're not over-fertilizing and over-watering, you won't have problems with thatch or excessive clippings. (Another symptom of over-watering is the growth of Bent Grass in the lawn. Bent is a very fine grass which stays brown until late in the spring and smothers itself under regular mowing conditions.)

Mow in different patterns each time. If, every time, you follow the same pattern of mowing - say, perpendicular to the street - the grass will develop a grain, laying down in one direction and will eventually get ruts where the wheels regularly run. Developing a grain stops water from drying off the grass quickly leaving it open to fungal infection. Instead cut the grass parallel to the street one week, perpendicular the next, at a 45 degree angle the next time and 90 degrees to that the next time.

This may all seem like excessive detail but proper mowing techniques will combine to reduce long-term chemical use, (such as weed spray and fungicide). Watering will not be as necessary. The turf will be more resistant to insects since it will be healthier and more able to absorb a certain level of damage and infestation. Most importantly, it will just look better. Keep in mind, if you're changing from your old, evil ways, it make take some time for the turf to adjust and start to look its best. Consider over-seeding with good grass varieties and topdressing with screened compost to speed up the recovery process.

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