

Pros handling weed battle

Many Ontario residents who dislike spending the summer duelling with dandelions are turning their annual lawn battles over to professionals.

Whether they are simply tired of fiddling with fertilizers, want better quality grass in their yards or are concerned about handling garden chemicals, increasing numbers of people are hiring lawn care experts, the industry reports.

As lawn care services are new to many buyers, consumer experts are advising people to use caution before signing up for the season.

Even consumers who have past experience with these services might benefit from a bit of comparison shopping this spring, says Roberta Allan of the Ontario Ministry of Consumer and Commercial Relations (MCCR).

"Pick a few companies and get lists of all the services they provide and costs involved," says Allan. "Try to choose from companies that have been recommended by friends or past customers."

The Consumer Protection Act requires that all lawn care firms operating in Ontario be registered with the ministry. Before signing a contract, ask for the company's registration number and verify it by calling the nearest Consumer Advisory Bureau of MCCR.

Most lawn care companies do everything but cut and water the grass. They analyse customers' problems and develop individual programs for rejuvenating run-down lawns.

Typically, a maintenance plan for a healthy lawn would include fertilizer, fungicide, pesticide and herbicide applications, along with soil aeration when necessary.

Properly-trained staff should also be able to spot and deal with any unusual pest infestations or other lawn afflictions.

The Consumer Protection Act requires that a written contract be set up, listing the name and address of the buyer and seller. It must include a detailed description of the services to be provided, the costs, method of payment and warranty information. If no warranties are offered, the contract should make this clear.

Some lawn care companies use a sales technique called a "negative option." At the start of each season, these firms send out letters to past customers advising them that their lawn care programs will begin automatically unless the company is informed the service is no longer wanted.

According to Allan, this system is acceptable to some consumers, but disliked by those who would prefer to request renewal of services themselves.

"So make sure you find out how the company does business before signing up," she advises.

In addition to knowing what to expect from the company, consumers who want to get the most from a lawn service contract should be sure they understand their own responsibilities.

Good companies will provide customers with suggested cutting and watering schedules to complement the chemical treatments carried out, says Fred Dixon of Landscape Ontario.

Bob Cheesman, Executive Director of Landscape Ontario, also warns consumers to be wary of companies selling one-time only lawn treatments.

"The trend in the industry is to offer a program of lawn care that will last the season," he explains.

Consumers should be aware that they have the right to cancel most lawn care contracts for more than \$50 that are signed in their homes. Just send a registered letter to the company within two working days of the date the contract was signed.

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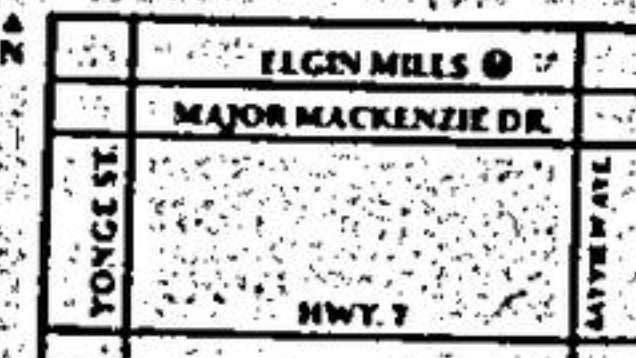
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