

Green Your Yard-- Questions to ask when looking for a “Green” Landscaper

Spring is here, which means it’s time to start planning your yard care. The Town of Andover would like to remind you that you can have a beautiful and healthy eco-friendly yard. Here are some tips to help you choose the right professional if you will be hiring a landscaper or a lawn care contractor. If you take care of your yard yourself, you can apply these practices too.

Why is it important to be eco-friendly? To protect our waters. Water is one of our most precious natural resources. Rivers, streams, lakes and wetlands provide clean drinking water, support a rich diversity of animal and plant communities, and offer countless opportunities for recreation. But in the summer these waters can be severely threatened by too much water being used to irrigate lawns and gardens and by chemical runoff from pesticides and fertilizers that have been applied to lawns and gardens.

Environmentally-friendly landscaping and gardening practices can create “Greenscapes” that conserve water and minimize or avoid using pesticides, herbicides and synthetic fertilizers while producing healthy lawns and plants with deep root systems.

When choosing a landscape or lawn care provider, consider these questions to help you find the right professional for you. (A good place to start is the Northeast Organic Farming Association, which certifies organic lawn care professionals. Visit www.organiclandcare.net/professionals.php)

- 1. What products do they use?** Is most of their business chemically-based? Ask about what type of products they generally prefer to use, and then decide whether you want these products in your yard. Providers are required by law to provide Material Safety Data Sheets when requested, or you can find information about these chemicals by searching the U.S. Center for Disease Control database. Make sure the contract you sign specifies that they will only use agreed upon products.
- 2. Do they do a soil test and site inventory?** Analyzing and observing existing conditions is very important before any recommendations for amendments are made. This involves taking soil tests, paying attention to light and shade conditions (microclimates), taking an inventory of existing plants, assessing their health and noting any other important site considerations. Soil tests are inexpensive and could save you a considerable amount of money in the long run.
- 3. Do they apply fertilizer without checking soil needs?** Fertilizers and limestone are tools applied for specific jobs. Their use should be adjusted according to the results of the soil test. Make sure your contract includes yearly soil tests and records of the monitoring results.
- 4. For Lawn Care Services:**
 - **How high do they set the mower blade?** Cut grasses should be at least 3 inches tall to encourage growth of a healthy root system.
 - **How often do they sharpen the mower blades?** Dull blades can shred the grass leaving it susceptible to disease and fungus. Mower blades should be sharpened after every 10 hours of mowing, at a minimum.
 - **Do they clean the equipment between lawns?** Mowers and other equipment can spread weed seeds and disease organisms if not cleaned properly.
 - **What do they do with grass clippings?** Grass clippings should be left on the lawn where they add nitrogen to the soil as they decompose.
 - **Do they aerate and overseed the lawn in the fall to help maintain a healthy lawn?** Mid-August to mid-September is the best time to renew the lawn.

5. **Do they apply weed controls only when needed?** The best eco-friendly companies will only treat weeds and bugs on an as-needed basis, rather than applying broad range weed killers, fertilizers or pesticides on a fixed schedule. If pesticides or weed killers are going to be used on your lawn, find out what specific problems are being addressed and what products will be used.
6. **What is their pest management philosophy?** Can they tell you the acceptable thresholds for pests, and will they use non-chemical pest controls and/or spot treatments instead of broadcast applications? Make sure that they will find the cause of a pest problem and fix it, not just treat the symptoms.
7. **Do they compost yard wastes?** Request that your yard waste be composted. (With lawns, leave the clippings in the lawn.) If you don't have space on site, select a company that will remove and compost your yard waste.
8. **Do they use native plants and seed?** Native plants have evolved over thousands of years in a particular region and are adapted to the soil and climate conditions. They are very hardy and tolerate heat and drought well. Once established, native plants do not need fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides. They also provide shelter and food for butterflies, dragonflies, and birds such as hummingbirds and swallows.

The Town of Andover is pleased to be participating in the Greenscapes North Shore program. For brochures and educational materials about Greenscaping practices, contact Karen Martin at (978) 623-8350 x 523. Sign up for the free Greenscapes email newsletter at www.Greencscapes.org.

The Greenscapes North Shore program is coordinated by the following non-profit organizations: Salem Sound Coastwatch, Ipswich River Watershed Association, and Eight Towns and the Bay Committee.