

## 8. Let's begin!

The following section provides some tools to get you off to the right start...

### 8.1 What to ask a service provider

Homeowners may hire for regular maintenance programs or for special projects a professional lawn and garden care service provider. How the service provider answers the following questions will help you test the professional's commitment and ability to provide natural lawn and garden services.

Ask your Designer:

- How will you prepare the garden beds for planting?
- Will the plant material include native species or ornamentals?
- Where will you purchase the native plants?
- Will mulching be included in the design?

Ask your Gardener:

- Will you adjust the cutting schedule to the growth rates of the lawn as it changes over the season – for example, cut less in the summer when growth slows?
- Do you have a mulching mower and will you leave the grass clippings on the lawn?
- Will you avoid tilling the garden beds?

Ask your Lawn care company:

- Will your program include overseeding and aeration?
- What kind of seed blend do you use?
- Will you provide the name of the fertilizer used?
- What methods will you use to manage weed growth?

### 8.2 Frequently Asked Questions

#### 1. *I think I have grubs – what should I do now?*

There's a good chance that you're asking the question because you've seen brown patches of dead-looking grass on your lawn, or animals have been digging up chunks of your grass for a nighttime meal. First, determine if grubs are the cause. Grass damaged by root feeding insects will pull back easily. To check for grubs, cut three sides of a square of grass roughly 0.3 metres (12 inches) with a sharp knife and pull the grass back.

It is possible to inspect for grubs before you see damage. You can check your lawn for the presence of grubs in the early part of August. The grubs, if you have them, will be big enough to see, but too small to have done any damage. Cultural practices alone are often sufficient to handle grub problems. However, if grub damage persists, nematodes can be applied (according to directions), followed by topdressing and reseeding.

Secondary damage caused by animals digging in the lawn can be repaired by raking away any dead material, tamping down the grass, topdressing and reseeding.

#### 2. *What kind of grass should I use?*

A high quality blend of grass species is always recommended – usually a combination of fine fescues, perennial ryegrass and Kentucky bluegrass. Look for blends with no less than three, and perhaps as many as five different grass species, including species with natural resistance to insects and drought. Check the package information to ensure you are purchasing the right mix of grass types.

#### 3. *Which is better for renovating a new section of lawn – seed or sod?*

Re-sodding is a good choice if you need thick green coverage fast. But, sod raises at least two issues for the natural lawn. The first is that most sod is 100% Kentucky bluegrass. This means it is not suitable for areas receiving less than four hours of sunlight every day. If you do place sod in shade, make sure it is adequately fertilized and watered and overseed the area every fall. Second, just about any sod you purchase will have been treated with herbicides. Watch it carefully for weed infiltration and other signs of poor soil.

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#### **4. *I have lots of weeds, what should I do?***

Weeds that have been established in a lawn for a long time will be slowly crowded out with hand weeding, overseeding, aerating and topdressing. Typically lawns that have been neglected respond well to a good horticultural program. Proper cutting, watering and fertilizing are the best weed control approaches. If weeds appear in the second or third year of a natural program, extra steps may be required. Focus on the weeds that strongly disrupt the look of the lawn such as dandelions, plantain and black medic. Hand weeding and preventing the weeds from going to seed can help limit them while horticultural practices will rejuvenate the soil. If weeds are spreading from your garden bed onto your lawn, spread mulch under the garden plants to suppress weed seed germination.

#### **5. *When is the best time to fertilize?***

In most Canadian cities the best time to fertilize is fall, from late September to mid November. If a spring feeding is desired this should be after the natural growth of the lawn slows, usually during the month of May. Mulched grass clippings add about 30% of nitrogen requirements and therefore can reduce fertilizing needs.

#### **6. *What do I do with dying patches of grass?***

Patches of dying grass can arise from problems for the whole lawn (such as grubs or disease) or from a more isolated problem (such as dog urine or salt damage). The solution for most of the isolated problems is to rake up the damaged grass, topdress and re-seed the area. Most lawn disease (fungus) problems are caused by and will be resolved with changes in the weather. The treatment for lawn grubs is described above. If the problem does not respond to horticultural practices, consult a professional for a diagnosis.

#### **7. *If the lawn is seriously infested, wouldn't it be easier to just spray a pesticide?***

This is only a short-term solution and seriously undermines your natural program. While this may appear to be an appealing solution for a very weedy or insect infected lawn or garden, it does not address the conditions in your lawn or garden that attracted pests in the first place. If you are committed to a natural lawn care program, it is much better to deal with any challenges following the recommended cultural practices. If grubs have destroyed a lawn, then it is a perfect time to add soil and reseed with a good blend – including insect-resistant species of grass. If the weeds have taken over, the worst areas under a thick layer of mulch for the summer and reseed in the fall. In cases where the lawn is more than 40% weeds, cultural practices may take too long to bring weed populations to a more acceptable level. In these cases it may better to completely rejuvenate the lawn by removing the top layers of soil and plant material and replace with healthy, new topsoil and seed.

#### **8. *What do I do about mushrooms?***

Mushrooms are the reproductive (fruiting) structures of some kinds of fungi. Most fungi in lawns are beneficial because they decompose organic matter, releasing nutrients for plant growth. Mushroom-producing fungi are not necessarily disease producing and are more of a lawn nuisance. Removing them will limit the spread of spores. Mushrooms can be associated with fairy ring and buried organic material as well as with poor drainage or overwatering. Thatch removal and aeration may reduce this kind of fungal growth in a lawn.

#### **9. *How can I take care of my roses?***

When planting roses, select resistant varieties, leave lots of space between plants and give them plenty of compost. Roses need to be pruned back in the spring. If black spot appears, remove any infected leaves. If necessary, you may treat your roses with products containing sulphur. If aphids are the problem and they persist after they have been blasted with water from the garden hose, you may want to try a lower risk pest control product containing an insecticidal soap, or diatomaceous earth. Always follow label instructions.

#### **10. *How can I keep my annuals looking good without a dose of 20-20-20 synthetic fertilizer?***

Try one of several available types of fish emulsion fertilizers and start the annuals out each year in a bed of fresh compost. You can diversify your annual garden by including colourful perennials. This will contribute to soil health as well.

### 11. How can I prevent my Magnolia and euonymus from becoming infested with scale?

Apply a dormant oil spray in the early spring. Add lots of compost to the soil around these plants. Monitor the plants for signs of scale and hand pick or scrape scale off the magnolia and use a tooth brush on the euonymus scale.

### 12. The large trees on the property don't look healthy. What should I do?

It is first worthwhile to determine if the problem is a serious threat to the tree or mostly a cosmetic problem. If you are concerned about the health of a tree, call in a certified arborist for an exact diagnosis.

**The Asian Long-horn Beetle is a new tree and forest pest found in September 2003 in northwest Toronto and Vaughan. This species, accidentally introduced to southern Ontario where it has no natural predators, poses a serious threat to Toronto's urban forest. It is very important that this insect be controlled and eradicated. Visit [www.toronto.ca/trees](http://www.toronto.ca/trees) for photos to assist in the recognition of this tree killing insect and for important information about what to do if you see one.**

Two common diseases of urban trees do not require any treatment. Anthracnose is one of these. It affects a wide variety of trees including maple, oak and ash. It is a common disease caused by a fungus that overwinters in infected twigs and fallen leaves. Infection on newly emerged leaves and shoots begins in early spring during cool and wet weather. Although it can cause complete leaf loss in the spring, trees usually recover by producing new leaves. The disease does not cause permanent damage to the tree. However repeated leaf loss year after year can weaken trees and predispose them to other pest problems.

Also characteristic in the City is tar spot on maples, a black spot that can cover the leaves. The spot is caused by a fungus that rarely causes any serious damage to the tree but can cause the tree to lose its leaves earlier than would be normal. The fungus can overwinter on the fallen leaves. Fallen leaves with anthracnose and tar spot are suitable for composting in your backyard or through the City of Toronto leaf composting program.

## 8.3 Checklist

The following checklist reviews step-by-step the horticultural practices that will create a healthy natural lawn and garden. Give yourself one point for each Yes ("Y"). Record your score and see the comments at the end of the checklist.

### 1. Know your property

I know the property's shade, water and use characteristics.	Y	N
I know about the plants on the property.	Y	N
I know which plants are thriving in the garden.	Y	N
I record what I know about the property in a garden journal that includes a map of my garden plants and the trees on the property.	Y	N

**SCORE:**

### 2. Design plans

I consider who uses the property and how before designing my garden (see above).	Y	N
I consider the best location to plant grass to avoid areas where grass would naturally have difficulty growing.	Y	N
I have researched plants to select the ones that will do best in my garden.	Y	N
I have picked plant and tree species that are most naturally resistant to disease and insects.	Y	N
I avoid design situations that encourage weed growth (such as leaving bare earth under a deck without a weed suppressing mulch).	Y	N

**SCORE:**

### 3. Soil management

I regularly add compost as a topdressing to the lawn and to garden beds.	Y	N
I mulch bare garden earth to prevent soil erosion and weeds from moving in.	Y	N
I replenish the mulch every fall.	Y	N
I avoid excessive tilling in garden beds.	Y	N
I include a lot of different plants to encourage diversity in soil micro-organisms.	Y	N

**SCORE:**

### 4. Lawn overseeding

In the spring I check for dying grass and repair it with overseeding and topdressing.	Y	N
I use a blend of seed types (fine fescues, perennial ryegrass and Kentucky bluegrass).	Y	N
I include endophyte-enhanced seed in the seed blend.	Y	N
I use an alternative to grass (ground covering or mulch) in areas where grass does not grow well.	Y	N
I overseed the entire lawn in the fall.	Y	N

**SCORE:**

## 5. Grass cutting

- I cut the grass according to its growth habit and no more than 1/3 of its height at any time. Y N
- I set the mowing height for grass at 7.5 cm (3 inches). Y N
- I use a mulching mower and leave clippings on the lawn. Y N
- I keep the mower blade sharp to ensure a clean cut. Y N

**SCORE:**

## 6. Watering

- I select grass, plants and trees in consideration of low watering requirements. Y N
- I water based on need and not on a fixed schedule. Y N
- When I do water the lawn, I water for at least 1 hour to encourage deep roots and I use a water gauge to ensure that 2.5 cm (1 inch) has been applied. Y N
- When I water plants and trees I soak the soil and not the leaves. Y N
- I water newly planted plants and trees more frequently, especially during drought. Y N

**SCORE:**

## 7. Fertilizing

- I apply natural fertilizers. Y N
- When I fertilize in the spring, it is after the lawn naturally greens up. Y N
- I apply a fall fertilizer to encourage the storage of nutrients over the winter. Y N

**SCORE:**

## 8. Compaction and Thatch Management

- I aerate clay-based soil yearly or at least once every three years. Y N
- I aerate in spring or fall to avoid damaging the grass during the hot summer months. Y N
- If my property is weedy, I aerate in the fall to discourage weeds from germinating. Y N
- I monitor the lawn for thatch. Y N
- If there is more than 1.5 cm (1/2 inch) of thatch, I dethatch in the fall. Y N

**SCORE:**

## 9. Weed Management

- I accept some non-grass species as part of a healthy, diverse landscape. Y N
- I hand weed as necessary. Y N
- In my garden beds, I do not till the earth so new weed seeds are not brought to the surface. Y N
- I place mulch in the garden beds to suppress weed growth. Y N
- I double check that the lawn is being properly watered, cut and fertilized to ensure a healthy and naturally weed resistant lawn. Y N

**SCORE:**

**TOTAL SCORE:** \_\_\_\_\_

If your total score is 20 or less (50%), you should review the guide and add some steps that are missing. Look to the sections of the checklist with lowest scores as the place to begin. If your score is 20-30 then your natural lawn and garden program is on the right track. If you scored higher than 30 (75% or more) then you should be enjoying your natural lawn and garden and sharing your know-how with neighbours, friends and family!

Even a high score, however, does not replace the time it takes to change over to a natural approach. For properties new to a natural approach, maintaining a high score for at least 3 years may be necessary. The best way to achieve and maintain a healthy lawn and garden is to follow the recommended horticultural cultural practices year after year.

This guide is one of many City of Toronto resources that can help you go pesticide-free. Need more information?

Toronto Health Connection

**416-338-7600**

Lawn Improvement Helpline (tips on lawn care, composting, etc)

**416-397-LAWN (5296)**

**[www.toronto.ca/pesticides](http://www.toronto.ca/pesticides)**

