



Talking to Your Lawn and Garden Care Provider

THIS HANDY LIST OF DISCUSSION POINTS AND QUESTIONS will help you to ensure that your lawn and garden care provider is employing practices that are safe for your family.

Chemical Pesticide Controls

A “pesticide” is a product that kills weeds, insects or other pests. Chemical pesticide exposure can negatively impact human health, especially children, even at low levels.

○ **ASK: Do you use chemical pesticides?**

Many lawn care companies run a pre-determined schedule of pesticide and fertilizer applications each year – often called “Weed and Feed.” These are marketed as “necessary controls” to keep weeds and pests from ruining your lawn. They often aren’t necessary, and they expose you and your family (and the local wildlife and waterways) to harmful synthetic chemicals.

Good Cultural Practices to Prevent Weeds, Insects and Disease

Following good cultural practices is the primary method for preventing unwanted weeds and managing insect and disease damage to lawns. Most home lawns in Pennsylvania do not need to be treated with pesticides if proper cultural practices are followed.

○ **ASK: What species of grass are you planting?**

Growing appropriate species for a your region and providing lawns with proper care are especially important.

○ **ASK: What are your mowing practices?**

Mowing with a dull blade makes the turf susceptible to disease, so keep mowing blades sharp. Mowing too close invites sunlight in for weeds to take hold. For the last and first mowing, mow down to 2 inches to prevent fungal problems. For the rest of the year, keep it at 3 – 3.5 inches to shade out weeds and foster deep, drought-resistant roots. Remove no more than $\frac{1}{3}$ of the grass height at one time.

○ **ASK: How do you deal with thatch?**

Thatch favors fungal growth and can harbor insect pests. Thatch that is greater than $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch thick encourages caterpillar and chinch bug populations. Prevent thatch by avoiding excess nitrogen application, irrigating deeply and infrequently, and minimizing the use of broad-spectrum lawn pesticides that can reduce populations of microorganisms responsible for decomposing the thatch.

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- **ASK: Do you aerate the soil?**
Compaction is an invitation for weeds. Aeration will reduce soil compaction and increase water penetration.
- **ASK: What measures do you take to promote beneficial insects?**
Naturally occurring biological control agents, such as predators and parasites, may limit some insect pests. To protect beneficial insects, avoid using broad-spectrum pesticides (such as carbaryl*, neonicotinoids, and pyrethroids) that will kill them along with the pests.

Good Cultural Practices for Soil Fertility

Fertilizing has a major impact on lawn health. Appropriate fertilization encourages a dense, thick lawn that allows grass to tolerate some insect feeding.

- **ASK: Do you test the soil?**
Too much nitrogen can weaken the grass, alter the pH, and promote disease, insect, and thatch build-up. Soil test results will ensure that you apply only what you need. Ideal pH should be between 6.5 – 7, and organic content should be 5% or higher.
- **ASK: Will you leave the grass clippings?**
Grass clippings contain 58% of the nitrogen added from fertilizers, improve soil conditions, suppress disease, and reduce thatch and crabgrass. Leave the clippings on your lawn!
- **ASK: Can you leave the leaves?**
Using a mulching mower and leaving the leaves on the lawn will also supply needed nitrogen.
- **ASK: Do you use compost?**
Compost is an ideal soil amendment, adding the much-needed organic content to your soil and suppressing many turf pathogens. In the fall and spring, preferably after aerating, spread a ¼-inch layer of organic or naturally-based compost over your lawn.

Sources

Beyond Pesticides: Organic Lawn Care 101
<https://www.beyondpesticides.org/assets/media/documents/lawn/documents/OrganicFallLawn101.pdf>

University of California Integrated Pest Management
<https://ipm.ucanr.edu/PMG/PESTNOTES/pn7476.html>