

Selecting a Professional Pest Control Service¹

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This guide provides information on how to make an informed decision when choosing a professional pest control service.

Household pests, such as termites, cockroaches, fleas, ants, wood-destroying beetles and stored-product pests are some of the common insect pests we encounter in our living spaces. Although most are considered to be merely a nuisance, some can cause serious damage to property. Others may bite, sting and even transmit disease-causing agents. Some household pests are seasonal and can be handled with over-the-counter pesticides, while others take no time off and require a year-round pest management program. Moreover, there are some pests, such as termites, that homeowners should not attempt to treat for themselves. The best choice in such cases would be to hire a professional who is trained, certified and licensed and possesses the necessary skills, equipment and proper pesticides.

Lawns add aesthetic quality to homes and increase home property values. Professional lawn care services are popular in urban areas as many homeowners wish to pursue activities other than lawn maintenance. Many professional lawn care services offer year-round comprehensive pest control

packages to control weeds, insects, plant diseases and vertebrate pests.

Many people contract the services of a pest control company to take care of their pest problems. However, when searching through the yellow pages of a telephone directory, you may encounter numerous companies listed under “pest control services” or “lawn maintenance.” Homeowners who choose professional pest control services need to be able to make informed decisions about who to contract for treatment of their property. Choosing a pest control service is generally based upon two major factors; 1) the effectiveness of the company's pest management programs, and 2) the company's customer service.

Evaluating effectiveness and customer service

A referral from a neighbor or relative is often better than any sales pitch that a company salesperson will provide. Ask why a neighbor or friend selected a certain company and if they have had negative experiences with other companies. Call the Better Business Bureau to see if there are any outstanding claims against the company. In most cases, you will

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Use pesticides safely. Read and follow directions on the manufacturer's label.

have a choice of companies and customer satisfaction is a matter of personal preference. A homeowner also should take the following considerations into account:

- Will chemical sensitivity be an issue for any of the family members? If so, there may be alternatives, such as organic products, but be realistic about your expectations because organic products have limitations in the pest control industry. Be wary of exaggerated claims about products. Remember, if it sounds too good to be true, then it probably is.
- For optimal control effectiveness, you may be asked to implement some techniques such as Integrated Pest Management (See EDIS publication PI-39 *Enhancing the Effectiveness of a Company's Pest Control Program*). Is that manageable?
- Some pest control companies have several types of contracts. Some contracts provide year-round, regular visits; others may require you to contact the company when a pest outbreak occurs. You must decide which is most appropriate for your particular situation.

Here are some more tips:

- **Get several bids.** Remember to get several bids to compare prices, services offered and terms of the contract. The lowest price is not necessarily the very best deal; you want to pay for quality service that is effective. Any pest control service should provide a detailed inspection of your property. Lawn care services often structure their prices on the size of the area to be treated. Does the lawn care company's measured area accurately reflect the true area? Some companies will purposefully underestimate the area in an attempt to undercut a competitor. Such practices usually lead to application of inadequate materials and sloppy service.
- **Check references.** Any reputable professional pest control service will have references available for your inspection. Don't assume that they do--ask them.

- **Ask if they carry a certificate of insurance.** In Florida, state law requires commercial pesticide applicators to carry either insurance or a surety bond.

- **Make sure that the business is licensed.** Florida law requires pesticide applicators to be certified and licensed. Request the license number of the business or person you are dealing with to be sure they are a legal applicator. You can check with the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS) for these records. FDACS can be reached during normal business hours at (850) 921-4177. You can also do an online search for licensed pest control companies in Florida at <http://www.app1.flaes.org/ceu/PersonSearch.asp>

- **Ask if the company belongs to any professional association.** Associations such as the Florida Turfgrass Association, the Certified Pest Control Operators Association and the Florida Pest Management Association offer their members educational opportunities to keep them abreast of new technology and other developments in the field. Such organizations also have codes of ethics for their members.

You should also consider the following factors when choosing a professional pest control operator:

- Do they appear neat and act in a professional manner?
- When you made the appointment for an initial consultation, were they on time?
- Are they able to answer your questions in a satisfactory manner?
 - Are their vehicles and equipment clean, neat and appear to be in good working order?

Terms of contract

Make sure that you have a contract before any work is done. Contract wording varies from company to company, and there are different contracts for different applications. Before signing a contract for the purposes of pest control, read carefully through

the entire contract and consider the following issues:

- Make sure the name and address of the pest control company is on the contract.
- Read and understand the service agreement terms. When you start a service, you may be authorizing the service to run continuously until you notify them to discontinue. Other contracts may be for a certain duration, such as one year or any other specified length of time. With lawn care companies, ask if they will retreat your lawn before your next regularly scheduled treatment if you feel adequate control of a pest was not achieved.
- Are there exclusion clauses in the contract? Such clauses specify why a contract can be cancelled. There may be any number of such clauses; be aware of these. If you wish to cancel a contract, will there be penalties assessed?
- Are there “arbitration” clauses? These will describe methods that may be undertaken should a dispute arise.
- With termite contracts, there may be a “retreatment only” clause. Generally, this means that the company will come out and retreat your house if termites infest the structure after they have previously treated it. If so, the company will not assume liability for damage caused by the reinfestation of termites. Other termite contracts may have a “damage replacement” clause. If this is the case, it usually means that the company will pay for any damage incurred by the termites while you have been under that contract. Some companies may not offer you contracts with either of these clauses if they deem the construction, such as wood-to-ground contact or leaky roofs, or other factors, such as landscaping too close to the structure, is conducive to termite infestation. There may be any number of such reasons why a company will not make such offers.
- Read the small print. Look carefully for any disclaimers and ask about all you don't understand.

Be wary of...

- Sales pitches that promote “special prices” if you act now or if you purchase a package deal. If you purchase a package deal, you may receive pest control applications for pests that are not even present. Another such pitch may be that they have material from a previous job and will offer a special deal.
- Companies that don't provide you with a telephone number and business address.
- Sales pitches that claim a certain pest is a neighborhood problem and that your property should be treated for protection. Just because a neighbor has a certain pest problem is certainly no guarantee that you or any other neighbors share the same problem.
- A company that has a pricing structure based on “gallons of material” used to treat the job. Termite jobs can require hundreds of gallons of diluted termiticides to satisfactorily control a problem. Such a pricing structure may wind up costing exorbitant amounts of money.
- Sales pitches that claim “secret” formulations to treat a pest. There are no “secrets,” as all pesticides used in Florida must be registered with the Environmental Protection Agency and the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. You have every right to ask for a copy of the pesticide label of any product that is applied to your property. Don't accept any “snake oils”.
- Anyone who tells you that your house is structurally unsound and should be treated immediately.

Additional reading

SP-43 The Florida Lawn Handbook, available from the IFAS Extension Bookstore at <http://www.ifasbooks.ufl.edu/merchant2/>; Phone: 1-800-226-1764.

Bulletins and fact sheets pertaining to pests of structural and lawn and ornamental settings may be downloaded from the UF/IFAS Extension's

Electronic Data Information Source at
<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/>.