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Have you thanked Pauline and Abraham yet? You know...the Levitts. Well, if you haven't, you should. They pretty much changed your life. Abe and his boys, William and Alfred, are largely responsible for all the yard work you're about to be doing.

After WWII, there was a huge need for affordable housing with so many GI's returning and starting families. So the Levitts planned and built several communities throughout the American Northeast – most of which were surprisingly named “Levittown”.

One of the defining characteristics of these new utopias was the presence of perfectly trimmed and neatly edged dark green grass in front of every home, which served no purpose other than to look good. Ordinary Americans could now join the ranks of the properly civilized upper classes and say hello to their very own lawn. The idea caught on like kudzu, and here *you* are with the dubious honor of getting to keep all that civility – and America's largest crop – alive and green once again.

Some things are easy (and dare I say *enjoyable*?) to do yourself. It's hard to beat the smell of just-shorn grass, the therapeutic rumble of the lawnmower, and the instant gratification of a good afternoon's work. Step back with dirt under your fingernails to enjoy the color of the flowers you just planted, and (after your lower back stops hurting) you'll stand a little taller knowing that you did it yourself.

But not so fast, Lawn Ranger. There are times you need to call in the pros. So I talked to Dr. Chris Cooper, Shelby County Extension agent and host of WKNO's “The Family Plot” ([www.familyplotgarden.com](http://www.familyplotgarden.com)), and Cullen Beard, professional weed assassin and owner of Personal Lawn Care ([www.personallawncare.com](http://www.personallawncare.com)), to get some tips on when to DIY your lawn, and when it may be best to throw in the trowel.

Dr. Cooper's work centers around helping people care for their own landscapes. He pointed out that we tend to have short memories when it comes to weather. "We forget we've had a brutal winter then we wonder why our plants aren't doing well." March is a good time to begin scouting your property. Look for broken limbs and cracked bark. If a plant doesn't bloom like it should, that's also a sign that it is struggling. Brown leaves that should be green are probably the result of harsh winds draining them of moisture.

Go ahead and plant any perennials you want to add. And now is a good time to move or divide the ones from last year. Get rid of any clearly dead plants so your space will be ready for new ones, and prune anything that isn't healthy. But before you start hacking away, make sure you know how and when to do it properly. It's the #1 mistake he sees homeowners make. For example, wait until *after* flowering plants – like azaleas – bloom. Otherwise, you'll be singing, "where have all the flowers gone?" with Peter, Paul, & Mary next year. A quick YouTube search for "pruning" will get you plenty of examples on how to do it right.

Weed control in your lawn is an area that homeowners should probably hand off to someone else. As the owner of a lawn spray company in West Tennessee, Cullen Beard regularly tackles the kind of issues that lawns present. "Really, anyone can do the work of lawn care," he says, "*if* they know how large the area to be treated is, what the turf type is, what weeds are present, the best timing to treat all the different insects, diseases, and nutrient deficiencies, and don't mind spending the money to get the right equipment and products." He makes it sound so simple, doesn't he?

There are plenty of off-the-shelf products available, but he cautions that they are often poor quality and low concentration. They may not be as effective as a professional-grade treatment and can actually end up being more expensive per square foot. And then there's that pesky need to read and follow the label. Too many people think: "if a little is good then a lot is better." It doesn't work with baking, and it doesn't work with lawn chemicals either.

Both pros emphasized the importance of getting your soil tested regardless of whether you plan to handle things yourself or not.

Testing kits are available through your county extension office or at labs like Waypoint Analytical in Memphis ([www.waypointanalytical.com](http://www.waypointanalytical.com)). A basic test will show you your soil's pH and what nutrients may be needed. Your soil is literally the ground level of everything you'll be doing, so definitely get that done.

Mr. Levitt and his boys went to a lot of trouble to make sure you could too. How much you are willing to take on yourself really comes down to time, knowledge, and money. If you've got plenty of each, then get out there and dig, prune, mow, and mulch your heart out. Where any of the three are in short supply, you'll find plenty of folks who do it for a living and are happy to help.