

## Southern Gentleman



### DIY or Don't You-Dare Lawn Care

By Dave Houpt | Photography courtesy of Chris Cooper and Bogdan Wankowicz

Do-it-yourself lawn care can be enjoyable... but sometimes you need

If you don't wait, you may be singing, "Where have all the flowers gone?" 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

a professional. The secret is to know when to call for help.

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 World War II, there was a huge need for affordable housing. So, the Levitts planned and built several communities throughout the northeast – most of which were 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. 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. There are times you need to call in the pros, according to Dr. Chris Cooper, Shelby County Extension agent and host of WKNO's “The Family Plot.”

Cooper's work centers around helping people care for their own landscapes. He pointed out that homeowners tend to have short memories when it comes to weather.

“We forget we've had a brutal winter and then we wonder why our plants aren't doing well,” Cooper explains. “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.”

Now is the time to plant perennials you want to add or to move or divide the ones from last year. Remove dead plants so the space will be ready for new plants, 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 number one mistake homeowners make,” Cooper adds.

“Wait until after flowering plants – like azaleas – bloom.”

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, and when is the best time to treat all the different insects, diseases, and nutrient deficiencies. And they don't mind spending the money to get the right equipment and products.”

Many off-the-shelf products are available, but Beard 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,” he says.

“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.”

Adding too much 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. A basic test will show the soil's pH and the needed nutrients.

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.

But if you prefer to leave it to the pros, you'll find plenty of lawn care professionals who are happy to help.

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