

My Biggest Pet Peeve

Gardeners. Yes, gardeners are one of my biggest pet peeves. Why pick on gardeners you ask? First, I want to differentiate between people who garden versus individuals who call themselves “gardeners” and provide gardening services, typically monthly maintenance gardeners.

What are the qualifications to become a "gardener" and turn that into a profession?

- A pick up truck.
- A lawn mower.
- A string trimmer.
- A blower.

Advanced Gardener Options to become a Tree Care Professional

- Chainsaw.
- Gas powered shears.

Congratulations, if you own the above equipment, you qualify as a “gardener”! With the addition of a chainsaw, you can even call yourself a tree care professional. Now that you have become a “gardener”, you begin by undercutting licensed, professionals, educated and insured landscape contractors and tree care professionals. Just print up flyers offering incredibly cheap monthly maintenance mow and blow service or “low cost” tree trimming and hauling services and you are now part of the underground gardening industry.

Unlicensed, unregulated, uninsured, uneducated, those are the four words that come to mind when I look at most "gardening" services. They exist because of their one common practice, providing gardening services to homeowners and businesses at sub-standard industry pricing. The mow and blow “gardene” is a cheap solution for clients’ with turf grass who don’t want to mow their lawns.

When a client wants more than just lawn mowing, then problems arise. For clients who care about their trees, shrubs and planter beds, have an automatic irrigation system requiring repair, re-programming or adjustments, want their plants fertilized, integrated pest management, annual color, plant replacement, weeds kept under control, they naturally turn to their "gardener" under the expectation the gardener is knowledgeable about trees, shrubs and plant care. Little do they realize they most likely have as much or more knowledge than the gardener!

Last year, I heard a chainsaw in the front yard. There was the neighbor's "gardener", pruning a heavily fruited Meyer lemon with a chain saw! Once I got his attention, I asked him why he was pruning a fruited tree with a chain saw; his reason was because the tree limbs were growing too tall so they needed to be cut down. In the picture, you can see the middle of the tree crown where he was happily topping large structural limbs of the lemon tree.



Although he told me he knew what he was doing and even though the tree is on the neighbor's property, I told him to stop butchering the tree immediately. I explained I was a certified arborist, horticulturist and landscape contractor, and it was unnecessary to prune the tree with a chainsaw, he could use a hand saw and pruners to remove dead wood, thin and properly reduce the tree, his responded by packing up the chainsaw and leaving. He has not touched the tree since. I don't think the neighbors have yet to notice their poorly shaped lemon tree.

Although gardeners can mow lawns, do they really understand turf care? In three years, my other neighbor has gone through two or three "gardening" services. They have a common Bermuda grass front lawn that is irrigated almost every day. The grass had accumulated so much thatch undergrowth and being on a slope, sprinkler runoff is constant. Does the gardener make any



suggestions such as reduce the wasteful turf irrigation? After all, it is common Bermuda which for a turf grass is quite drought tolerant when established. The neighbor thinks he needs to irrigate every day to keep the turf grass green. Does the gardener advise him that nutrients derived from fertilizer keep plants green, not overwatering? The neighbor is constantly working on adjusting the sprinkler heads that

appear to be frequently damaged by the lawnmower used by the gardener. The picture shows a popup head about three inches above finish grade and parallel with the top of the Bermuda grass lawn. In order to compensate for three inches of accumulated Bermuda thatch, better to raise the popup heads then dethatch turf. Guess the gardener never explained the benefits of de-thatching and aerating turf grass as a solution that would reduce



water runoff, increase irrigation infiltration, increase nutrient uptake and improve the health and beauty of the lawn. Oh, that's right, the gardener never studied or learned about turf grass, soils, irrigation and fertilizer, so how would they know?



Here is something typical for most gardeners, turning trees and shrubs into cute little geometric shapes. Gardeners love to whip out the power shears and trim away, what would they do without hedges? The Shrub on the right of the hedge is actually a Hollywood twisted Juniper although you would never know it from the picture. The constant shearing into a cylindrical shape has ruined the natural form of what

should be a magnificent large growing shrub or even small to medium size tree. However, if the gardener cannot be allowed to use his gas powered shears to turn plants into cubes and boxes, then what is left for him to do?



Indian hawthorn does not grow as a box



The true form of a *Juniperus torulosa*

A friend and neighbor asked me advice on two junipers that had been sheared and hedged into ovals shapes for the past decade. They were loaded with dead interior branches and twigs with only a thin veneer of green leaves remaining. I told him restoration was possible through interior thinning and cleaning to remove crossing branches and dead wood then allowing the shrubs to grow out without any shearing. The process take upwards of two years but the results would be worth it. Unfortunately, he allowed his “gardener” to do the work resulting is this monstrosity.



Bermuda grass allowed infesting ground cover

Another quirk unique to “gardeners” is there aversion to doing any physical labor. Meaning, they are in love with their power equipment, God forbid they should actually bend over to pull weeds, cultivate a bed, or push a broom. If there isn’t a gasoline engine involved in the activity, it generally doesn’t happen. I am constantly amazed by what “gardeners” do and don’t do as part of their services. After all, it is far easier to just use a string trimmer to edge gazania ground cover, knowledge and

thought are required to eradicate Bermuda grass invading the Gazania groundcover.

Do you notice anything wrong in these pictures? The lighting made for difficult



photos, but perhaps you notice a dead Dodonaea (Purple hopseed) in the middle of



the hedge? This is the third hopseed to die from root rot, the shrubs are watered everyday and never pruned. Guess the gardener was too busy blowing the dead leaves to notice the shrub died and has been left in the ground for over a month now, allowing the root rotting pathogen so spread to surrounding trees.

In summary, you get what you pay for. If you want a cheap maintenance service that has no education, knowledge, license or insurance, my guess is you will select a gardening service. For those with more discriminating values, who understand a well tended landscape and properly maintained trees can add up to 10% to the property value of the home, then you should avoid low ball gardeners and chose a licensed landscape contractor maintenance firm and tree care professional company. You might have to try a few companies, but eventually you will be rewarded for your efforts.