

BUSINESS IN THE FRONT

Courtesy of Maxalea



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BY GREG A. LOHR / CONTRIBUTING WRITER

By now in the Baltimore area, snow is (hopefully) a distant memory. Birds are back in town, and they're doing more tweeting than the average teenager. Trees and flowerbeds are full of buds and the occasional bloom. Eager for sun, you're ready to spruce up your front yard before summer's heat arrives. But what should you do?

Take a cue from the pros – February through May is an especially busy time for landscaping companies, as they clean, edge, fertilize and mulch their customers' planting beds. Spring is also ideal for cutting back any ornamental grasses or winter-interest plants that weren't cut back in the fall, says Jim McWilliams, vice president of Baltimore-based Maxalea Landscaping Co., a family-owned business that was founded in 1929.

While many homeowners are comfortable with light-duty yard work, such as weeding, deadheading plants and pruning bushes and small trees, they're often inclined to call a company like Maxalea to handle bigger projects and dangerous tasks. Maxalea trims trees or shrubs less than 20 feet tall, McWilliams says. For taller growth, the company hires a specialist, who either subcontracts under Maxalea or works directly with the client.

Whatever you do, go easy on the mulch. McWilliams frequently sees homeowners and other landscaping professionals applying between three and eight inches – “just crazy amounts of mulch” — in beds and around trees. Anything

beyond two inches, he says, is overkill and isn't healthy for trees. One easy technique: Look for the “root collar,” the point at which a straight tree trunk flares out as it nears the ground, and avoid covering it up with mulch.



Damaged roof shingles that need replacing.

Courtesy Maxalea

Whether you hire a lawn care company or do the dirty work yourself, it's important to pay attention to your home's exterior while you're already outside this spring. The key is to look for any winter damage and spots where your house is vulnerable to water.

“My advice would be turn yourself into a home inspector for a couple hours

and pretend like you're a detective,” says Tom Witt, an actual home inspector who founded Avocet Home Inspections in Baltimore after running a general contracting firm for 22 years.

Start at the top and give your roof a good long look, even if you need to use binoculars. Examine your gutters while you're at it, making sure the heavy snowfall didn't cause them to sag or become detached. Don't forget the chimney; are there any major cracks? All chimneys should have a cap, Witt says, to let them vent and to keep water out.

Keeping water out is a consistent and important theme. Gutters should be free of debris, for example, and their downspouts should direct water away from the house to prevent damage to the foundation. Proper grading of the yard can help in that respect, too.

Witt also recommends checking the condition of your home's siding, especially vinyl siding on the north side of the house. The lack of sun can cause algae to grow on the siding.

“You can power wash it,” Witt says, “but have a professional do it, because power washers can do an awful lot of damage.”

For your own comfort – and, increasingly, for your safety – look for standing water on your property, Witt advises. Mosquitoes can breed in buckets, old tires, even a rain barrel that has a small, unscreened opening.

“Any little container,” he says, “they'll breed in.” ■