

## Why Follow the Crowd?



Source: [www.TurfMagazine.com](http://www.TurfMagazine.com)

Winston-Salem firm scores with premium lawn services



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Nature's Select lawn care program provides outstanding results due, in part, to its use of soil enrichment products developed on the Hildebolt "family farm."

Photos courtesy of Nature's Select.

Bill Hildebolt, owner, Nature's Select Premium Turf Services, Inc. in Winston-Salem, N.C., understands that his people are in the "aesthetic business" as well as being in the turf care industry.

"Our job is to satisfy clients' desires to have beautiful lawns," says Hildebolt. "To accomplish that we must understand the equity of soil and the science behind advancing soil technologies."

The Hildebolt family, along with colleagues, farm about 1,000 acres in west-central Ohio. That's where he grew up and learned first-hand about microbial life in the soil. The family farm practices what they term "renewable agriculture," employing sustainable philosophies and carefully measuring the energy requirements and soil biology needed to produce optimal yields.

### **Nature's Select Premium Turf Care**

**Principals:** Owner Bill Hildebolt, President Gene Queen

**Founded:** N/A

**Headquarters:** Winston Salem, N.C.

**Markets:** Winston Salem and surrounding communities

**Services:** Complete turf services, including irrigation, design/build and arborists services

**Employees:** 20 full time

**Website:** <http://www.naturesselect.com/index.htm>

After a long stint with Campbell's Soup Company, in their research and development department, Hildebolt, who earned a Ph.D. from The Ohio State University before embarking into the business world, eventually decided to take his experiences from renewable agriculture and build a turf maintenance business in the Winston-Salem market.

Nature's Select is that end product. Its goal is to offer their high-end residential clients an effective lawn service by minimizing chemical applications, keeping them green and weed-free with a unique holistic service.

"We developed proprietary formulas and a delivery method that creates and sustains more microbial life in the soil and that replaces necessary minerals and biologicals," explains Hildebolt. "This enables the turf to flourish with the formal application of our seven-step lawn maintenance approach. We combine essential grass plant nutrients and highest quality weed controls, with organic and biological products that actually improve soil health. We blend the materials ourselves at our facilities."

The firm's holistic approach does not mean that chemicals applications are never used. They're used only when there is no effective natural organic alternative.

"When it comes to preemergence herbicides, we all know they are effective and inexpensive," says Hildebolt. "The only real organic options are to get down on your hands and knees and remove every weed, or to engulf the property with large amounts of corn-glutton-meal or similar products."



"It is not economically feasible to do either; so in spring or summer we'll use a chemical application as a tool to help get the soil and property ready for a more natural approach. We don't exclude best practices in favor of ideology; ours is an integrated approach."

For example, Hildebolt says that some companies have stopped using lime on high acid soils. Applications of agricultural lime are beneficial for the health of turfgrass on these properties. Nature Select's goal is to improve the health of the soil on customers' properties, reducing the need for chemical inputs.

Nature's Select begins with a soil test to determine what is missing within the soil chemistry and determine pH.

## Checking the soil

"We check calcium and nitrogen, phosphates, whatever soil minerals need to be addressed," says Hildebolt. "We then add in ongoing regularly scheduled treatments. Soil biology and micronutrients must be considered and infused, as well. That's where our blending of organic compounds becomes so important to the overall health of the turf. Our program is formulated to give the best agronomic results possible, while also controlling most weeds."

The service creates lawns with enhanced drought tolerance, are slower to go into dormancy and are quicker to green-up in the spring, he contends.



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The company smart car features the clever Bert the Fert Guy logo, which is easily recognized throughout the Winston-Salem, N.C., market.

"The mid-Atlantic region has some very tough weeds and insects to contend with," says Hildebolt. "Crabgrass, chickweed, dallisgrass, spurge; you name it. We have warmer winters and longer summers and weeds are always a problem. Same for white grubs deep down in the soil feeding on roots, and scarab beetles and other yard pests. We're certified by the state to apply pesticides when we must, but then again, healthier soils require less and less chemicals because healthier soil can fight off weeds and pests."

## Seven visits

The company's seven-step application starts in early winter and again in early spring with preemergence protection along with an application of nitrogen, phosphorous, potassium and also biologicals. A second application is made in mid-spring or early summer. Step three continues in midsummer, bringing a slow-release liquid fertilizer source. Typically that application also includes iron, micronutrients, biologicals and organics. Late-summer applications include lime and granular organic materials. With fall aeration, overseeding begins; along with treatment of high-phosphorus granular fertilizer that provides a slow-release feeding beneficial to new seedlings and established turf. Late fall brings applications of a granular fertilizer to allow a further feeding, along with additional organics. The final application of nitrogen is applied in winter.

"Cold weather is the greening months when food sources are stored in the root system of the turf in preparation for the spring growth explosion," says Hildebolt.

Tall fescue is the turfgrass of choice in Nature Select's market. "We have the seed especially prepared for us in Oregon and it is 100 percent weed-free. I can't tell you the pains that we've gone through to ensure that our seed blends are the best in our region of North Carolina. There's nothing worse than getting the soil prepared properly and then introducing weeds into the overseeding process."



## Still learning, still growing

The company offers irrigation and tree and shrub services, as well, and it is working on achieving ISA certification. Hildebolt, a long-time industry supporter and former president of The Professional Landcare Network (PLANET), claims that the same principles that apply to turfgrass are also beneficial to trees and shrubs.

"Get the soil ready," he says. "Our tree and shrub health care program is designed to feed and protect the plantings, again utilizing fertilizers with natural and biological enhancements, providing optimal soil health levels for all ornamental plantings." Nature's Select is able to offer premium services because of the expertise and experience of its employees. Hildebolt proudly explains that as a group, his firm's employees average over 12 years of service.

"That's pretty exceptional for a company that's only 20 years in business," says Hildebolt. "We have the finest people in the industry working, and it really shows in customer service and their dedication to the company."

But it took some effort to build such a fine staff, says Hildebolt. "Back in the 1990s when we started there was a work boom in the area and finding quality folks was difficult, but we managed."

Through its first 20 years, the company has grown steadily even through the severe recession of 2008-2009. It services more than 800 properties in Winston-Salem, and 90 percent are residential.

"Our president, Gene Queen, and I started the business at about the time that a regional service provider was going out of business. So, we hit the ground running," says Hildebolt.

"Many of these properties were in bad shape and had not been serviced properly. We had our hands full, and I don't think we missed a beat."

Pricing is a serious issue, says Hildebolt. But, he subscribes to something he learned during his Campbell's Soup days: you don't discount your brand. "Sure you can find lower priced services, but our brand stands for something. People know they are buying a premium service with us, and that is the promise that we must live up to every day," he says.

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