

Where the grass is always greener

Ken Peters

January 20, 2011

BURLINGTON Going with artificial lawns appears to be a real big deal in these tree-lined, boulevard-bordered residential neighbourhoods.

A growing interest in installing artificial grass in Burlington residential front yards has prompted city planners to schedule an open house on the issue.

Burlington planner Dave Marriott said Burlingtonians are permitted to have artificial grass installed in their back yards but a 1999 zoning bylaw prohibits it for front yards.

That could change. The Burlington public meeting is set for Wednesday Jan. 26 in room 247 at city hall.

Burlington Councillor Jack Dennison, chairperson of the community development committee, will wait for the staff report before commenting. But he said during the last campaign he knocked on a door and asked the woman if she would put up a lawn sign. The woman said she couldn't because she had artificial grass.

"I was amazed," Dennison said.

Proponents of the half-dozen companies doing the conversions in southern Ontario say the product is now so lifelike business is booming. It's so brisk that few bother to advertise.

"It's growing to the point that more and more of the American companies are trying to make their way up here. That's how active it is up here," said Robert Hodichak, senior sales manager for Stoney Creek-based Artificial Grass and Landscaping.

Hodichak said his company does about 100 conversions a year, half of them in Hamilton.

The firm has completed 30 to 40 conversions in Burlington, including several front yards despite the city bylaw.

The Burlington public meeting is expected to spur even greater interest in this local landscaping trend.

Hamilton permits artificial front lawns as long as at least half the area in question consists of natural materials, such as shrubs, flowers, trees, soil or rocks, confirms planning department spokesperson Debbie Spence.

The benefits of going with mod sod are numerous.

The lawn mower becomes obsolete. So does the lawn sprinkler. And the lawn spreader. Over half the customers are dog owners who find cleaning up after Fido a whole lot easier. The product is recyclable and lasts about 25 years. And it looks real.

"We've introduced two-tone colouring to the blades and our newest product has a brown thatch to it so it even has a little bit of a dried-out look to it," says Hodichak.

He says the product has improved so much that it's easy to mistake the fake – even if you installed it. Like the time he drove by one of his Burlington installations.

"I knew we did one on the street and I was going to go check it out, figuring I would be able to pick it out, and I wasn't able to pick it out. That's how realistic it has gotten. It just looks like well-groomed grass."

But going with the bogus bluegrass takes some bucks.

Both Hodichak and Robert Mislán, with Toronto-based Versatile Grass, say homeowners can expect to pay \$5,000 for a front lawn conversion, double that for a back yard, depending on the size of the lot.

"My phone rings off the hook," said Mislán. "But it hiccups on the price. It's not for a low-wage earner and it is touch and go for middle-class folks."

"But the grass looks so pretty I've had people try to mow it. It just doesn't stick out like a sore thumb any more."

Mislán said artificial grass – no one in the industry uses the word "fake" – appeals to homeowners who enjoy low maintenance.

"Look at people's homes. They are all no maintenance. All the soffit and fascia. All the siding. Fencing has gone no maintenance. The entire building industry has gone no maintenance. Why would people say, 'It is valid for the side of my house and under my roof but it is not valid for my play area?'"



GRASS IS ALWAYS GREENER. There appears to be a growing appetite for ever-green lawns that need no maintenance. Torstar News Service Source: Torstar News Service