Organic Lawn Care

Growing A Lawn Without Synthetic Chemicals

Can you grow a decent lawn without herbicides, insecticides and synthetic lawn fertilizers? Is there an organic approach to lawn care? Is lawn life beyond 4-step programs even possible?

The answer is "yes" to all three. And there are some advantages to going the "organic" route, such as:

•Organic fertilizers break down slowly and gradually, meaning you don't have to fertilize as often.

•Organic fertilizer results in slower, stockier grass growth, which researchers believe helps grass better fight off disease. (They think it relates to thicker grass cell walls.)

•It's almost impossible to burn or streak a lawn with organic fertilizer.

•Fewer or no pesticides are friendlier to earthworms and soil microbes that improve soil health and break down thatch.

What IS 'organic' anyway?

"Organic" lawn care commonly refers to an approach that shuns synthetic pesticides and fertilizers. Technically, though, the definition of "organic" involves any product that contains carbon, which would include lawn chemicals.

Growing a lawn with nothing but naturally occurring products is possible, but that approach usually means giving up the notion of the absolutely perfect weed-free lawn.

That doesn't mean an "organic" lawn is going to look like a mini-jungle. Well tended organic lawns look as nice as any lawn, although up close you'll probably see a patch of chickweed here and a patch of clover there.

If you're willing to use an occasional spot-spray of herbicide or a well timed insecticide to fight off the occasional bug attack, your lawn can be as nice as any. Think of these as "prescription medicines'" that you turn to only when necessary.

The right stuff

Bad lawns usually are the result of a lot of little things that aren't being done instead of one or two big things that have gone wrong.

That's why the first step in "going organic" is getting in the habit of doing a lot of little things right. These include:

•Cutting the grass high. Move the mower setting up to cut at a height of 2 1/2 to 3 inches and never let the grass get so long that you have to remove more than the top one-third of the blades at a time. Taller grass shades out weeds, slows soil moisture evaporation and provides more chlorophyll to make plant sugars that grass needs to grow.

•Let the clippings lie. They'll break down and add nitrogen to the soil. Only rake if the clippings are thick enough to mat down the grass.

•Improve the soil. Lawns very often are started on poor or thin soil. It'll help to build up the soil by adding a light quarter-inch top dressing of compost or peat moss every now and then. The decaying grass clippings also gradually will add humus.

•Add "good" grass. Overseed the lawn every year or two in September with newer turfgrass varieties that have been bred for bug- and disease-resistance. This will gradually introduce the improved varieties into your lawn. For new lawns, start with a mix that contains these better grasses.

•Core-aerate every year or two to reduce soil compaction.

•Dethatch if there's an inch or more of thatch atop the soil. Thatch is a matted layer of dead roots

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and stems that tends to build up in lawns that have been shallowly watered, fed with fertilizers high in water-soluble nitrogen and/or mowed too closely. Organically fed lawns tend to be less prone to thatch buildup.

•Don't water in a drought. Let the lawn go dormant unless you have a new lawn or the drought persists more than 6 or 8 weeks. Then soak the lawn deeply so the soil is damp at least 6 inches down. Frequent, shallow watering encourages surface roots that are more prone to drought death and thatch buildup.

An organic feeding plan

Start your switch to organics by doing a soil test. We have do-it-yourself Penn State mail-in kits that are inexpensive and easy to do. Results are usually back within a week or two.

Next, stop applying insecticides, herbicides and fungicides unless you actually have a problem. Regularly use only an organic fertilizer, such as EarthGro or Milorganite.

Your soil-test result will help you decide which fertilizer to use, how much and whether to add lime or any other soil nutrients or amendments.

Usually, two feedings per year are enough — one in mid to late April and one in September. That's especially true if you're letting the clippings break down on the lawn. Penn State turfgrass researchers say that's the equivalent amount of nitrogen of a third feeding.

What about weeds?

Organic fertilizing won't make weeds magically disappear. But if you do all of the above "good" things, your lawn should fill in and become thick enough that you'll have fewer and fewer weeds. If grass already is occupying the space, there's no room for a new weed to get started.

Another strategy is to prevent weeds from sprouting by applying a natural product called corn gluten meal. This byproduct of corn milling has been found to shut down the growth of most weed seedlings before you ever see them while adding nitrogen to the soil at the same time. It's sold as Concern "Weed Prevention Plus" among other names.

Once weeds are up, bigger ones can be hand-pulled or dug and spreading ones can be raked out. Or if weeds are becoming an eyesore and you don't mind occasional chemical use, they can be killed with a spot-spray of herbicide, such as one containing Trimec.

That's all there is to it. If you have any questions, give us a call. We're glad to help!

Trouble-shooting in the organic lawn

Some tips on dealing organically with common lawn problems:

Grubs Apply Milky Spore disease powder on lawn any time ground is not frozen. It's a bacteria that affects only Japanese beetle grubs. A single application stays active 15 to 20 years.

Voles This rodent makes surface "highways" over the lawn, often most noticeable at end of winter. Reseed tunneled areas and trap voles with snap or cage traps baited with peanut butter or oatmeal. Or get a cat or repel them with fox or bobcat versions of Predator Urine.

Rust red thread, snow mold. Good cultural practices listed above will prevent most lawn diseases such as these. A fertilizer treatment will help fight off mild cases. Otherwise, healthy lawns will grow through most diseases without treatment; most diseases won't kill turfgrass. Overseed with disease-resistant varieties for future control.

Moss Add lime, aerate to improve drainage and limb up nearby trees to increase sunlight. Overseed with shade-tolerant grass.