

Organic Lawn Care 101

The world of science has now joined forces with the organic movement to offer easy to use, highly effective alternatives to petro-chemical fertilizers and toxic poisons. Many homeowners use readily available 4 or 6 step chemical programs for their lawns and do not realize the danger this causes to their own health and the health of their children, their pets, and the environment as a whole. At Natureworks, our focus is on building healthy soil and creating a healthy ecosystem that will encourage lawn grass and discourage weeds. Healthy turf grass in healthy soil will crowd out other plants, out-competing them for nutrients, light, and water.

FEED THE SOIL AND THE SOIL WILL FEED THE PLANTS

Healthy soil is the basis for healthy plant life. More than a structural material to hold plants up, your soil is a living thing. Nutrients and minerals are bound into soil particles, released by the breaking down of organic matter by soil microbes and beneficial insects. In order to maintain healthy soil you must maintain a high level of organic matter and encourage essential soil life. As with any other gardening endeavor, when growing an organic lawn, the soil is key. Remember, a lawn is nothing more than a very short garden of grass plants!

Chemical fertilizers feed the soil with synthetic nutrients without providing the substance of organic matter necessary to maintain soil health. Insecticides, herbicides, and soil chemicals destroy any soil life that may have existed. Eventually, the result is a "dead" soil that must constantly be fed with artificial nutrients. Compare it to humans living on vitamin pills instead of real food! As an alternative, at Natureworks, we offer lawn fertilizers from natural sources, meant to enrich the life in the soil, increase microbial action, thus releasing nutrients slowly. This maximizes nutrient uptake of the plant and reduces the amount of nutrients leached away or fixed in the soil. To accurately assess your soil's needs, we recommend that you take a soil test. There are state agencies that will test your soil for a nominal fee. The staff of Natureworks can then help you interpret your soil test and recommend organic products.

Some key ways to build healthy soil include using a mulching mower and returning the clippings to the lawn, adding organic fertilizers in spring and fall, and foliar feeding with liquids such as seaweed and other microbial solutions. If you are transitioning your lawn from chemical feeding to organic feeding, it will take more inputs in the beginning and less as the life in the soil grows and develops. There may be a period of time in the beginning when your lawn looks pale or sick. Do not get discouraged. A healthy soil ecosystem takes time to develop!

WEEDS, PESTS AND DISEASES

There are organic solutions to every lawn care problem. Weeds are a sign of an unbalanced soil, compaction, or other factors that stress the grass plants. They may also be the result of mowing too low. Mow your lawn higher (4") and this will prevent many weed seeds from germinating, especially crab grass. Corn gluten is a valuable product that inhibits weed seed germination. It can be added spring and fall while your soil is developing. Eventually, healthy lawn will outcompete the weeds. Many organic lawn care practitioners and homeowners tolerate certain weeds in the lawn. Clover is a legume that fixes nitrogen and gives it back to the soil, providing up to 1/3 of the lawns nitrogen needs for the year. It used to be a part of lawn grass mixes in the first half of the 20th century. When you have existing weeds, they can be killed using organic herbicides, a flame weeder, or manual methods.

Many lawn fungus problems are the result of thatch build up. This is not caused by lawn clippings! Thatch is decomposed steadily in an organic lawn as the soil microorganisms feed upon it. In a chemical lawn, thatch does not get decomposed because the soil is devoid of life! Dethatching may be necessary to eliminate a thick thatch layer. After that, as the soil becomes healthier, it is less of a problem. Improper watering techniques are also the cause of many fungus problems. An organic lawn with a high organic matter content is much more able to withstand periods of drought.

Lawn insects include grubs, cinch bugs, and other pests. Each can be controlled with a wide range of cutting edge organic products including beneficial nematodes, milky spore disease, and Repellex granular Mole, Vole, and Gopher Repellant. Endophytic grass seed mixtures also act to eliminate many pest populations.

SEED VERSUS SOD

There are very few sources of organic sod and sod lawns (primarily composed of Kentucky bluegrass) and those are less able to tolerate stress than seeded lawns that use carefully selected, sustainable lawn grass mixtures. The best time to install a new lawn or renovate an existing lawn is in late August and September, NOT the spring! Turf grass roots grow more vigorously at that time of year, the rains return following summer dry spells, and you will find many fewer weed seeds germinating. Natureworks offers a custom lawn seed mixture that contains endophytically enhanced seed (this naturally kills many turf pests) and tall turf type fescues that are much more drought tolerant, require less fertilization, and clump rather than run, making garden bed edging much easier.

LONG TERM MAINTENANCE AND FURTHER INFORMATION

In each successive year that you do organic lawn care, the emphasis shifts from pest control to soil enrichment, because a healthy lawn can hold its own if properly nourished.

Each year, Natureworks publishes a comprehensive and lengthy 4 part handout on our Organic Lawn Care Program. This describes methods, products, a calendar of what to do when, and a product chart showing application rates and costs per square foot. This is updated regularly as new products are tested and brought to market. Visit the retail store or go to our website www.naturework.com for the current version.

While in the retail store, be sure to pick up a copy of the comprehensive book *The Organic Lawn Care Manual* by Paul Tukey, founder of a nationwide movement called Safe Lawns. Go to www.safelawns.org for more information.

Throughout the growing season, Natureworks offers free workshops explaining the basics of organic lawn care and answering your questions. Be sure to sign up for our email mailing list to receive notifications of all of our educational workshops.

The Natureworks Mission Statement:

Natureworks offers organic and ecologically friendly products, services, and information to our customers. We are deeply committed to education in all we do. We beautify our surroundings with colorful, creative designs and cutting edge plant material. We proudly provide fair living wages and benefits to our employees, and constantly strive to further their knowledge of plants, design and organic practices. We are a stable, financial entity working to strengthen and build our local economy.

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