

Lawn Care, the Natural Way

You can help your customers make the switch. Here's how.

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ORGANIC LAWN CARE GOES TO WASHINGTON. A new coalition called SafeLawns has embarked on a mission to educate homeowners about less toxic lawn care methods. The organization, led by Paul Tukey, Publisher of *People, Places & Plants*, and Shepherd Ogden, Founder of the organic and heirloom mail-order seed company The Cooks Garden, has planted an organic lawn on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., to demonstrate that "greener" lawn care practices can even work on a large, high-traffic, public lawn.

But that's not the only way gardeners are learning about organic lawns. John Dromgoole, Owner of The Natural Gardener Nursery in Austin, TX, and host of the popular radio show *Gardening Naturally*, says the city of Austin started a local educational campaign after running tests that showed chemical fertilizers were not only polluting rivers and lakes, but didn't work as well as organic products like his signature Lady Bug line.

Customers also see it in their neighborhoods. "People are witnessing these changes on their own street," Dromgoole said. "They see this great lawn, and they go ask their neighbors what they're doing. It's nothing but compost and organic fertilizer."

Getting them there. These messages are getting through to gardeners, and many are ready to make the switch. But it's not enough to simply put organic products on the shelf. Most consumers need help putting together a new lawn care regimen. And it's not just about substituting organic products for nonorganic ones. Your customers may

need to re-think their plant selection and techniques, too.

"Here's how I think about it," Dromgoole says. "Our customers on the shore on one side of this river have heard the bad news about chemicals, and they're ready to [go to the other side]. It's our job to get them on board." He continues, "[It's like] we have this little boat, and whoever is greeting them is the one who takes them across the river.

Along the way, we teach them the language of the organic garden. We teach them about diseases and fungus and microorganisms. When they get out of the boat on the other side, we have a new customer."

Dromgoole emphasizes the importance of giving customers what they need, even if that isn't a product or a plant: "People will trust you and come back if you're not just trying to sell them something they don't need."

He continues, "Teach them useful techniques.

We can share information that doesn't make us any money but makes them a better customer. They love it when you help them solve the problem without having to buy something."

For Dromgoole, that education starts in his own garden. "Customers don't want five products to choose from that all do the same thing," he explains. "They'll say, 'Well, what do you use?' That's the one they'll buy." He recommends trying the products out at home and encouraging sales staff to do the same: "It's hard to sell this stuff if you're not a gardener yourself."

WHAT MOTIVATES A GARDENER to go organic? Most garden center owners agree it starts with the lawn. After all, kids play on the grass, and dogs roll around on it. A lawn is designed for recreation, so safety comes first. Some homeowners are concerned that lawn chemicals could migrate from their property to groundwater, posing a risk to wildlife and drinking water.

Natural Lawn Care Tips for Gardeners

LOOK AT YOUR MOWING PRACTICES -

A healthy organic lawn starts with a healthy root system, and healthy roots start with good mowing practices. Look for earth-friendly push mowers - health-conscious organic gardeners will appreciate the exercise and environmental benefits. As John Dromgoole, Owner of renowned organic garden center The Natural Gardener in Austin, TX, says, "The lawn is one of the few plants that we keep cutting the leaves off of. They need those leaves for photosynthesis, but we take that away from them."

The solution? Longer grass. Start with a sharp mower blade to reduce the stress on the grass, and set it higher - 3 to 4 inches works for most grasses - which helps crowd out weeds, keeps moisture in the soil and supports deeper roots. But the most important mowing strategy of all is to leave grass clippings on the lawn to decompose. They're a great source of free nitrogen. And if the clippings get too dense, rake some of them up, and add them to the compost pile, leaving just enough on the lawn to decompose without getting in the way.

WATCH OUT FOR THATCH

- A lawn that has been treated with chemicals for years may have biologically inactive soil. This condition prevents organic matter, like dead roots and leaves, from breaking down. The result: a layer of thatch that blocks healthy growth. "This kind of thatch buildup creates anaerobic conditions," Dromgoole says. A simple aerating tool, or the spiked aeration sandals that strap onto shoes, make the job easy. Do this twice a year, in spring and fall, and follow it immediately with feeding the soil.

CHOOSE THE RIGHT

GRASS - Not all grasses are created equal. Most need at least four hours of sun to thrive, and some varieties simply can't tolerate heavy foot traffic, extreme cold or extended drought. In addition to your trusted garden center, local agricultural extension offices can usually provide a simple guide to finding the right grass for your area's conditions. But remember, as with any other part of the garden, no product can help the wrong plant in the wrong place.

ADJUST THE SPRINKLERS -

We have to change the way we water. Overwatering not only wastes a precious resource, it may actually harm the lawn. Frequent, shallow irrigation encourages shallow roots. Waterlogged roots may rot or become unable to take up nutrients.

Organic lawns, with deeper, healthier root systems, require less water over time and are better able to withstand drought. Water deeply once or twice a week, and turn off the sprinklers during rainy seasons. If you have an irrigation system, consider upgrading to one that better meets your watering needs.

FEED THE SOIL

- Apply a thin layer of compost to the lawn every spring and fall. A bagged compost or soil conditioner is ideal for this project, as homemade compost may contain weed seeds. Spread 1/4 to 1/2 inch of compost over the lawn - a 2-cubic-foot bag will cover about 100 square feet. Rake it into the grass, then water. Compost products that contain worm castings, small amounts of organic fertilizers or beneficial microbes are especially appropriate for top-dressing lawns, and may be the only supplemental feed the lawn needs.

Dromgoole recommends feeding the naturally occurring beneficial microorganisms in soil and compost with molasses or cornmeal before applying compost. "One pound of cornmeal applied to 1,000 square feet of lawn, combined with a 1/4-inch layer of compost, will help increase fungal organisms to fight disease," he says.

He makes the same recommendation for molasses, which feeds microbes in the soil and improves tilth. "Ask your garden center for horticultural-grade molasses in a liquid or granular form," he says, recommending 2 teaspoons in a gallon of water to soak an area of 250 square feet, or 40 pounds of granular molasses for a 2,500-square-foot lawn.

FERTILIZE FOR THE LONG TERM - Gardeners

accustomed to a monthly chemical feed may be surprised to learn organic lawn fertilizer needs to be applied only twice a year. Why? Grass clippings and soil conditioners already provide plenty of nutrients. Also, organic fertilizers are long-acting, continuously feeding the root system for months. Finally, over-application of any kind of fertilizer - organic or nonorganic - can contaminate water supplies and contribute to algal blooms and other problems. Feed an organic lawn fertilizer once in fall and once in spring according to package directions.

If your soil is poor (a testing kit can verify this), add one more feeding in summer or winter, depending on when the lawn is green. For example, Californian lawns may go dormant in summer during the long drought period, but green up during winter rains, so they would be fed during winter. Gardeners in the Northeast face a long, dormant winter, but enjoy summer thunderstorms that keep the lawn alive, so they could add a summer feeding.

Another alternative is to supplement the twice-yearly feeding with a foliar feed of liquid seaweed or kelp, which helps build strong roots and allows the lawn to withstand drought and stress. "I sell Maxicrop," Dromgoole says, "because that's the one all the research has been done on. It helps build stronger cells, and has plant hormones that stimulate root growth. This is great for lawns that have been stressed by drought or chemicals."

SUPPRESS WEEDS

NATURALLY - Organic gardeners learn to tolerate a few weeds like clover. After all, as a member of the legume family, clover helps fix nitrogen in the soil. You may find that, by setting the blade on your mower a little higher, weeds are crowded out. For small lawns, the correct hand-weeding tool may be the solution.

For larger lawns, the organic pre-emergent weed control offered by corn gluten is a great alternative to chemical weed products. It doesn't work on existing weeds but does suppress new seedlings. Corn gluten will also work on grass seeds, so don't apply it in combination with new grass seeds. "I recommend corn gluten in spring and fall," Dromgoole says. "The research shows that seeds may germinate but they fail to thrive. It also happens to be a nice source of nitrogen, which is all a lawn really needs." He applies it at the rate of 40 pounds per 2,000 square feet.

And for perennial weeds? "I just love this tool called the WeedPopper," he says. "It pulls weeds right out by the root."

FIGHT BUGS WITH BUGS - Organic pest

control often involves introducing the pest's natural predator. Nematodes are microscopic worms that burrow into lawn grubs or flea larvae and kill them. Organic pest control companies sell specific species of nematodes that are effective against Japanese beetles, chafer grubs and other common lawn pests. Some retailers may store them in a refrigerator with other beneficials like ladybugs and earthworms. Others offer a mailback service through a company like Orcon, which means they only have to keep the mailback coupons in stock. In any case, make sure you are purchasing the right nematode for the lawn pests in your area (county agricultural extension officers can help identify local pests), and follow package directions.

Another option for controlling Japanese beetles is milky spore, a naturally occurring bacteria that kills the beetles in the grub stage. Milky spore is inexpensive - a 10-ounce can covers 2,500 square feet, retails for about \$40, and will continue to control grubs for years because the population of this beneficial bacteria increases over time. For many gardeners, this is a one-time application.

"My customers love the nematodes," Dromgoole says. "People tell me they only need to apply them every two or three years." For diseases, he also recommends Serenade, which works against such a broad range of problems that he offers it even when he's not sure what the problem is. He also sells Actinovate, which is made from a naturally occurring micro-organism that colonizes the root system and protects the plant when disease is present in the soil.