

# Going Green

by Amy Stewart

## Soil Products

As demand surges, gardeners look to IGCs for advice

RUSSELL'S GARDEN CENTER IN WAYLAND, MA was organic before it was popular. "We've been around since 1876 in one form or another," says Jack Russell, the latest in at least five generations who have managed this family-owned independent, located in a suburb outside Boston. In those early days, any soil-related product - potting soil, mulch, manure, compost - was organic by default. But today, gardeners face a wide choice of products, some of which are blended with synthetic fertilizers, chemical weed killers and other products that organic gardeners avoid.

So how does the latest generation at Russell's navigate the options? It offers both. "People come in, looking for what their parents or grandparents used," Russell says. "If we don't have it, they walk out the door. But if we can keep them in the store, we can show them the organic alternative."

Russell describes the garden center as leaning more toward the organic side, with some chemical controls still on the shelves. In the lawn department, they lean more strongly toward organic. "It's a lot less maintenance in the long run," he says. "We've been selling corn gluten and organic lawn fertilizers for years, and they outsell the chemicals."

While Russell's doesn't have the space or the equipment to sell bulk composts and soils, it does offer a wide variety of products across all categories to appeal to the do-it-yourselfer who wants to mix a personalized blend. "We see people every year who want to buy their own perlite or vermiculite, their

own worm castings and manure, and blend it all according to their secret recipe," Russell says.

### Certified Solutions

The USDA's National Organic Program allows the term "certified organic" to be applied to food, fiber and feed. The inputs that organic producers use - pesticides, fertilizers, composts and other additives - can be referred to as "approved for organic use" if they meet the USDA's criteria.

Additional rules may vary from state to state, and in many states, local or regional organizations provide the "organic" seal of approval to manufacturers of bagged soil products.

One such organization with a nationwide reach is the Organic Materials Review Institute (OMRI).

Some organic gardeners look for OMRI-certified products because they know the products have been tested for contaminants like E. coli, salmonella, arsenic, cadmium and lead. Backyard gardeners may look to the guidelines to make sure the product they are buying meets a generally accepted organic standard, but many simply want a good, healthy soil blend with no sewage waste or chemical additives like synthetic fertilizers. Knowing the ingredients and how the products were made can go a long way toward winning over this group of dedicated, knowledgeable customers.



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## potting soil

Marie Winter, Russell's potting soil buyer, says offering both organics and chemicals gives customers the choices they want. "We have really promoted the organic products," she says, "but the best way for us to get people on board is to offer both. If people come in looking for [a chemical] fertilizer and we don't have it, then we lose the opportunity to show them the alternative. It's been a gradual education for everybody." Jack Russell, who manages the garden center, says that organic potting soils appeal to "people who want to start their own seeds and garden organically. They want to be organic from start to finish - that means an organic potting medium and starter fertilizer, so when they put plants out in the garden or raised beds it's all organic." Coast of Maine's certified organic potting blends sell well. "They contain blueberry compost, lobster shells, salmon - it almost seems like it's good enough to eat," Winter says.

## Tips on Succeeding with Organic Soil Products

## worm castings

Educating customers about earthworm castings was a hard sell at first for Russell's. "The first year, we had a pallet of bagged worm castings, and we sat and looked at those bags for most of the year," Russell says. "But this is our third year carrying them, and they move at a steady rate." He cautions that worm castings aren't a bread-and-butter seller, but it makes a good "gateway product" for other organic products. "It piques their interest," Russell says.

## seed starting mix

Russell's customers often use milled sphagnum moss for starting seeds, which is available certified-organic. The garden center plans on bringing in Espoma's new organic seed starting mix this year. "Now people really know to ask for organic," Russell says. "They may not understand that with soils, almost everything in the bag is organic by definition, but they don't want the chemicals added, especially for vegetable starts."

## bagged compost

Russell's does well with composted and dehydrated cow manure. "They can use it for lawns, for raised beds, for planting trees and shrubs - just about anything," Russell says. "The easy thing to do is to sell cow manure anytime we sell a plant." A 40-quart bag sells for \$5.99, and the dehydrated product is \$9.99. As with potting soils, Coast of Maine products are popular. "This is local to New England, so it has a nostalgic, romantic connection to our customers' experience of the region," Russell says.

## mulches

“We find that people are less concerned about whether a mulch product has a certified-organic label or not,” Russell says. “What they do care about is whether it has been dyed or if it’s made from real bark or from some shredded wood product.” Russell’s doesn’t carry any dyed mulches. In addition to offering a local pine bark mulch, it does particularly well with the Coast of Maine organic mulches. “It’s an attractive dark bark with kelp meal mixed in,” Russell says.

Another popular mulch for vegetable gardens is Mainely Mulch, which is marketed as a substitute for salt marsh hay. “It’s a chopped straw that’s been kiln-dried to kill off weed seeds,” Russell says. In vegetable beds, a bale will cover 100 square feet, but for planting grass, a single bale will stretch to 500 square feet. “It’s also great for putting roses to bed,” he adds.

## microbial soil conditioners

Microbial soil conditioners are not fertilizers but soil enhancers that contain beneficial soil microbes that can help plants use water and nutrients more efficiently, thus reducing the need to water and fertilize. Russell has found this type of product sells well in the lawn department. The garden center offers Organica’s Microbial Soil Conditioner, which covers 5,000 square feet of lawn. “These are small pellets that will go through a spreader,” Russell says. “People buy it to make their lawn more water-wise and better able to stand on its own.”

## composters

Organic gardeners want to recycle their own kitchen scraps and yard waste, and Russell’s has had good luck with the SoilSaver, a square black box made of heavy duty plastic with a locking lid to keep out raccoons and other critters. “Various towns and counties around here have laws concerning compost,” Russell says. “If you have food scraps going in, you need a locking lid to keep animals out.” The bin sells for \$129.99, and at that price, it’s a steady seller. Even at the end of the gardening season, the garden center was selling a couple of bins each week. People buy them as birthday and Christmas presents, and after they buy one, they often come back for a second one. And as for worm bins? “We’ve been experimenting with them,” Russell says. “We had our first worm bin this year out on display. People love the idea of having a worm composter, but there is a certain ick factor, especially here, where they have to come indoors in the winter.”