TRANSITIONING TO ORGANIC LAWN CARE

It's time to TRANSITION TO ORGANIC LAWN CARE. According to beyondpesticides.org, a growing body of evidence in scientific literature shows that pesticide exposure can adversely affect neurological, respiratory, immune, and endocrine systems in humans and pets, even at low levels. "Weed and Feed" products combine herbicides and petrochemical fertilizers to achieve that green lawn, but harm natural soil biology and harm many beneficial insects, birds and other wildlife.*

A NATURAL HEALTHY LAWN is good for children, pets, and the entire ecosystem. How can I make the switch?

- improving the soil (your lawn may be devoid of the good microbial and fungal life it needs to be healthy)
- building deeper turf roots which will increase drought tolerance and decrease the need for watering
- using slow-release organic fertilizers to improve resistance to insects/diseases
- reducing the need for weed control herbicides since thick, high and healthy turf crowds out weeds
- using natural organic grub control rather than harsh chemical methods

LET'S GET STARTED!

The most important principle of healthy lawn care is NO PESTICIDES, HERBICIDES, INSECTICIDES, FUNGICIDES, or any other "cides"!

If you worry that your lawn might die or look terrible if you do not use such products, the important thing to note is TRANSITION SLOWLY to organics.

Your lawn may be devoid of microbial life if you have been using chemical fertilizers, weed and feed products that include herbicides, chemical products to prevent grub damage, an in-ground sprinkler system to water your lawn daily, and/or a chemically-based lawn care service. If you go "cold turkey" off all the chemical products, you might cause your lawn harm, or at least invite weeds to take over. It's important to GRADUALLY, over the course of a year or so, convert your lawn to organic care.

Transitioning your lawn takes a bit of patience, but it is not hard to do. You will gradually build up your lawn's resilience with compost and organic fertilizing, with proper mowing and watering, and by over-seeding with a good grass seed mix containing tall fescues (rather than the Kentucky Blue Grass that is so water-needy and fragile). You may also need to aerate your lawn to overcome compaction so air can reach down into the soil to help the microbes thrive.

You can rest assured you will be helping to build an ecosystem more attuned to nature and helping to address climate change in the process. And you will be keeping children and pets safe! You may also notice more butterflies and fireflies in your yard as you ditch the hazardous chemicals.

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*Lawn and Garden Chemicals and Our Children's Health: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7LTcdlEAScU.

*Pesticides and You Report, April 2023: www.beyondpesticides.org

FOLLOW THESE STEPS TO A BETTER LAWN

Ideally, Start in the Fall

- In our area, FALL conditions are perfect to start the transition, but some changes can be started at any time of year (mow high, leave the clippings, water deeply/not frequently, overseed with tall fescue).
- To get started, visit **https://www.beyondpesticides.org/resources/lawns-and-landscapes/overview/prime-your-lawn-this-fall** and look through their recommendations.
- Follow the instructions to **aerate**, **over-seed** with a good seed mix that has lots of tall fescues that grow deep roots (such as Jonathan Green Black Beauty and others); scatter a good quality **compost** over the lawn; **water** for several weeks until the new seed germinates; and use a fall **organic fertilizer** (such as Espoma and others).

Continue the process in the spring/summer

- Do a soil test!! Check out the UMass website for directions on how to take a sample and send it to them. Typically, the soil pH may be low, and you will need to add lime so that nutrients in the soil are available for the grass. Lime can be added at any time. The test will also tell you what percentage organic matter you have.... keep adding compost spring and fall to increase that percentage until it is at the recommended level.
- Use an organic fertilizer (such as Espoma Organic Spring Lawn Booster and others) instead of a synthetic one. Organic fertilizers release nitrogen more slowly over a longer period of time so more of it is used by the grass. Or use corn gluten lawn fertilizer to keep crabgrass and other annual weeds from taking over. (Do not use corn gluten at the same time you are over-seeding bare spots...it will keep the grass seed from germinating.)
- Broadcast a 1/4" of good quality compost (such as Black Earth) across the entire lawn again. This will add organic matter to support good microbial life.
- Have the lawn cut high...3 1/2" ...all season long to help shade out weeds and build deeper roots.
- Daily watering leads to shallow-rooted, delicate grass. Gradually transition to watering thoroughly once a week rather than every day or two for a short time. Watering deeper and less frequently helps the grass grow longer roots which are more resilient and survive dry spells better.
- Leave grass clippings on the lawn to add back the nitrogen in the grass blades. It's "free" fertilizer!
- Keep a regular watering schedule for any dry hot periods. Dry hot weather favors crabgrass and you do not want crabgrass to take over your lawn while you are building its resilience.
- Do NOT use a chemical grub control product that will kill the good microbial life you are trying to build in the soil. If grubs are an issue in your yard, award-winning new organic bacterial products (such as grubGONE, grubHALT and others) are now available that can treat both adult beetles and grubs without harming beneficial insects, birds, aquatic life or pets. (Check local retailers or buy online.) It can be applied in the late spring and/or in the fall if you notice evidence of grub damage. A skunk or many squirrels or birds poking around in the lawn is a sign that grubs may be present.

During the following seasons, chemical weed/feed products should no longer be needed

- The added compost, mowing higher, watering deeper/less frequently, over-seeding with tall fescue grass seed mixes all will help thicken the turf and crowd out many weeds.
- Even organic fertilizers may no longer be needed if you leave clippings after mowing and/or add Dutch white clover seed which adds nitrogen to the soil naturally.

NOTE: You do not have to wait until the fall to start the transition to organics. Start in the spring spreading compost, mowing high, leaving clippings and overseeding with a grass seed high in fescues.

YEARLY SCHEDULE

MARCH & APRIL

Sharpen mower blades (Cutting with sharp blades makes for healthier grass.)

Raise mower blade to 3 1/2”

Test soil: **https://ag.umass.edu/services/soil-plant-nutrient-testing-laboratory**

Add soil amendments based on soil test

Re-seed bare patches

Leaves clippings on lawn to fertilize

MAY & JUNE

Check for weeds; pull out by hand

Re-seed bare spots

Monitor for grubs and treat with an organic Bt product if necessary

AUGUST

You may allow lawn to go dormant during drought. It will green up after rain or in September’s cooler temperatures.

SEPTEMBER & OCTOBER

Best time to seed (generously)

Top dress with 1/4” compost

Aerate if soil is compacted

Lime if an autumn soil test finds pH lower than about 6.8

NOVEMBER

Final mowing before winter

MANAGING YOUR LAWN SERVICE

- Ask for an organic program. Know that an organic lawn can take up to 3 years to fully establish. Remember: the service works for you. If they are not willing to help you with your organic lawn, find a service that will.
- Refuse routine applications of chemical grub treatments/fertilizers, and weed/feed products
- Specify mowing 3 1/2" high and leaving the clippings rather than bagging them
- Request organic fertilizer (offer to purchase if necessary)
- Request aeration and over-seeding using seed with tall fescue for its deep roots
- Ask if they will spread compost if you have it delivered (broadcast by hand or shovel from a wheelbarrow, not a spreader)
- Offer to purchase the organic Bt grub product for the service to spread if you have grub issues (available online)
- Beware if a lawn company tells you a chemical application is safe. Federal EPA regulations prohibit manufacturers from making pesticide safety claims, even if used as directed. All pesticides must be treated with caution.
- Never allow unidentified products to be used on your lawn. Request safety information. Look up toxicity at www.pesticide.org.
- Be aware that chemicals listed as inert ingredients can be highly toxic.
- Take note: many pesticides persist in lawns and soil long after the posted 24-72 hours.
- Beware of "greenwashing." Services using words such as "natural" and "green" may not be truly organic.

FIND OUT MORE

Beyond Pesticides: Organic Lawn Care 101, Take Simple Steps This Fall to Convert Your Lawn to Organic

Xerces Society: Top 7 Reasons to Stop Using Pesticides at Home

Wild Seed Project: How to be an Ecological Gardener

USE	AVOID

Grub Control

YES to products containing Bt. Winner of 2015 Green Thumb Award. Biological granulated insecticide controls annual white grubs in turf and ornamentals. Contains the active ingredient ***Bacillus thuringiensis (Bt) galleriae***. Extensive research and testing show Bt galleriae is effective against virtually all white grubs in your lawn.

Other ORGANIC products containing oils are **not generally very effective. READ LABELS**: Rosemary, Sesame, Peppermint, Thyme, Cinnamon, Garlic Oils.

NO TO HARSH CHEMICAL PESTICIDE GRUB CONTROL. KILLS: 40+ insects, including: ants, ticks, mole crickets, chinch bugs, European crane fly larvae, crickets and more, including microsomal life in the soil. *"Not for Sale in MA, CT, CA" means they contain neonicotinoids that were banned for retail sale in/to MA in July 2022.*

NO TO NEMATODE GRUB CONTROL PRODUCTS: Even though listed as organic, recent research shows application can harm bumblebees! Heterorhabditis bacteriophora (Hb) nematodes are not easy to apply and are harmful to bees.