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An Organic Lawn? Yes You Can

By Suzanne Thompson

Getting ready for the annual mowing ritual? Ever notice how it seems to be a vicious cycle? Apply a mix of those little white granules to the lawn in the spring and once it warms up after all of those April showers, follow the weekly ritual of cranking up the lawn mower to cut the stuff that is growing like crazy. Or pay someone else to mow the lawn. Entire neighborhoods are abuzz with mowers and blowers every day of the week.

Americans love their green lush lawns. We want them ready for Memorial Day picnics, graduations, and summer weddings. It's fun to run barefoot through a lush lawn; to roll around in the grass. There's no better sports surface than a healthy, well-maintained playing turf.

Bill Duesing, the executive director of the Connecticut chapter of Northeast Organic Farming Association (NOFA), wishes more people would revisit that logic of the feed and cut method—particularly when so much of the nitrogen (the stuff that stimulates flushes of green, vegetative growth, at least until it gets used up) ends up where it's not wanted: in our streams, rivers, the Sound, and lakes and water wells. Pesticides to control the weeds and insects can have unintended consequences on “non-target species.” That's jargon for honey bees and other beneficial insects, fish and aquatic life, wildlife, pets, and humans.

There's growing interest in organic lawn care—make that “land care”—in recognition that organic, or sustainable, horticultural methods really are about taking a holistic approach to the ecosystem, not a “pump it up” feed and fert regimen of what is called “conventional” lawn care.

NOFA, started in New England in 1972, is one of the oldest organic farming organizations in the country. It also is a leader in helping to define and promote the practice of organic lawns and landscapes by do-it-yourself gardeners and professional lawn care and landscaping professionals.

“Organic land care really starts with the soil. A good soil is a healthy ecosystem with six billion living things is less than a handful of soil,” Duesing said. “We want to encourage that ecosystem which can then release nutrients from the air, the soil, the water and make them available to the plants so they can grow well.”

To do this, compost is applied and worked into the grass, instead of chemical fertilizers. Synthetic fertilizers are, by definition, salts, which can cause more harm than good to the health of the soil and plants.

“Less is more” when it comes to landscape use of fertilizers and pest controls, Duesing said. Plants don't need a lot of nutrients added because they can pull it out of the air and

the soil. What they need are the microbes around their roots to help break down the nutrients.

Liquid compost tea, a stew of live organisms—the bacteria, the fungi, the protozoa that are necessary for good soil health—is applied to add or increase the microbial activity.

“It’s tricky stuff; it needs to be applied at the right time of day, in the right weather conditions, so you’re getting all of the good stuff you want down in the roots, and you’re not cooking it on top of the grass blades,” Duesing said.

Organic methods avoid broad-spectrum residual insecticides or herbicides that are synthetic chemicals. If necessary, some natural materials may be used as pesticides, such as soaps, oils, and extracts from plants and animals. However, these must be organic materials that have low toxicity and break down rapidly in the environment.

“Good grass seed is the best herbicide,” Duesing said. “I’ve heard many professionals say this. If you have bare spots now, sprinkle on some fescue and perennial rye grass seed. Skip the Kentucky Bluegrass; it’s more high maintenance.”

Top the seed with other natural materials—compost, hay, or chopped leaves—keep it moist and let the grass seed germinate.

“We also want to match the right plant in the right place. Rather than adjusting our situation to do some fantasy planting, we should instead think of plants that will grow well in that situation,” Duesing said. “All over Connecticut there are places that are really gorgeous just with what nature does.”

Each winter NOFA puts on a rigorous five-day course in organic land care techniques and requires professionals who want to be accredited by NOFA to pass an accreditation examination and pledge to follow NOFA’s standards for organic land Care. They also must attend at least four hours of organic landscape education annually to maintain this accreditation.

Some 220 people in Massachusetts and Connecticut took the course and test this past January, Duesing said. There were eight firms in New London County last year, including Perennial Harmony Garden Center of Waterford, Festiva Gardens of Lyme, which specializes in field grown peonies, and Four Mile River Farm in Old Lyme.

Most people interested in organic foods are aware of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) organic standards. These standards also define what can be applied to horticultural crops, Duesing said, as long as the grower goes through the same certification process by an accredited certifying organization that food crops do. The NOFA accreditation applies to practices or services provided, not products.

NOFA has more than 700 members, Duesing said. Only 100 are organic farmers; the vast majority are people who want to help support organic farmers and farm markets, community gardens, and land preservation efforts.

Duesing has a polite suggestion for people who have time and energy to mow and obsess over their lawns: take up gardening instead or plant a few fruit trees.

“These will give you something back in the long run,” he said. “A lawn just gives you something pretty to look at. Kids need a place to play, but spend the time teaching them how vegetables grow. It’s very beneficial to be feeding your family fresh tomatoes, maybe blueberries and raspberries. It will make you care less about what your lawn looks like because you’ll be worrying about what your garden looks like, how it grows, and how the vegetables taste.”

The newest list of accredited firms will soon be listed on the Organic Land Care Web site, www.organiclandcare.net. Newsprint copies of the annual NOFA Guide to Organic Lawn Care, including the list of firms, also are available at many area libraries and public information outlets.