



CT OUTDOORS ~ Whose Yard is it, Anyway?

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**If women ruled the world, would we have lawns?
I hate to chalk up the annual lawn care debate as simply another battle between the sexes. After all, we've learned to pick our battles, right?**

Maybe your household doesn't debate what goes on the lawn each year - are we going with the "four-step" program of fertilizer, herbicides, and grub killer? Do I get to try making my own compost tea, or will I try a new, non-GMO microbial spray to boost the health of the grass? When my dear husband said "I do" to a horticulturist, he had no idea what he was in for. All he expected was the right to buy a riding lawn mower and drive it on his manicured green lawn each week.

Bill Duesing knows this debate well. The executive director of CT Chapter of New England Organic Farmers Association (CT NOFA), leaders in the charge to keep synthetic chemicals at bay, or at least out of our wells and Long Island Sound, is in high demand on the garden club speaker circuit.

"I hear a lot of the women say, 'My husband insists on all of this chemical stuff so he can have the best-looking lawn in the neighborhood.' But they are beginning to understand that it really makes a difference, what we do, to our children and our pets. None of these chemicals are really safe for our environment or our health," says Duesing.

CT NOFA, founded in 1982, led the development of NOFA's Organic Land Care program, which guides home owners and offers training and credentials for landscapers and lawn care professional through its Accredited Organic Land Care Professionals (AOLCP) program. The newest crop of AOCLP graduates can be found at www.organiclandcare.net/aolcp-search. The land care program is committed to maintaining lawns and landscapes, the places where most people carry out their daily lives, through natural and organic methods, eliminating the use of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides.

"The standard way of maintaining our lawns is not sustainable at all, and depending on what chemicals people apply, it is doing a lot of damage to our environment," says Duesing, whose ideal yard includes an organic vegetable garden.

But before one of you ends up sleeping on the sofa, Duesing doesn't advocate getting rid of mowed lawns altogether.

"There's no problem with mowing, as long as you mow high (set your mower to 3 inches) and leave the clippings to add some natural fertility so you don't have to add additional fertility. Where we get into problems is when we add things to that," he says.

"The whole idea of lawns was really out there to sell these (synthetic) products and services that go with them," Duesing adds. "We should remember that one layer of leaves each fall is nature's fertility program for this whole region."

I do want a lush lawn. I also want some trees, shrubs, and perennials to attract birds and butterflies, and yes, my ever-expanding vegetable garden, fenced like Fort Knox to keep out deer, rabbits, and ground hogs.

"When we look back at what organic agriculture is about, it's building biodiversity and about using minimal inputs, working with nature to increase the biological diversity in the soil and the landscape," Duesing explains.

Duesing's concern is that most of the standard lawn chemicals go in the opposite direction, reducing biodiversity by killing off insects and other plant species, adding excess nitrogen, which can leach out into water wells and Long Island Sound where it encourages algae overgrowth, or phosphorus, which encourages green pond slime in inland waters, choking out native ecosystems.

His advice is to start with a soil test, including soil pH, which should be between 6 and 6.5. "That number is more important than NPK (nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium), and it is more easily corrected by adding crushed limestone, or ground marble, a natural material," he said. From there, add compost, which is increasingly available from multiple sources, or better yet, NOFA recommends home owners just create their own by recycling clippings and trimmings. "In the fall, run over the leaves with your lawn mower a time or two, leave them there so they will nourish the soil organisms, build up the organic matter to provide a reserve of nutrients the grass needs," Duesing said. "With those three things you may be able to avoid outside nutrients at all, and just mow the grass."

I'm all for that. But here's where Duesing's advice is really going to be hard for our household to follow:

"You might want to plant some clover. White Dutch clover is a solar-powered fertilizer factory," he says. "Dandelions do all sorts of good things - they are very beneficial for bees, birds, earthworms."

That's a real mind change for today's lawn kings. I don't even like dandelions in my yard or flower beds.

"I think it's better to have some clover in our lawn than to pollute Long Island Sound," says Duesing, "or to consume fossil fuels or perhaps pollute our wells with excess nitrogen just to have large expanses of grass around our houses."

Sobering thoughts for lawn and garden lovers. Look for the 2010-11 NOFA Organic Land Care and Organic Farms and Food Guides at your local library, some farmers markets, and environmental fairs or see more at www.ctnofa.org, or call CT NOFA, (203) 888-5146, in Oxford, CT.