



“Simple Steps” to Organic Lawn Care

Tips for Organic Lawns

As more studies document the threat to human health and the environment posed by synthetic pesticides that are routinely used in lawn care, there is increasing interest in chemical free lawn care. Below are some generally accepted “Simple Steps” that can substitute for conventional chemically based lawn care.

- **Test Your Soil. It is not possible to have a healthy lawn without healthy soil.** Before you begin a natural lawn care program, make sure to do a soil test to determine the health of your soil and its composition. The results will indicate what inputs and products are needed to amend the soil. Send 1 dry cup of soil in a baggy to a soil-testing lab. Request recommendations for organic fertilizers and amendments. Make sure you do not sample after fertilizer has been applied to your lawn.
- **Mow High and Sharp.** Set the mower blade at least 3 inches high and keep it sharpened. This encourages stronger more viable turf. Twice a year, the first mow in the spring and the last in autumn, set the blade to 2 inches. In the spring this removes any winter fungus and in the fall prevents fungus from getting established during the winter. Try not to mow when your lawn is wet.
- **Leave Grass Clippings** on your lawn to supply ample nitrogen, rendering unnecessary those high nitrogen synthetic fertilizers that are so damaging to the environment.
- **Water Infrequently and Deeply.** During extended dry periods only, water no more than twice a week deeply and deliver a total of 1” of water. This encourages deep root growth creating hardier grass that is more drought resistant. If the blades pop back up when you walk on your grass, it does not need watering. Despite what your sprinkler system service provider may recommend, natural lawns do not need frequent watering and may not need any if there is at least an inch of rain each week. Frequent, shallow watering will encourage grub infestation, fungus disease, and weak turf.
Water between 4 a.m. and 9 a.m. Watering should take place before intense sunlight causes too much water to be lost to evaporation. Watering in the early



evenings will leave the lawn damp all night, and may increase the lawn's susceptibility to fungus disease. Deep watering encourages deep root growth.

Environmental note: The average American family of four uses 400 gallons of water per day, and about 30 percent of that is devoted to outdoor uses. More than half of that outdoor water is used for watering lawns and gardens. Some experts estimate that more than 50 percent of commercial and residential irrigation water use goes to waste due to evaporation, runoff, or over-watering.

- **Feed the Soil.** Top dress lawn with ¼ inch compost or apply compost tea in Spring and Fall. Compost is a key to successful organic land care; it replenishes the soil to maintain ample organic matter, nutrients and beneficial organisms, essential components of a fertile nurturing soil.

Organic Fertilizers may be applied in Spring and Fall. Use non-synthetic, slow release fertilizers that are water insoluble. Organic fertilizers are broken down by soil microbes as opposed to water.

- **Control Weeds.** The best weed control is a strong, healthy turf to out-compete weeds. Over-seeding or re-seeding (ask for *endophytic* varieties) - in the early fall build stronger turf. You may want to aerate before putting down seed. (see below) Weeds can be hand pulled or larger areas can be smothered under black plastic at end of summer before putting down new grass seed. Spot treatment with white vinegar or natural weed killers such as Burn Out are also effective, but they will kill grass as well, so reseedling may be necessary.
- **Aerate your Soil.** Soil compaction is one of the biggest causes of weed problems. Aeration is the removal of plugs of soil, which allows oxygen to reach the soil and promotes root growth, proper drainage, and loose soil. Aeration also helps prevent thatch build-up of plant material between the green vegetation and the soil surface. By using non-synthetic fertilizers and eliminating the use of chemical pesticides, you will encourage beneficial micro-organisms and earthworms to inhabit the soil. These organisms will naturally create air pockets in the lawn. You can also hire a lawn service or use a core aeration machine. The machine will remove tiny plugs of soil. Leaving the plugs on the soil surface to break down naturally provides the soil and lawn with nutrients. Most lawns should be aerated once or twice a year during the transition period.
- **Re-define “Weed”**
Until the 1950s clover was included in many lawn seed mixes for its soft texture and ability to contribute nitrogen to the soil. The American lawn industry and



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chemical manufacturers started promoting pesticide use and encouraged the public to view clover as a weed. Many plants considered weeds – such as Veronica and violets – are actually wildflowers. If your lawn looks green and, most importantly, is a healthy place for your children and pets to play, please re-think your definition of “weed”.

- **Control Pests and Grubs.** Elimination of synthetic pesticides will increase populations of birds, beneficial insects and soil microorganisms which are natural inhibitors of disease and insect problems. Plant shrubs to attract bug-eating birds. If grubs become a problem, Beneficial Nematodes are the recommended antidote. Apply in late August/early September. They are not harmful to humans, pets or plants. Ask your garden center for details or visit www.norganics.com.