

Switching to Organic Lawncare Methods

As we switch from chemical lawn care maintenance over to organic, you should remember that problems are going to be exposed which normally would have been masked by the high nitrogen chemical fertilizers. Your lawn may not look as green and lush as it did before the switch (at least temporarily). Over a short time this will be corrected, but be aware that it is a possibility.

One of the things that will be happening is that your lawn is going to go through "*withdrawal*" symptoms because of lack of nitrogen. This is to be expected. Chemical fertilizers typically contain about 20 to 35 percent nitrogen. Organics at 8%, as with all other organic fertilizers which run as low as 4%; translate as a big drop, and your lawn can go into shock (until soil imbalances are repaired) if you don't compensate. There are several ways to accomplish this.

- You can on your first and/or your second organic fertilization applications, put down a half dose of whatever chemical fertilizer you were previously using. For that same application put down one full dose of whatever organic you are switching to as part of the weaning process and increase your next solely organic application by 50%.

or the latter which is my recommendation, and a preferred all organic solution from the start..

- Put down a special extra application of Organic Fertilizer the first year, (not part of the normal 4-Step Program); I recommend the 8-2-4 Plus, which best be done in the late fall after fall cleanup prior to a spring conversion; or as an early summer application when the decision to convert does not occur until spring. Still increasing the 1st application of Lawn Booster in the Spring by 50% if you're budget allows.

This should give your lawn an easy switch-over which won't stunt it too bad.

However, there are other problems which may need to be corrected before you will have your lawn looking its best. Organic methods tend to expose imbalances in the soil and other detrimental situations. One of the main problems that may need to be dealt with is thatch. If you have an excessive thatch issue, it is likely that you also have compaction and possibly high acid content. A soil test will give you pH readings to check acidity levels. Anything below 6 or 6.5 is probably too low. A Lime Application will correct this problem.

By following these tips and making sure to implement our other suggestions, you should be looking at a very healthy, chemical free lawn in about a season or two. Don't get discouraged. It can take time, but it will be worth it.

Lawn Aeration or Gypson Application

Core aeration can be a very good way to improve the soil conditions for your lawn when converting to organic. Lawns can become especially compacted when subjected to chemical fertilizer and pesticide applications over time and hopefully your customer has already been aerating at least once a year already. Once a full conversion to organic has occurred, we view aeration to be a wasted and unnecessary step. However, there are still times and situations in which a person can be doing everything right, but aeration might still be necessary. This can be the case for those people who have soil with a very high clay content. An application of granulated Gypson might do the trick as well to loosen up the soil.

If you find that lawn aeration is necessary, core aeration is the best method. Spike aeration can be helpful, but tends to be a more temporary method. Slitting or dethatching are ok too, however, keep in mind that this can also cause a certain amount of stress to a lawn by ripping through the sod, and the less stress, the better, so be sure to make just one pass. Organica offers a granular Dethatch Product to solve the thatch issue but I believe you can accomplish your end result more quickly by any of the means mentioned above.

Core aeration and or dethatch can also be helpful before topdressing or over-seeding a lawn for the first time but again, we do not recommend doing so on an annual basis. When topdressing, the main objective is to get good topsoil (or maybe some compost or sand) mixed into the soil so as to break things up and possibly provide some of the beneficial nutrients and organisms which the soil may be lacking. In light of this, it seems obvious that aerating beforehand will provide much better conditions for this mixing to take place since there will be holes for the topdressing material to drop into. Just remember, aeration itself creates a hole giving a weed the perfect opportunity to find a new home. When aerating in conjunction to going organic, be sure and over-seed as part of the process.

NOTE: When performing core aeration, don't worry about raking up the cores. Let them sit on the lawn and dry out (unless you absolutely can't stand the mess for a couple of days). When you mow the next time, you'll break up most of it, and nature will do the rest over a short period of time.

Correct Organic Lawn Mowing

1. Start cutting early. By cutting the lawn before it turns green and begins growing you clip off the old dead tips and give the lawn its cue to start growing. The sooner you get the lawn growing the better you can crowd out the weeds before they start.

2. Cut on a consistent basis. Normally weekly mowing is the rule, but some lawns need cutting more often. Other lawns will grow more slowly and might need cutting only once every ten days or two weeks. Generally, don't cut off more than one third of a blade of grass. Any more than that may harm the grass. So, if you like your lawn at 2 inches, make sure that you cut it when it gets to about 3 inches. Let the length of the lawn be the judge, NOT when the last mowing was.
3. Always have sharp blades. Dull mower blades tend to rip the blades of grass as opposed to cutting them. Every torn blade is an opening for disease and causes stress to the lawn. Mowing a lawn when it is wet tends to cause the same problem, so try to avoid it if possible. Never mow in the same direction for more than three weeks straight (preferably no more than two). If you do, you'll end up with ruts, and the grass will begin to lean over (making it difficult to get a good cut). Try cutting perpendicularly or diagonally occasionally.
4. Let it grow!! The longer you let your lawn grow (speaking in terms of length, not necessarily time) the longer your lawn's root system will grow. The longer the root system, the healthier and more stress resistant your lawn will be. AND, the more stress and drought resistant your lawn, the less watering that has to be done. In addition, tests have shown that letting the lawn grow to longer lengths reduce the number of weeds in the lawn by reducing the amount of sunlight that reaches weed seeds. This is especially true of crabgrass. Longer blades also have more surface area available for photosynthesis which produces life-giving food and energy for the lawn.
5. As long as you have a healthy lawn already and no problems with thatch, feel free to leave the clippings when you mow. Mulching is a good practice, but it is not a necessity. As long as the clippings are not excessive, they can in fact feed your lawn. If your soil is well balanced and has plenty of earthworms and micro-organisms, the clippings will break down within a short period of time and will provide nitrogen to your lawn. NOTE: If you are currently using chemicals or have within the not so distant past, it is likely that your soil is very acidic and has few of the aerobes and earthworms that are necessary for the break down of dead roots and clippings.
6. For the last cut of the season, make it a short one but be sure not to scalp your yard. Also, make certain to collect the clippings on the last mowing. These clippings most likely would not be broken down before cold weather moves in. Long grass and old clippings in the lawn can be the perfect breeding ground for disease and fungus at the start of the next season--especially snow mold.
7. To save some time and effort you may want to consider planting groundcover or putting in some mulched beds around trees and in areas that would otherwise have to be weed whipped.

Organic Thatch Removal

Thatch is a layer of dead organic matter at the surface of the soil and at the base of the grass plant. This layer is made up of dead roots, rhizomes and lawn clippings which have not been

broken down. A layer which is greater than about 1/4" is too much and should be dealt with appropriately. Thatch is beneficial under this level, but over 1/4" it keeps valuable water and nutrients from fertilization from ever reaching the soil. In addition, it is the perfect breeding ground for disease and pests which will harm the lawn even further.

You can check your thatch layer thickness by pulling up a section of sod or taking a core sample. Look right at the base of the grass blades where they come to meet the soil. You will see a brown matted section of dead organic matter. This is thatch. You will know that you have a serious problem if you see very few live roots extending beyond this layer and if the sod pulls up fairly easily in a nice uniform strip.

Contrary to what some may tell you, thatch is not directly caused by leaving clippings on the lawn. This can be a factor, but, if you have a healthy lawn and well balanced soil, clippings will not be a problem. When does it become a problem? When you begin using chemical fertilizers and pesticides, herbicides, fungicides....well, you get the picture. These products, although they *may* provide a quick fix to aesthetic problems in your lawn, will certainly cause even greater "behind the scenes" damage that will lead to even more damaging problems in the future.

The biggest problem is that these chemicals raise the acidity levels in the soil. Therefore, even if the chemicals don't directly kill off any beneficial insects, micro-organisms and/or earthworms (and most of them do), the high acidity levels of the soil will push them out anyway. All of these little helpers like pH levels near neutral. Without these helpers, dead roots, rhizomes and clippings cannot break down efficiently, and thatch buildup occurs. Also, aeration of the soil comes to a halt resulting in compaction of the soil. Moreover, without the breakdown of the dead organic materials many of the nutrients that the lawn needs are not being produced.

In short, your lawn is slowly dying.

So, How Do You Fix It?

There are dethatch products out there (even Organica offers one) that can be amended to the soil, but I recommend the old tried and true approach. Best to eliminate thatch by raking it out or using a dethatching machine or verti-cutter to slash it out and rip it up in either the spring or fall. Keep in mind that this causes a certain amount of stress to a lawn and an opportunity for both weeds and grass to take root, so take advantage of this opportunity to over-seed with grass seed as soon as possible. Also, the factors that caused the thatch build-up in the first place must be taken care of. This means eliminating chemical applications and probably adding a lime application to raise the pH levels back to normal. Also, if you intend on fertilizing, you should switch over to an organic fertilizer that will maintain the critical soil balance that your lawn needs. Organica's 4-Step product line quickly works to build microbial activity in the soil breaking down any remaining thatch in short order. You might also choose to aerate beforehand since this really should be done to alleviate soil compaction concerns.

Correctly Seeding a Lawn

Seeding a lawn correctly is not as easy as some might think. You could just run outside and

throw out a bunch of seed and hope it grows, but you'll be wasting a great deal of money on seed that won't end up germinating.

Use the tips below to help you make the most of your time, money and effort when you seed.

Renovation of present lawn: Is overseeding an appropriate measure?

1. Are there many bare patches or is lawn very thin? Do you have a fair amount of weed cover (20% - 40%)? If so, overseeding may be appropriate.
2. Is there weed infestation (50% or more weeds)? If so, start lawn from scratch.
3. Is the present lawn of an acceptable type? If not, start lawn from scratch.

If overseeding is appropriate, use procedure below with 1.5 times new lawn amounts.

1. Check for high acidity levels and apply lime as appropriate, discontinue chemical usage
2. Mow areas of lawn to overseed **very** short depending on your type of turf
3. Remove as much thatch as possible.
4. Pull or dig up as many weeds as possible
5. Sow seed mixture in appropriate amounts. A drop spreader works nicely.
 - o *Make one pass with half of seed necessary*
 - o *Make a perpendicular pass with the last half of seed.*
6. Top dress with compost, topsoil and/or Organica Kelp Booster
7. Cover with a light layer of mulch/ topdressing if necessary to maintain moisture capacity
8. Water regularly if needed but not excessively (appropriate to type of soil)

Money Well Spent

You may be thinking to yourself, "I don't have time to overseed my lawn, plant flowers, put mulch around trees, etc." What you need to realize is that a lawn which is cared for correctly and naturally will eventually begin to take care of itself in many ways. Good soil requires less fertilizer which saves money and time. Organic maintenance practices eliminate imbalances in the soil which are the initial causes of disease, pest and stress problems in your lawn. By eliminating these causation factors, you eliminate the time and money spent taking care of future problems.

Organic Weed Control

1. If your lawn is less than 10% weeds, you might want to learn to live with it. Present day, you will never organically rid yourself of every weed, and chemicals will only cause more problems. If your lawn has more than 25% weeds, it definitely needs help. More than 50% weeds means till it under and start from scratch.
2. Don't Use Chemicals!!! Every time you apply a chemical weed control product to solve one problem you create at least one more. Chemicals (herbicides, pesticides, fungicides,

fertilizers) destroy the natural balance of the soil and kill off many beneficial insects and organisms. This in turn causes other diseases and pests to spring up because their natural competitors are no longer present to keep them in check. In addition, grasses do not take well to the higher acidity levels and salts caused by most chemical applications (including fertilizers). Thus, you may begin to see bare patches in your lawn where the lawn has died off. These are the places where weeds will spring up.

3. If you have a high percentage of weeds in your lawn, you must have some areas lacking grass. If grass covered the entire plot, there would be no room for weeds. Therefore, it would be good to overseed the lawn (for sure areas where weed infestation are the worst).
4. Mow your lawn high and often (normally once per week is sufficient). This keeps sunlight from reaching dormant weed seeds and causes the lawn to fill in on its own.
5. If the weeds are going to seed such as when dandelions get that cottony puff head, catch the grass clippings when you mow so that the seeds don't have a chance to spread. Make sure to put the clippings someplace where the weed seeds will not blow back on the lawn.
6. If you have an area that has a high percentage of crabgrass already, and it is too late to "beat them to the punch" try spreading black plastic sheeting over the area for about a week to 10 days. The grass will yellow, but the crabgrass will die off. The grass will come back within a short period of time. To prevent the crabgrass from coming up again, follow the above outlined procedures at the recommended time of season.
7. The newest organic method being used for weed control measures is to spread corn gluten meal as a pre-emergent. This is a great alternative to chemical pre-emergents and works very well. Organica's Lawn Booster w/ corn gluten pre-emergent applied twice a year is one of the most effective available on the market to date.

Optimal Mowing Heights

Mowing heights depend on the type of grass and turf utilized but optimal cutting heights for cool-season grasses, such as blends of turf-type tall fescues, range from 3-4 inches. Kentucky Bluegrass should be mowed at heights of 2.5 to 3.5 inches. Cutting heights for warm-season grasses, like Zoysia, can range between 1.5 and 2.5 inches. Selecting the tallest, acceptable mowing height for your species of grass and maintaining that height throughout the entire mowing season is optimal at improving competition against weeds and reducing summer stress.

Save Money with Organic Methods

Having an organically maintained lawn can save you both time and money. Here are just a few tips which will hopefully assist you in both of these areas:

Organic Fertilization

- Organics have much lower nitrogen content than chemical fertilizers

- *Less time and money fixing spots where nitrogen "burn" occurred.*
 - *Slower lawn growth rate = less mowing, fewer clippings.*
- Greater resistance to stress, pest, disease and drought
 - *No need for pesticides, etc.-saves money (use organic if absolutely necessary)*
- Can be universally applied to any plant
 - *Fertilize lawn, landscaping, trees, gardens, etc. all at the same time.*

There are a couple of ways to reduce the necessity of fertilization which will save time and money also. Since a lawn needs a certain amount of nitrogen and normally fertilizer is purchased in order to supply this, finding alternate sources can be beneficial and cost effective. Leaving the clippings on the lawn (never in excessive amounts) will lessen the necessity for fertilizer. Grass clippings are a very good source of nitrogen and other nutrients for the soil. Clover mixed with your grass seed can also be a GREAT nitrogen source for your lawn (not too much though--it can take over a lawn).

Organic Mowing Techniques

A person can spend a great deal of time mowing their lawn. Although some find it enjoyable, there are many who would much rather spend that time with family or on other, more important tasks. Utilizing some of the tips below could save you a great deal of time and money, and will make it easier to have a good looking lawn.

- Mow your lawn in a circular or elliptical pattern spiraling inward
 - *Never have to turn the mower around.*
 - *Blow clippings "inward" for better mulching.*
- Put shredded bark or mulch or ground cover around trees, obstacles, house, etc.
 - *Reduces time spent weed whipping.*
- Mow lawn when it's needed, NOT when it's "Saturday"
 - *Never cut off more than 40% of grass blade.*
 - *Less stress to lawn = less disease, pests = less time and money fixing it*
 - *Fewer clippings eliminates need to rake or catch.*
- Always use SHARP blades
 - *Won't tear grass - less chance for disease*
 - *Won't take as long to cut the lawn and looks better*
- Let the grass grow long (at least 2 to 3 inches)
 - *Long grass blades lead to deeper and stronger root systems*
 - *Stronger root systems provided better drought resistance and therefore less watering is needed, saving you both time and money.*

Organic Watering Techniques

- Water **deeply** and **infrequently**
 - *Water your lawn only when necessary & for 20 min. - 30 min. (w/ good drainage)*
 - *Root systems grow much deeper*
- Never water at night - water in the morning.
 - *Water won't sit on grass and cause disease*

Organic Weed Control

Pulling or raking weeds out of your lawn can be very time consuming. However, chemical spraying can be very costly over time, especially because while fixing one problem it normally causes at least two more. The following tips should help reduce the time and money you spend on the "picture perfect" lawn. Remember, an hour spent today is 3 hours and a bundle of money saved next year.

- Take time to overseed your lawn in the FALL (late August)
 - *Weeds can't grow where grass is growing. Two things can't occupy same space.*
 - *Planting in fall eliminates grass vs. weed competition of spring.*
 - *Next spring new grass will crowd out the weeds*
- Fertilize in the fall
 - *Provides much needed nutrients for a good spring start so the grass beats the weeds*
- Mow the grass high (2 to 3 inches)
 - *Less sunlight reaches weed seeds so less will germinate*
 - *Grass forms thicker root system - less room for weeds*
- Catch clippings when present weeds are going to seed.
 - *Less weed seeds to germinate next year or later this year.*
- Keep thatch levels in check (lower than 1/2", preferably lower than 1/4")
 - *Weeds grow better in heavy thatch than grass does*

RESULT: Less time and \$\$\$ spent killing weeds in future

Organic Pest Control

A person could spend a great deal of money purchasing chemical insecticides to kill off pests in their lawn. Here are a few things to keep in mind:

- Make sure the "pests" are really causing a problem
 - *Many insects are beneficial for a lawn, don't kill the "good guys"*
 - Plant flowers which have leaves or blossoms with insecticidal properties.
 - *Many plant flowers / leaves contain organic, pest specific or general insecticides*
 - *By planting them once you create a lasting "free" insecticide supply*
 - Plant trees and shrubs in your yard for natural bird habitat
 - *Birds will keep your insect populations in check*
-