



First Steps

There are 3 considerations or steps that must be addressed upfront, and applied across the board, for all lawn and turf management professionals to be successful in implementing an organic landcare program.

1. The Soil Must be Tested in order to understand current soil health.
2. Commitment to the Use of Organics (This decision is vital.)
3. Adoption of Revised Horticultural Practices (It's easier than you think.)

When we follow these 3 steps, we are on our way toward beginning a successful program. Let's look at each of the steps in more depth.

1. Testing The Soil

One of the fundamental differences between a natural program and conventional turf grass management is the thought process regarding soil. Most of the products that are used in conventional management work directly with the plant and essentially bypass the living portion of the soil. In natural management the soil is integral to the way nutrition and disease management function and this is why we first focus on the creation of good soil health. Soil testing guides us in this process.

When we look at the nutrient, textural, and biological aspects of the soil together, we begin to get a snapshot of what is going on. It becomes the job of the turf manager to begin to assess current situations and then move properly in the right direction.

As long as the initial move involves addressing overall soil health we can be successful. This process involves product input for both immediate turf grass nutrition and overall soil improvement. It is critically important that our initial efforts address both of

these at their individual levels. Some of the product input addresses the grass and some of the product input addresses the soil. At some point, once we have made it through the transition period, the soil begins to provide for much of the plants' needs.

2. Committing to the Use of Organic Products

We rarely achieve success when we try to eliminate synthetic pesticides and continue to fertilize with synthetic, water-soluble fertilizers. Our choice of materials to address both the grass and the soil is natural, organic. There is a fundamental difference in the way that organic fertilizers work and the way that synthetic fertilizers function within the system. It is through an education process that we teach the difference between the two, and how making this choice sets us up to succeed.

3. Adoption of Revised Horticultural Practices

Turf professionals are aware of cultural practices in relation to turf, but the organic practitioner understands that they become critically important.

The use of synthetic fertilizers and control products can, at times, override the absence of cultural practices. We understand that employing strategies regarding aeration, overseeding, thatch management, irrigation, and top dressing if desired, will make a difference and assist us in offsetting the absence of chemical control products. We also know that synthetic products have the ability to override the absence of good cultural practices for a short period of time. They are generally looked at as materials that are treating symptoms as opposed to solving problems. The use of sound cultural practices will help us build the system.

This threefold concept replaces the product centered chemical approach.

A conventional management program is generally based on product input by the calendar date. This is evidenced by the development of the four-step program. That approach delivers product at regular intervals for both fertility and control. In a natural program we do things based on some degree of seasonality, but with the idea that the product is only a small part of the overall program.

An organic lawn program is science-based.

An organic lawn program is more than just a product for product swap. One of the mistakes that is made time and time again is simply trying to switch out conventional product for natural product. The idea that we can replace conventional insecticides with natural ones, traditional herbicides with alternative products, chemical-based fertilizers with organic

fertilizers, and biologically based fungicides for their chemical counterparts will not produce results.

This product swapping approach was taken early on in the beginning years of organic lawn care and people experienced more failures than successes. We know now that it is the systems-based approach that brings together science, product and practices. This approach allows for the design of a thoughtful program that monitors and manages the transition period. This period is when we implement changes, monitor progress, and make adjustments that may be needed to produce results that meet communicated expectations.

This does not necessarily happen in a day, a week, a month, or even a season. The length of time is generally governed by the quality of the turf system and the intensity of current and past chemical management practices. But if we follow these three critical steps, we are well on our way.

