Go Organic!

Over 10 million pounds of pesticides are applied on Long Island every year. This presents a threat of exposure to toxic chemicals and contamination of our underground drinking water aquifers.

Insects, weeds, and fungal diseases in a lawn are often symptoms of underlying problems.

Conventional methods that address those symptoms with chemicals that can be harmful to human health and the environment are simply not sustainable.

The Organic approach increases soil health, helps prevent disease with natural materials, and enhances soil life.

It’s An Easy choice!

The goal of an organic maintenance program is to establish a healthy soil ecology which provides your turf with natural defenses against weeds, disease, and insect pests.

Families who want to maintain green lawns without the risks associated with pesticides, need to know that there are better, safer alternatives. Especially where children are concerned.

Children crawl and play on the lawn, put hands and toys in their mouths, and have more contact with pets, which may have pesticides on their fur.

Exposure to toxins at a critical period of development can result in permanent damage to the nervous system. Children’s livers, kidneys, and other detoxification systems are not fully developed. Many Pesticides remain longer in their bodies, doing more harm.

Since Long Island’s water supply is drawn from the ground, it is important to use fewer pesticides and synthetic fertilizers which can leach through the soil and contaminate the underground aquifers. Synthetic nitrogen may also run off from fertilized lawns causing algae to grow in bays. As the algae die and decompose, they deprive fish of oxygen. Hypoxia, or a lack of dissolved oxygen, is already a serious problem throughout the western part of the Long Island Sound.

Finally, your lawn can become addicted to toxic pesticides because they kill the beneficial insects, microbes, and earthworms that help maintain a healthy lawn. When these “good bugs” are gone, expensive pesticides must be re-applied to kill pests that a healthy soil ecology would have helped to control.

Where can I find organic products?
Find a list of recommended lawn and garden stores at neighborhood-network.org, or ask at any better nursery.

Some name brand products to look for:
- Bonide
- Concern
- Critter ridder
- Earth Tone
- Espoma
- Garden Safe
- Garlic Barrier
- Garlic Barrier
- Hot Pepper Wax
- Liquid Fence
- Messina Wildlife
- Organica
- Ringer
- Safer Brand
- Shake Away
- St. Gabriel’s
- Victor Poison Free
Mowing
Cutting grass higher (3’ to 3.5’) will shade out weed seeds and keep them from germinating. This is the easiest, most basic step to controlling weeds and eliminating pesticides in use. Avoid cutting off more than one-third of the grass blade at a time. Cutting more can shock the plant and inhibit root growth. In the spring, you may have to mow more than once a week. Always keep mower blades sharp. Dull blades tear grass, leaving larger surface areas vulnerable to disease. Leave grass clippings on the lawn, providing vital nitrogen to keep the lawn green. This will reduce the need for fertilization and watering. In healthy organic soil the clippings break down quickly, a mulching mower will speed the break down.

Watering
Water infrequently but apply. Only about once every 7 to 10 days in the summer when there has not been a good rain. Light watering encourages shallow root growth. Shallow roots dry out quickly in dry, hot weather. You should wet the soil down to the full root depth, about 6 inches. To know how deep the soil is saturated, stick a shovel or spade into the soil and press forward; look behind the spade to see how far down water has reached. Or water long enough to apply an inch of water on sandy soil (more on clay). If you do not know the rate of your sprinkler, put a coffee can in its stream of water, time how long it takes to collect a half inch of water (about 10 minutes), and calculate the water collected as per square foot per hour. Divide the rate of your sprinkler, multiply by the area you want to water and time by the number of inches of water you want to apply.

Fertilizer
Fertilizer is less important for organic lawns than it is for chemically-dependent lawns. Low-maintenance fescues, where clippings are left on the lawn will need very little added nitrogen. Kentucky blue grass may need as much as 2 lbs./1,000 square feet per year. Apply half the year’s fertilizer around Memorial Day and the other half around Labor Day. If you only fertilize once a year, Labor Day is the better time. Do not fertilize in late fall (after October).

If your turf needs nitrogen, use organic fertilizer with low water soluble nitrogen, 5% or less is good. Organic fertilizers have a much lower N-P-K numbers, usually adding up to about 15 to 10. Soil microbes make the nutrients plant-available, releasing them slowly.

Addling white clover seed will reduce the need for fertilizer. Clover “fixes” nitrogen from the air, adding it to soil. Grass and most other plants cannot. However, clover blossoms may attract bees. If children play on your lawn frequently, you might want to avoid clover.

Compost
Compost contains beneficial microorganisms, and organic material. These are especially important for the first two years of transition to an organic program. Spread 1/4 inch thick on turf then rake in.

Some landscaping companies are now providing compost tea applications, which provides many of the benefits of compost, but is easier to use.

Soil Amendments
Lime
Test the pH of your soil before applying. Soil test kits are available at local garden stores. You can also send a soil sample to Cornell Cooperative Extension for testing. Keep the pH as close to 6.5 as possible. Long Island soil is likely to be more acidic (less than 6.5). If your soil is too acidic, add lime to raise the pH of the soil. Look for calcitic lime rather than dolomitic, unless you know the pH of the soil needs magnesium. In addition to raising pH, lime adds calcium, which discourages dandelions, because they thrive in low calcium soil. Pelletized lime is effective and easy to apply; if applying powdered lime, wear a dust mask.

Kelp
Kelp products are a natural source of micro-nutrients including vitamins, plant growth hormones, and trace minerals. Using kelp in the spring can protect your lawn from summer heat stress. It also helps establish grass seed.

Rock Dust
Rock dust adds trace minerals that are important for plant growth. Remineralizing your soil will improve turf vitality; this can be spread any time of the year, even in winter after a thaw.

Rock phosphate
Rock phosphate will add phosphonious which is important for root systems. It should be applied in the fall. Avoid run-off near fresh water bodies.

Weeds
Weeds take hold in bare or thin patches. Mowing higher, seeding bare spots, and proper fertilization will prevent most weed problems. Small outbreaks of perennial weeds can be weeded by hand or killed with hot water. Cover large patches of annual weeds with a mix of lime and compost, then seed on top. Adding calcium discourages dandelions; proper pH helps control crab grass.

Grubs
Soil insects such as grubs can be controlled with beneficial nematode. Apply nematode in the early morning or late evening, or on a rainy or cloudy day, and in spring or late summer. Direct sunlight will kill these delicate microscopic worms.

Insects can be controlled with a number of organic products, one example is garlic juice, which repels mosquitoes and ticks. Do not spray garlic on flowering fruit trees or vegetable gardens, or bees will not pollinate them. If you are having a party, spray a few days before. The garlic odor will be strong until it dries in about a day. Garlic will keep mosquitoes away for about two to four weeks.

Hot pepper wax will repel insects from your bushes, flowers and vegetables.

Dollar Spot and Other Fungal Diseases
Apply a high quality compost, composted wood bark, compost tea, or a microbial inoculant containing trichoderma fungus. When you mow, remove clippings so they do not spread the disease. Do not over-water or water in the evening.

Feed the soil
Remember weeds, insects, and diseases are indicators of an underlying condition. If you only treat the symptom and not the cause they will recur. The underlying cause, is usually malnutrition of the soil and the plant. Compost, compost tea, and proper pH balance will solve many problems.