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Organics in our Midst – Myth or Possibility?

by Steve Pincuspy

Turf professionals and homeowners increasingly use an organic approach to lawn care, and though the term can be as slippery as a dewy lawn, it is clear that organics are gaining wider acceptance. Yet this trend has not necessarily worked its way onto community parks and athletic fields. Many obstacles remain, including misperceptions about the costs of organics, questions about their short-term effectiveness and a general lack of knowledge about the principles of an organic turf system.

Investing the Time to Go Organic

At its core, organic lawn care focuses on restoring the soil system, rather than the grass, in order to create a more resilient and self-sufficient lawn.

This sounds great, in theory. However, there is a bewildering array of organic products and services making different claims, with few sources to verify this information independently. The result is a lot of speculation and skepticism towards organics. Park agencies suffering from budget cuts are less likely to invest the time required to sort out this confusion when conventional products offer the promise of a quick turf response with almost no planning or forethought. Organic turf systems simply take more time.



In 2005, John Howell of the Elk Grove Park District started the Community Athletic Fields Facility (CAFF) on a thirty-five percent bio-solid fertilizer infused with beneficial microorganisms, moving to seventy-five percent over the course of just a few years.

Yet a conversation with an organic turf manager indicates this is time well spent, and may free up even more resources over the long term.

Creating an Organic Turf System in Illinois

When John Howell of the Elk Grove Park District took over the Community Athletic Fields Facility (CAFF), he already had years of experience using organics at NaturaLawn of America. In the fall of 2005, he started CAFF on a thirty-five percent bio-solid fertilizer infused with beneficial microorganisms, moving to seventy-five percent over the course of just a few years.

Bio-solids are made from the sludge left over from sewage treatment. Bio-solids are arguably ‘organic,’

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depending on whom you talk to, and, even though they have been tested to ensure they meet EPA standards, some people still harbor lingering concerns about their long-term impact. However, bio-solids work in a similar manner to other natural-based fertilizers: they add organic matter to the soil that slowly releases nutrients, improves soil structure and encourages microbes. The addition of microorganisms to the soil also helps catalyze a healthy turf system by stimulating turf growth and suppressing disease outbreaks.

The results have been remarkable. “Since we started this program, turf durability has improved,” according to Howell. “It holds up to wear and tear better.” Similarly, the rust issues that used to plague the fields are no longer a problem. Howell estimates that total pesticide applications are down 70 to 80 percent, and he stopped using pre-emergent herbicides altogether. Current pesticide applications are very selective, consisting of only the occasional spot spray. Although the costs of organics were a little bit more expensive in the beginning, Howell says that more companies are offering products, so that the price is becoming competitive.

Other possible benefits of an organic turf system are less nutrient leaching and runoff, reduced mowing time, fewer irrigation cycles and an overall reduction in fossil-fuel consumption through the decreasing use of synthetic fertilizers, pesticides and gasoline.

Organics are now at the point where they are cost effective, create healthier turf with fewer disease problems, reduce labor hours, save money and help preserve local environmental quality. With all of these benefits, it is surprising that more people are not using organics. So what is stopping them? Trying anything new on lawns can be a challenge for turf managers, whose jobs are on the line. While the transition might just be a matter of time, it may take more success stories before others are convinced.

Using an All-Natural Program on Campus

Many prestigious institutions are choosing an all-natural program. Harvard University is just two years into an all-natural program on sixteen acres of high-profile, high-traffic turf, producing healthy largely weed-free grass with six- to eight-inch deep roots – unheard of in most conventional lawn programs. The secret: some initial compost topdressings to restore soil organic matter and regular compost tea applications to enhance microbial activity thereafter. As a result, they have cut all synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, using thirty percent less water in the process.

Safer Pest Control Project routinely conducts workshops for turf professionals to teach them how to develop their own natural lawn care program. Visit www.spcpweb.org/yards for more information.

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