

Making The Move From Chemical's To Organic Lawn Care

Recently we interviewed Rick Brzakala, President of Applewood Acres Gardening & Landscaping and Applewood Property Management and Board Member for the Organic Landscape Alliance in which Mr. Brzakala shared his views on the topic of organic lawn care and offered readers and consumers his insight into what they should expect in terms of making the move away from pesticide use.

The move from chemically treated lawns to organic (pesticide-free) is becoming more common as many homeowners are becoming increasingly conscious of the hazards associated with pesticide use.

Each year more and more homeowners are switching to 'natural' or 'organic' lawn care treatments and methods that offer them a safer more environmentally friendly choice.

In Toronto and surrounding municipalities, governments have begun to legislate the move away from dangerous pesticides. In many other jurisdictions across Canada and the United States, municipal bodies have outright banned or outlawed the application and use of these highly toxic chemicals.

Consequently, chemical companies in the Toronto area such as Chemlawn, Dr.Green, Weedman, Weed-Away, Lawn Rangers, etc. have lobbied hard to try and deter municipalities from enacting 100% bans, for fear of impacting their revenues and ultimately putting many medium sized businesses out of business. The political lobbying has worked to some extent, but the writing is clearly on the wall and the message is very clear- consumers want a safe and healthy environment and are willing to trade off chemically treated turf for safe and natural green spaces that offer zero risk to their families, children and pet's.

In the Toronto area, there are a few truly organic service providers. Once such company, *Applewood Acres Gardening & Landscaping* (Applewood) located in Mississauga Ontario, practices responsible horticulture and offer's consumers a variety of safe organic pesticide-free methods of treating their green spaces through the use of organic products. Rick Brzakala, President of Applewood answers some sample questions (below) from concerned consumers and describes the benefits of organic lawn care, as well as outlines some of the realistic expectations that consumers face in deciding to move away from chemicals and pesticides and invest their money in more environmentally safe methods of lawn care and gardening.

Question: I have a great looking lawn with very few dandelions each year. I have been using a chemical company for the past six years and they have given me excellent results at a reasonable cost. However, both my wife and I have become worried about the sprays being used on our lawn as we have two golden labs who love to roll around . What concerns should we have..

Its difficult to say what risks you and your family and pet's face with regards to the type of chemicals your service provider has been using. It would not be unreasonable to conclude that whatever the chemical, if it's not organic, then the toxicity and your exposure to it may be extremely risky.

Most people do not realize that chemical lawn sprays last up to 15 days in the surrounding vicinity (up to 300 meters) from where they were sprayed. It is an uphill battle if many of one's neighbors on a street move to organic and one neighbor continues to spray using chemicals. Toxicity levels in plants, animals and humans have risen dramatically in the past 30 years since the popularity of lawn sprays has increased. It is only now that cancer rates in pet's, children and older adults is reaching epidemic proportions that many are concerned about their immediate living spaces and the effects exterior contaminants have on themselves and those around them.

Consumer awareness about the health risks associated with exposure to pesticides has been the prime motivator behind why most municipalities have imposed tighter restrictions and outright bans on the use of pesticides.

However, the battle to ban pesticides is far from over, even though environmental groups welcome the latest legislative changes. An outright ban at the consumer retail level would be an even bigger success as many retail stores in both Canada and the U.S. continue to carry and sell many of the same toxins the municipalities are restricting. Controlling the service industry is one thing, controlling what a homeowner applies on his/her lawn is another matter.

A bit of a history lesson is important before we jump into our discussion:

Chemical pesticides were developed during WWII as agents for chemical warfare. From there, they were further developed to kill weeds, insects and diseases. Unfortunately chemical pesticides do not know when to stop and consequently kill many living micro-organisms in your soil. Environmentally, there is now a direct correlation and link between pesticide use and many forms of cancers in people and animals exposed to the carcinogenic toxins found in the pesticide compounds.

Some of the health concerns with pesticides are:

- many are considered to be carcinogenic
- risks to children, pets and wildlife
- weakens turf and makes it vulnerable to infestations
- adds more chemicals to our over-burdened bodies
- residues in food
- runoff into our water systems
- some are unstable and breakdown into more harmful substances (dioxins, etc)
- unnecessary and expensive

What can I expect to see happen when I switch from chemicals and pesticides to organic lawn care?

If your lawn has been treated for years by a chemical company, chances are there are very few beneficial micro-organisms in the lawn to fight off 'bad-bugs'. The synthetic chemical fertilizers that have been used on your lawn to kill weeds and dandelions have most certainly killed off all of the beneficial organisms as well. The beneficial organisms, such as earth worms, are what in the natural lawn cycle help your lawn defend against harmful insects and disease.

As well the acidity level of your soil (or PH level) is probably off from where it should be due to the high levels of nitrogen injections and spraying in the past. The poor condition of the soil and the depleted micro-organism populations require that your lawn be brought back into a more perfect natural state requiring such things as a PH soil test to determine what level of

resuscitation/rescue is needed. From there Applewood Acres would determine which type of organic compost fertilizing and top dressing would be required. If the lawn was severely compacted and thatch had built up, mechanical aeration or even de-thatching the grass may be required. Re-seeding with a hardy fescue or other type of grass seed may also help rejuvenate the turf.

If weeds and crab grass pop up Applewood can recommend treating them with a dry organic application of "corn gluten" (a natural by-product of corn milling that acts as a weed inhibitor and fertilizing agent- 100% safe for kids and animals) that simultaneously fertilizes your lawn and unlike toxic pesticides, Applewood's corn gluten poses no toxic risks.

If grubs are an issue Applewood will introduce microscopic nematodes (tiny worms) that borrow into the soil and reproduce at a high rate and cannibalize grub larvae and cinch bugs).

In the long run all of the above will aid the soil and help maintain your lawn above and beneath the surface. Applewood is committed to working with each client to customize a service arrangement to suit their specific needs and budget.

Why is organic treatment program generally more expensive then other alternative chemical and pesticide based applications?

Organic lawn care services are generally priced about 20-30% higher then chemical or pesticide services. The reason simply is that chemicals are plentiful and cheaper to produce. Organic elements are heavily reliant on manual production in order to get them to market.

Many organic service packages require greater frequency in application then just the one or two chemical dumps that are applied by many pesticide company's in a season.. Often there is a significant amount of labor that is involved in delivering the desired result's. Many organic company's price these return visit's (travel time, + labor) into the equation and when couple to the price of the materials, consumers inevitably end up paying a premium over what they would when using a chemical/pesticide company.

Moreover, at this time there are still unfortunately many more chemical/pesticide company's in the market place. They simply outnumber organic service providers and can afford to spend larger sums of revenue on advertising resulting in a saturation of the market with cheaper chemicals and services.

Generally speaking the organic industry as a whole is more expensive, whether it is clothes, food or environmental services such as lawn care.

As an aside, organic foods and cloth manufacturing are currently more expensive due to production costs. (E.g. organic food yields are on average between 10 and 20% lower than in conventional agriculture because organic farmers don't use herbicides so they have to weed some crops, such as onions and carrots, by hand). Such a labor intensive method contributes to a more expensive product. One also has to take into account the hidden costs cost to the environment that is associated with food production.

Agricultural practices that make use of pesticides and fertilizers can be expensive because of the harmful effect they have on human health and the environment.

The price we pay for our food does not take into account the cost of solving these problems - we pay for those indirectly through tax, which the government then uses to try and limit the damage inflicted by agriculture. Some scientists have estimated that the use of just one agrochemical (methyl-bromide) contributes to more than 20% of the global ozone depletion. This in turn is estimated to double the incidence of skin cancer globally.

Our taxes are then used to pay for operations and the care of terminally ill patients. This money is currently not added to the cost of producing crops (such as strawberries) using methyl-bromide. If the environmental cost were accounted for, organic strawberries would be cheaper than conventional ones.

In addition to the pricing factor the organic industry requires a greater level of understanding than chemical companies ask for from their consumers. In fact, most chemical companies profit from the ignorance of their consumers and prey on the uneducated who fail to understand the health consequences that are associated with prolonged exposure to their toxic products.

Conversely, as biased as it might sound, organic consumers are generally better educated and more knowledgeable about their environment and the consequences of their actions.

As a Board of Director member with the Organic Landscape Association, I have met and spoken to many consumers, as well as service providers. I believe that there is a general consensus out in the market place, that consumers are willing to pay a premium, regardless of the reason why organic services cost more, simply because as one of Applewood's clients put it... "when it comes to the health of my family, the cost factor is irrelevant and if I would have to think about it ..it's (price) the last determinant in my decision making process..."

Most Pesticide(Chemical) companies offer guarantees. What kind of guarantees do organic lawn care and gardening companies provide?

Perhaps the greatest disadvantage organic/natural lawn care has when compared to chemical company's is that organic or natural lawn treatment results cannot be absolutely guaranteed. Let's face it, controlled (albeit toxic) chemicals offer a greater assurance of what to expect as their end result can be better controlled versus one that is co-dependent primarily on nature- which as we all know may

take a bit longer and even be a bit unpredictable. However, in the end one is a lot safer and the trade off of less predictability is accepted and forgiven.

Organic gardeners who are educated and understand the products that are being used around their property also understand that dealing with the natural world, as opposed to the chemical, requires a greater degree of patience and leniency. Mother nature may at times have her own schedule and cannot, nor should, be rushed. Consequently, this lack of absolute assurance is what probably sets organic lawn care at its greatest disadvantage in terms of competing against chemical pesticides where consumers have gotten use to almost instantaneous (albeit riskier) and less costly results.

How easy is it to transition a chemically treated lawn back to its ideal organic and natural state?

Many consumers that move to organic lawn care services such as Applewood, understand that natural results come at a different pace than those derived from chemicals. Expectations of most organic consumers are reasonable and allow for Mother Nature to take control. The trade off is enormous in terms of maintaining a healthy environment around your family home...If it means the occasional dandelion, so be it.

More and more consumers seem to be willing to trade off the importance of cosmetics for something more substantive and real...the importance of one's health and a cleaner environment.

Any service provider who guarantees results using organic methodologies is taking a risk. Educating the consumer on the process, ingredients and expected results is what we do. To do so otherwise creates false expectations and may end up being misleading and dishonest.

What types of things are done to either rejuvenate or re-establish a lawn that has been chemically treated with pesticides?

Moving from a chemical lawn to organic means in most cases that your lawn needs to be re-established below ground. Lawns treated with continuous pesticides also kill beneficial insects and soil micro-organisms that act as natural predators of plant pests. Pests return, however there are no good bugs to help keep them in check and they return even worse.

Organic fertilization (i.e.cow/sheep/worm compost or manure) tend to have fewer harmful insects than those fertilized with synthetics. Soil microbes are needed to make use of the nutrients in the soil by taking energy from organic matter. Depleting organic matter makes the soil lifeless. Although you may have thought your lawn was lush and green, and healthy, the results that were being achieved through the use of chemicals, was nothing more than cosmetic.

Soil Preparation is an important first step to developing a healthy lawn. At Applewood we would need to first test the soil to determine the soil conditions and correct nutrients required. Add lime if it is below 6.0 and gardener's sulfur if it is above 7.0. Dandelions love a pH of approximately 7.5. Grass loves a pH of about 6.5. If your pH is 7.5 or higher, your grass will probably never beat out the dandelion. Lower the pH to 6.5 and your grass has the advantage over dandelions.

The three main nutrients for healthy plants (lawns) are nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium. Using Organic fertilizers provides a slower release of these nutrients. We would need to apply fertilizers in the fall for previously chemically dependent lawns and again in the spring.

Applewood sources for these fertilizers are:

Nitrogen – Canola seed meal, Fish meal, Blood meal, Hoof and horn meal

Phosphorus – Bone meal

Potassium – Kelp meal and Liquid seaweed, Wood ashes

Fertilizer- Sheep,Cow,Worm or Bat(Guano) Manure (kilm dried to kill any dormant weed seeds), alfalfa

Compost is an excellent and easy additive for lawns. Compost can be easily made by adding kitchen waste into a black garbage bag or Compost Bin. Compost can be added to lawns without

the fear of “burning” the grass as will happen with too much synthetic fertilizer. Compost also adds organic matter in the soil, benefiting the soil microbes.

Plant Selection is important to help create a lawn resistant to pests and reduce maintenance. Look for pest resistant plants. Select a grass blend that has a high percentage of *Tall Fescue*, also Perennial Ryegrass and Kentucky bluegrass (Baron).

If there is a particularly weedy area, we would mow very low, as low as the blade will go. Then apply grass seed, water and keep mowed low until seed starts to germinate. The grass seed will germinate quicker with the warmth of the sun. Once germination begins, we would start to cut higher, allowing grass to grow.

This is very useful in areas where the weed is not spread by seed but by root, such as Creeping Charlie. You will eventually crowd out the weed with healthy new grass roots.

Can organic lawn care provide the same results as I am currently enjoying with my current company?

This is a common question we often hear from newer customers or people thinking of switching service providers. People are concerned that if they move from chemicals/pesticides to organic, the appearance and “quality” of their lawn will suffer and it will not be as esthetically pleasing and green.

It may in fact take some time for your lawn to bounce back to its proper, natural level. It usually takes two or three seasons for organic fertilizers to produce optimum results, but in the long run they will improve the soil’s health.

In the short term, you may or may not witness the same results you have been use to with chemicals...meaning, you may see the occasional dandelion or weed surface. These over time can be controlled with such natural products as ‘corn gluten’ (a by-product of corn milling and a natural fertilizer that also acts as an excellent weed inhibitor).

Generally after two seasons, most people notice a positive difference depending on the issue’s or goals they set out to achieve. At the very least they know that their immediate environment is safe for their children and pet’s and worry free from unknown and harmful chemicals.

My chemical company has “environmentally friendly”, “natural” and “organic” service packages... how do I know if it is really “organic” and enviro.safe?

Many chemical companies have begun to manipulate unwitting consumers by disguising and ‘re-packaging’ their existing toxic chemicals by ‘green-labeling’ them under more environmentally-friendly sounding pseudonym’s and language.

The chemical pesticide industry understands that their days are numbered, and their marketing and advertising people are cleverly trying to squeeze out profits by taking advantage of loopholes in bylaws that do not currently restrict and govern how they can market their services or how they label the chemical pesticide ingredients that go into their products.

Consequently, many chemical pesticide company's are continuing to spray the same toxic chemicals that they have always been spraying, but now are re-labeling them in their marketing literature as "organic" or "natural". Current loopholes allow for a product to be labeled as organic if at least one composite ingredient is either water or has traces of carbon. Almost everything produced in the chemical industry has each of these elements. In other words, buyer beware and do your due diligence!

How can a consumer protect him/herself from the manipulation that is taking place in the marketplace.

My first suggestion when selecting an organic service provider is to go with someone that belongs to a reputable organic regulatory body or agency that has set a high standard for its membership and the company's in the directory have all signed off that they are pesticide free and truly practice responsible horticulture. The Organic Landscape Association (OLA) www.organiclandscape.org is one such body in Canada where a client can be assured that companies and businesses registered there are truly organic and pesticide free. Membership does not always guarantee quality, but lack of membership can cast doubts on the person's professionalism.

Having an organic lawn care company provide you with a written declaration about the ingredients it will be using is synonymous to an assurance that no chemicals or toxic pesticides will be used on one's property.

Ask questions about what type of ingredients are included in the applicators the company will be using.

If the company cannot produce a declaration, in writing, or if they start throwing around a lot of chemical sounding terms, you know it will not sound natural.

Don't settle for such responses as, "it's been government approved and is safe", "it's organic and natural...look I don't even use gloves or a mask when I spray.." "it's certified natural", or environmentally friendly"...None of these response tell you anything.

In most cases if it is a chemical company disguising itself as now being organic, the service person will know very little about what they are spraying. This in itself speaks volumes and should alert you to something being not right.

If a DO NOT WALK on your lawn sign is posted, or if there is any other type of sign posted that identifies that some type of application has been released, it generally indicates that chemicals have been used, regardless of what the company promised you.

Many municipalities have strict controls and laws about posting notice that chemicals were applied. The sign will also indicate the chemical name or code that your lawn was sprayed with. No organic company will ever post such a sign!

Obtain a schedule or time-table that will govern service calls and application times and understand in writing what it is they will be doing and again, written assurance that no toxic chemicals or pesticides will be released on your property.

Pesticide and chemical lawn-care companies have traditionally relied on preventative applications—dumping chemicals before a pest problem arises. The drawback is that often times, it is a matter of ‘over-kill’ as many of these chemical applications may be unnecessary.

Organic companies routinely investigate the pest problem with a on-site evaluation and don’t do such evaluations over the phone such as some chemical company’s that do cold calling and request your credit card info and then later some guy shows up in a green uniform and doses your yard with who knows what.

Beware of “door knockers” and flashy slick advertising pamphlets that make ambiguous claims and scream out “Natural” and organic.

Chemical companies today are routinely re-inventing the way they market themselves. The one thing that has not changed with them is their continuous push to get you signed before the snow has left your front yard.

Most companies and other reputable organic service providers that Applewood deals with believe it or not, do not need to mass market themselves in such a way as they can barely keep up with the word of mouth referrals.

Don’t be rushed into paying them on the spot, even if a company says they will give you a 10 percent discount for a decision today.

Do not pay in advance. Most organic company’s will allow you to pay as you go.. a very good testimonial to responsibility and wanting their customers to witness the progress.

Ask for referrals

Ask if there is any toxicity associated with the substances that will be applied on your lawn. (Toxicity is the inherent ability of a chemical/ pesticide to cause injury or death, indicating how poisonous the chemical is. Acute toxicity is the ability of a substance to cause harm as a result of a single dose or exposure to a chemical. Chronic toxicity is the ability of a substance to cause harm as the result of repeated doses or exposures over time.) if the answer comes back that there is any mention of the slightest toxicity, your provider is not organic and is trying to fool you into believing their product or service is risk-free.

I have always told our Applewood clients that there is enough pollution in the environment we live in, the last thing I want to do is to breath or touch more of it when I get home.

Concluding Remarks From Rick Brzakala, President Applewood Acres Gardening & Landscaping

Applewood prides itself on educating its clients and potential consumers of its organic products and service offerings.

We are encouraged by the mindset in the marketplace shifting away from dangerous chemicals and pesticides. It’s not an easy battle some days , but we believe that through he partnerships we

enjoy in working with our clients we can achieve a healthier difference, even it is only one backyard at a time.

For more information on Applewood please visit their website www.applewoodacres.org

Applewood Acres Gardening & Landscaping (Applewood Property Management) or “Applewood” is located in Mississauga, Ontario. Applewood is comprised of professionals with over twenty years of experience focusing primarily on residential and small to medium sized commercial corporate projects offering property management, residential and commercial repair services and a full suite of landscaping, organic and natural lawn care and gardening services. Applewood is a privately owned business, that has in the past volunteered its services and offered generous financial assistance and support to a number of environmentally conscious organizations and social charitable organizations. Most recently, Applewood has contributed financial assistance to the High Park Initiatives Fund donated its services and workers to onsite building projects for Habitat For Humanity as well as local community organizations and schools.

For more information on Applewood and its services please visit their website www.applewoodacres.org or email Applewood at applewoodacres1@yahoo.ca . Applewood can be reached by phone by calling (905) 281-3111 . Applewood is a proud sponsor and member of the Organic Landscape Alliance (OLA).

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