

# GREEN LIVING

By Cile Downs

## Organic Lawn Care

Yes, I know how Americans love their lawns, and how they demand that they be perfect as though they were just sodded or maybe made of plastic. They buy lawn care products by the millions of tons a year nation-wide, without thinking that many are poisonous. Even worse, the well-off hire lawn-care companies that take care of the problem, out of sight, out of mind. If price is no object or poisoned groundwater or offspring no objection, the lawn-possessor can simply swell with pride and far surpass all the neighbors.



But you are the exception, you have heard some things and sincerely want to know a better way to have good-looking grass without using bad stuff. Might I suggest ORGANIC?

In common usage, this means using natural methods without chemical fertilizer or chemical pesticides, fungicides, or herbicides. Many lawn problems are the result of bad growing conditions (over-watering, cutting too short, shade, or acid soil), use of the wrong grass (consult an expert or a neighbor with a successful lawn) or the very pesticides, fungicides and fertilizers that are touted on the packages as cures.

The very best fertilizer for a lawn is compost (available free at the Town Recycling Center) followed closely by rotted manure, fish emulsion, cottonseed meal and commercial organic fertilizers. These release their nitrogen slowly so it does not immediately leach down past the grass roots and into groundwater. Nitrates in groundwater are a growing human health problem,



and appear to encourage algae blooms and other problems when they reach estuaries. There are even water-insoluble organic fertilizers low in nitrates and phosphates that are broken down by soil organisms and can't wash away. The idea is to keep adding fertilizers that build the soil, making for permanent improvement in your turf. When you have enough humus to support earth worms, they become little fertilizers and aerators of your lawn. Acid soil is easily corrected by annual application of ground limestone. Avoid cutting off more than 1/3 of the grass blade at one time. Leave clippings on the lawn. Water infrequently but deeply. Funguses thrive in over-watered grass. One of the saddest sights is an automatic sprinkler system watering a lawn in the rain when someone has left it on a timer and gone away. Fungicides may abolish disease organisms that flourish in bad conditions like these, but at the same time kill off the beneficial ones that healthy soil needs.

Pesticides can do the same thing. Besides killing earthworms, and threatening the health of children and pets that play on the grass, they will tend to leach down into groundwater where they may threaten the health of anyone who drinks the water. Besides these dangers, rain can wash pesticides from home lawns into nearby bodies of water where they can kill fish and shellfish. Insects are attracted to struggling and weakened plants. Keep your lawn healthy as described above, and you won't have to endanger human and animal health because of a few insects. Never use weed killers (herbicides). They are among the most carcinogenic of all chemicals used on lawns. 2,4 D and glyphosate (the active ingredient in Round-up), have been linked to non-Hodgkins lymphoma as well as canine lymphoma. Weeds not discouraged by a healthy turf or accepted as being at least green (I've seen some very nice crabgrass-dominated lawns) can be dug out and added to the compost heap. Corn-gluten prevents weed seeds from germinating if applied to established lawns in early spring for several years. Weed control on driveways and walkways can be accomplished with the use of vinegar. All lawn chemicals are dangerous and can remain poisonous for up to a year if tracked into your house.

In 2006, the East Hampton School Board voted to use herbicides on their playing fields because of "poor turf conditions". Sue Avedon, co-chair of the South Fork Groundwater Task Force, says she was shocked and appalled by the decision, given the fact that there had been a cancer cluster of non-Hodgkins lymphoma among East Hampton High School students in the late 90s. Toxic chemical use on all school grounds was discontinued at that time. When she heard of the reinstatement of herbicide use, Sue contacted the school district's Director of Facilities who informed her that they would not be using the herbicides for now. The door was not closed on future use. "Given the history and the known dangers of these chemicals, and the obligation of the school authorities to protect children in their care, this is an outrage!" says Sue. "Schools, of all places, should have a permanent no-chemical policy!"

The dangers of pesticide use as well as guidelines for organic lawn care have been compactly spelled out on the Green Lawn Card (slightly larger than a bookmark) created by Grassroots, an environmental organization. It is available at East Hampton Town Hall or call the South Fork Groundwater Task Force at 329- 9560.