

The transition from chemical to organic lawn care requires a willingness to learn about and accept the gradual processes of nature. Patience and ecological awareness are essential.

Get Educated and Get Involved!

One of the greatest differences between organic and chemical lawn care is the degree of ecological knowledge and participation required by the homeowner. Homeowners who decide to ditch their chemicals must learn how to create and maintain a healthy, naturally pest-resistant lawn. In many cases, the overuse and misuse of lawn care chemicals has resulted in unhealthy, highly pest-susceptible lawns. If this is the case, it may take some time to break the cycle of chemical dependency and establish a healthy and resilient system.

Fertilize Naturally

The guiding principle of organic lawn care is to nourish the soil. In this way, it differs fundamentally from chemical lawn care, which focuses on feeding the grass. Nourish your soil with natural and organic products such as finished compost (from your own backyard compost heap), well-aged manure (eg. Turkey Trot), grass clippings and/or slow-release organic fertilizers. Grass clippings and compost can be applied in small amounts throughout the growing season but slow-release organic fertilizers are best applied in late summer - early fall. An early spring application is also acceptable. Unlike many quick-release chemical fertilizers, these natural and organic products will not burn grass or contaminate ground and surface water.

Note: Before you feed your soil, you may want to test it to determine the pH (acidity/alkalinity) as well as the amounts of nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium in the soil. The results will tell you what your soil needs so you won't be unsure if you are over-feeding or under-feeding with a particular nutrient. Testing should be done in early spring and only once every four to five years. Home kits for soil testing are available, or you can have a professional lab test your soil for nutrients.

Topdress with Compost

Nourish your soil by sprinkling finished compost over your lawn. Finished compost has an earthy odor, spongy texture and rich-brown colour. It contributes a wide range of both macro and micro-nutrients, which are released slowly over a long period of time. It also contributes microorganisms, which help decompose thatch and other organic matter.

Recycle your Clippings

Instead of collecting and putting clippings out for garbage, leave them on your lawn. Grass clippings are the perfect fertilizer for lawns. They are free, convenient, chocked full of nutrients and organic matter and able to boost soil fertility by up to 30 per cent. They also return moisture to your soil and shade it from the drying rays of the sun.

Aerate

Aeration relieves compaction and cultivates the soil. It is best done in the spring or fall prior to fertilization. Aeration increases air and water penetration and movement in the soil. You can ensure continual, natural and free aeration by attracting and protecting earthworms in your soil. Aeration is especially important in Manitoba, as our clay-based soil tends to get compacted easily, and a compacted lawn is more prone to weed infestations. If you can't stick a pencil into your lawn, it's too compacted and needs to be aerated. The best way to aerate is to use a plug-removing machine, or "coring aerator". These machines remove small plugs of soil and leave them on top of the lawn to decompose.

Overseed

Your lawn is comprised of millions of individual grass plants. Like any other living thing, these plants eventually die. It is important to overseed once a year to keep your lawn thick and healthy. A dense lawn will crowd out weeds like dandelions and crabgrass that crop up in bare or thinly-covered patches. Choose grass varieties that suit the light, moisture and soil conditions of your yard. It is best to overseed from late-August and late-September, although April is also acceptable.

Overseeding is also a great way to introduce hardy, pest-resistant and low-maintenance grass varieties such as perennial ryegrass and fine fescues into your lawn. A lawn with diverse grass types is better able to deal with and recover from stresses such as droughts, pest outbreaks, diseases and traffic. Adding 10% clover seeds to the mix will also help give the soil and therefore the grass a natural nutrient boost because clover fixes nitrogen from the atmosphere.

Mow High

Mowing is one of the most important aspects of organic lawn care. The simple practice of mowing high contributes enormously to the health of a lawn. Experts recommend letting your grass grow at least 3 inches because it shades out sun-loving weeds and encourages good root development. Taller turf also shades the soil more than shorter turf thereby helping to keep soil cool and moist.

The One-Third Rule

A general rule is to never cut off more than one third of the blade at once. Cutting off more than one third of the blade may cause the grass plant to go into shock as a huge portion of its food factory is eliminated. It will also result in longer clippings that take longer to decompose and may suffocate some grass plants. If grass is overgrown, mow twice; first at a high setting and then at a lower one.

Sharpen your Blade Once a Year

Another way to ensure your grass remains healthy and strong is to cut it with a sharp blade. Dull blades tear and stress grass blades, thereby increasing the potential for disease and infestations. Sharp blades cut cleaner and easier and leave your lawn healthier and better looking.

Water Wisely

Experts agree that a lawn requires no more than one inch of water a week. Sometimes, rain will provide your lawn with all the water it requires. At other times, irrigation is required. As a general rule, water deeply once a week during the early morning. Watering during the late evening is not recommended because cooler temperatures and sitting water invite disease.

Thatch Removal

Thatch is the dense layer of undecomposed plant matter compacted on the surface of your soil in a grayish brown fibrous mat. Thatch is *not* the very healthy and beneficial layer of natural mulch at the base of your grass plants. A thick layer of thatch will prevent water from soaking into the soil beneath, providing the perfect breeding ground for plant disease and insects. If the thatch layer is thicker than 0.6cm (¼ inch), you may want to dethatch. The best time to do this is in the fall using a rake specifically designed for this purpose. Dethatching stresses the lawn so if you discover you have build-up in the spring or summer, aerate and topdress with compost as an interim measure.

Organic Lawn Care Schedule

(This is simply a guide. Not all steps need to be done every year or as many times per year as this schedule suggests)

