

## **DEVELOPING AN ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP PROGRAM FOR MICHIGAN'S LAWN AND LANDSCAPE INDUSTRY**

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In the late fall of 2000, the Michigan Department of Agriculture sponsored a project to evaluate the merits of a state-wide environmental stewardship program for the lawn and landscape industry. The primary industry associations along with professionals from each region of the state were assembled to participate in the project.

The lawn and landscape business offers a wide range of disciplines where individual companies usually specialize in a niche of the marketplace. Landscape businesses range from nursery production to landscape design, construction, and management. Lawn management businesses range from those offering irrigation, construction and installation to mowing, fertilization, and pest control. Because of the range of services, it may be cumbersome to describe a "typical" lawn and landscape company. Therefore, an environmental stewardship program should focus on the programs and inputs used to manage these landscapes, their potential to degrade natural resources, and the ability of individual companies to maximize the protection of natural resources.

The "Green Industry" has been challenged over the years by environmental groups and regulatory agencies regarding the amount and source of nutrients used, timing of application, pest control programs, pesticide product choices, applicator training, safety programs, regulatory compliance, and diligence toward protecting environmental resources. Of primary importance in Michigan are the protection of the surface and groundwater resources, and the health concerns of citizens from the inputs used on lawns and landscapes. The Michigan Department of Agriculture estimates that there are approximately 1,000 companies licensed to apply pesticide products to home lawns and landscapes.

There has been recent activity at the local level to create more consumer awareness of lower impact lawn care programs. The Southeastern Oakland County Resource Recovery Authority (SOCRRA) in collaboration with the Metro Detroit Landscape Association (MDLA) and others have developed a "Healthy Lawn" program designed to assist homeowners in making lawn care choices that reduce inputs and improve cultural practices in an effort to protect natural resources. The MDLA has recently created a program for their members to become certified as "Healthy Lawn" providers. Other organizations that have been active in recommending lawn care practices and water quality education include the Rouge River Watershed Council, the Huron River Watershed Council, the Clinton River Watershed Council, and the Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council.

Michigan currently has legislation in place that authorizes the MDA to regulate the use of pesticides on lawns and pre-empts local authorities from creating additional regulation at the local level. There is no similar legislation that authorizes the MDA to regulate the use of fertilizers on home lawns and no pre-emption system to prohibit local units of government from regulating the use of fertilizers. At this time, there are several local authorities that have adopted

ordinances to limit the amount of nutrients used on lawns by their residents. The City of East Grand Rapids and West Bloomfield Township have had restrictions in place for several years. West Bloomfield Township modified their ordinance this summer to prohibit the use of phosphorus by commercial applicators unless its use can be defended by a soil test. Since that time, other municipalities have been considering developing their own individual ordinances. The Southeastern Michigan Council of Governments has provided recommended language for local fertilizer ordinances and will provide assistance for those interested in adopting them.

The committee concluded that a state-wide environmental stewardship program would be beneficial for the long-term prosperity of the lawn and landscape industry. They discussed a variety of principles that would be critical in making the program successful and they are listed below. The order of presentation is not intended to rank one element as any more important than another.

### **1. The Program is Voluntary, Non-Regulatory, and Confidential**

This program would be a voluntary and self-paced program with clear guidelines for “certification”. The evaluation of participating businesses would be conducted by the Stewardship Program at MSU in collaboration with industry associations and regulatory agencies. Participant’s records are confidential.

### **2. Establish Partnerships**

In order to deliver the objectives, foster collaboration, and broaden the legitimacy of the program, effective partnerships will need to be established. An initial list of partners and groups to assist in the development of the program include the following:

- \* Michigan State University
- \* Michigan Nursery and Landscape Association
- \* Michigan Turfgrass Foundation
- \* Metro Detroit Landscape Association
- \* Michigan Department of Agriculture
- \* Michigan Department of Environmental Quality
- \* Greater Grand Rapids Landscape Maintenance Association
- \* Grand Rapids Nursery and Landscape Association
- \* Kalamazoo Valley Landscape and Nursery Association
- \* Saginaw Valley Landscape and Nursery Association
- \* Genesee Valley Landscape and Nursery Association
- \* Mid-Michigan Landscape and Nursery Association
- \* Capital Area Landscape and Nursery Association
- \* SOCRRA
- \* Michigan Environmental Council
- \* Huron River Watershed Council
- \* Rouge River Watershed Council
- \* Clinton River Watershed Council
- \* Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council

### **3. Establish Areas of Competency**

The program would establish minimum standards for the infrastructure of the business, employee training, and customer communication. Once these standards are met, the business would be recognized as being “certified” by the program. The criteria for the business infrastructure area will ensure that programs are available to maximize water protection and to create standards for the operation of the business. The employee training and customer communication areas will establish minimum competency levels for natural resource protection. The intent is to establish firm standards, yet allow flexibility and competitiveness within the industry. Each participant in the program would be provided checklists to evaluate their level of competence in each of these areas. The program would provide the technical assistance for participants to make advancements toward certification.

### **4. Establish Industry Definitions and Standards**

There are inconsistencies in the way terms are being used in the industry and the confusion that results has challenged the integrity of the lawn and landscape professionals. The committee identified several terms that will need to be defined by the program and associated partners in order to foster consistent communication within the industry. These terms include:

Spot Spray	Dry Time
Combination Products	Integrated Pest Management
Broadcast Application	Target Application
Blanket Application	Preventative Application
Low Impact	Broad Spectrum
Systemic	Naturally-based
Pre-emergence	Post-emergence
Selective	Non - Selective
Nutrient	Macro vs. Micro Nutrient
Organic	Natural
Natural Organic	Organic - Based
Slow – Release	Balanced
Controlled – Release	Quick Release

### **5. The Program Must Be Accountable**

### **6. Program Must Be Marketable**

## **7. Statewide, Yet Local**

This program should not be viewed as all inclusive. Partnering with local initiatives and organizations that have the ability to address local needs will promote its adaptability state-wide. Examples include the “Healthy Lawn” program in SE Michigan and the lawns and lakes program being considered by the Tappan of the Mitt Watershed Council.

The first phase of this project is to establish the program requirements, identify the specific program materials needed, and clarify the roles and responsibilities of all partners. The second phase of the program will be to develop the materials and field test the program. Future intentions of this program will be dedicated toward adapting the program for the ornamental tree and shrub management business and the nursery production segments of the “Green Industry”.