

Organic Lawn Care

DOUG SMITH DISCUSSES THE NEED FOR STANDARDS AND CERTIFICATION

The term “organic” has by and large been accepted by our society. Education, especially by interest groups, has sent a strong “organic” message. The message has been picked up by the public, who have now created a demand for organic consumer goods and services.

The lawn care service industry has taken particular notice of this trend. As well as their conventional programs, some lawn care companies now also offer their customers organic programs to varying degrees. A select number of companies provide only organic programs and have noticed an increase in business.

At the same time as the lawn care industry is experiencing a growth in demand for organic lawn care, the real possibility exists that environmental legislation will ultimately prohibit the application of conventional chemical pesticides and fertilizers. It is therefore important that all lawn care companies accept there are forces beyond their control that will drive an even increasing demand for organic lawn care. It just makes sense that lawn care companies should give their customers a full range of options when it comes to lawn care, options that include both conventional and organic programs. It is time for

the lawn care industry as a whole to take advantage of the clear business opportunity that exists and decide to become proactive by adhering to a set of standards for organic lawn care and becoming certified organic lawn care providers.

The Need for Standards

Standards for organic lawn care are important because they will “set the bar” for both the consumer and the lawn care provider. A clear set of standards will provide direction on the principles, processes and products involved in organic lawn care. Standards that lead to certification will then create a level playing field for both the consumer and the lawn care provider. The provider is certified and able to deliver an organic program, while the consumer is in a much better position to compare those lawn care companies that are certified and provide organic lawn care programs.

With standards, there will be no basis for descriptive terms such as, “environmentally friendly,” “natural” or “organic-based.” Each lawn care business that chooses to provide organic lawn care can be measured against a common denominator: either you are organic by an accepted set of standards or you are not. There will be no more gray areas of confusion. In general, criteria for a functional set of standards include:

- they must be comprehensive
- they need to be dynamic so they can evolve over time
- they must be user-friendly to the lawn care service provider
- they must avoid semantics
- they must lead to certification
- they must be beyond reproach by all groups involved in furthering the implementation of organic lawn care

The Great Pesticide Debate

With the current and rather heated battle over the pesticide issue, it is this last

criteria that is especially significant, and which requires elaboration. In the pesticide issue, there are the two camps – those who utilize conventional chemical pesticides and fertilizers and those who oppose their use. It is important to accept that there will always be points of disparity between the two camps. It is time to go on with business and begin to focus and expand upon the common ground that exists between the two camps – the common ground that encompasses organic lawn care.

To this end, a viable set of organic lawn care standards should transcend the emotional politics that have become an obstacle in the delivery of organic lawn care to the consumer. The delivery of organic lawn care to the consumer is the common ground and an area that will become reinforced and expanded through a set of organic lawn care standards, which will ultimately lead to certification for the lawn care provider.

The common ground is where we all speak the same language, a language that is based upon fundamental soil science, agronomic and overall plant health care and not on emotionalism. Organic standards can convey the value of organic management within this system of soil/plant health. A lawn care service provider that comes to understand this value will more likely be motivated to offer organic programs and become certified. ♦

— Reprinted with permission from *Landscape Trades*, Volume 24, Number 4, May, 2002

Doug Smith is the technical director of Organic Turf Management, a company involved in the development and distribution of organic turf products. He participated on the Panel Discussion on Organics at the 2002 Ontario Turfgrass Symposium. Doug has also developed a set of organic lawn care standards and certification process for lawn care providers. He may be contacted via email at organicturf@idirect.com.

