

Organic's elusive promise

Promoters of commercial bio lawn care say the public likes their message, and they think the industry is missing an opportunity

BY RON HALL/SENIOR EDITOR

Organic landscape/lawn service providers claim the public's acceptance of their services is growing. Concerns over the safety of synthetic lawn care products and ongoing regulatory activity will continue to drive demand, they're convinced.

"It's the future of the lawn care industry," says Paul Drake, owner/operator of Organicare, Portland, OR. "When I started in business here (1988), nobody offered an organic program. Now a lot of people do."

Drake's assertion is disputed by many landscape/lawn company owners, who insist

that the vast majority of customers don't need or want these services. They say customers expect results — at least at a price they're willing to pay — that are most efficiently provided with the use of traditional chemical tools, particularly in turf care.

Understandably, they bristle at claims that the products they use pose safety or environmental risks, and they point to the rigorous testing these products undergo prior to being released into the market.

But, safety is just part of the equation, say organic service company owners.

"Over time most of the biology in the soil is killed or suppressed by the repeated use of pesticides," claims Todd Harrington of Harrington's Organicare, Windsor, CT. "The lawn becomes chemical dependent."

Harrington's message — like that of similar services — is to build the health and tilth of the soil using organic fertilizers and composts, and combating turf and plant woes with an assortment of compost teas and bio products.

It's difficult for turf/landscape company owners to ignore the claims of organic competitors, even though the concept of organic turf/landscape care is hardly new.

Who wants it?

Several established traditional lawn care companies have, in fact, offered alternative ser-



PHOTO COURTESY: ORGANICARE/OREGON

More natural herbicides on the way

A natural organic herbicide to control weeds in turf was largely a dream until Dr. Nick Christians, a professor of horticulture at Iowa State University, accidentally discovered the herbicidal properties of corn gluten meal in 1986. Corn gluten meal is a by-product of the wet-milling process of corn and is sold as feed material for cattle, poultry and fish.

Christians patented his discovery in 1991, and by the end of the decade sales of the natural herbicide (which, because of its 10% nitrogen content, serves as an excellent organic fertilizer, too) had topped \$1 million annually. The product is now licensed to 17 companies across the United States, and its use continues to grow in turfgrass and in some food crops.

Lawn care company owner, entrepreneur and self-described inventor Mark Miles, Greener Pastures, Minneapolis, MN, claims to have developed the second natural pre-emergent herbicide and also the first natural post-emergent. Like Christians, he isolated a protein from an agricultural crop.

In 2000, after getting the results from a test at the University of Missouri Turfgrass Research Center, Miles began using his organic herbicides on the public grounds of the City of Roseville, a suburb of Minneapolis.

Erik H. Ervin, Ph.D, monitored that test and reports that he applied two products from Greener Pastures in mid-spring 2000 and compared their results in controlling smooth crabgrass with Scott's



Goose and Crab along with an untreated control. Ervin, now an assistant professor of turfgrass at VPI, Blacksburg, VA, says that on Aug. 11, 2000, he reported that the Scott's product gave 90% control, Nature's Weed Control provided 38% control and Nature's Weed and Feed, the post-emergent, 62% control.

"The city was afraid that it (the herbicide) was going to fall on its face. I was afraid we were going to fall on our face," Miles admits. "Then we ended up in a drought and we found out that it needs soil moisture and actively growing plants to work. But those are the same things that chemicals require."

Even so, Miles says that officials at both Roseville and the nearby Minnetonka School District, where he also used the products, were pleased with the results.

Miles is ramping up production of the organic herbicides at two plants located in Minnesota, and is eyeing a third.

To learn more about Dr. Nick Christians and corn gluten meal, visit the Web site www.hort.iastate.edu/gluten. To learn more about Greener Pastures and its natural products, visit www.greenerpast.com.

services only to find consumer demand lacking, particularly in regard to lawn care. In the late 1980s, ChemLawn, owned by EcoLab then, promoted this type of a program but it didn't find widespread customer acceptance. Did they miscalculate the public's mood? Were they ahead of their time?

Probably both, respond today's organic services providers. Add a third reason — lack of acceptable products, which they say is no longer the case.

"There are so many more materials on the market, and homeowners know that and are wondering why more professional companies aren't using them," says Drake.

Cost may be one reason, but it's an increasingly smaller reason, he says. "I'd say we're about 10% more in cost than our competition. A lot of people expect it to be more expensive than it is."

Adds Mark Miles, owner/operator of Greener Pastures, Minneapolis, MN: "The chemical companies repeatedly tell me their customers won't pay \$10 more per lawn for our services. They're right. But they're talking about the wrong customers.

"You want the customer who isn't already giving anybody a check, and that's the 85 out of 100 homeowners who don't have any lawn care. Many of them simply don't want chemicals on their properties."

Phil Catron, co-founder of NaturaLawn of America, based

in Gaithersburg, MD, agrees that the demand for professional landscape/lawn services, both traditional and alternative, will continue to grow. He points to middle-aged Baby Boomers as the reason. They have the money but not the time to do lawn care.

Catron's also convinced that most new customers can be educated to take a "reasonable" approach in selecting professional landscape and lawn services.

"They will want a nice lawn and not necessarily a perfect lawn. They will want to feel good about what they're doing," he says. "A big part of our program is educating the consumer to know that a few weeds are not an issue, a few insects are not an issue and that diseases are always going to be there. After all, all of us get colds from time to time."

"The people who want an organic program are pretty knowledgeable, but the philosophy still requires a lot of education because people are used to doing things by a certain method," adds Mark Gile, co-owner of In Harmony Organic Based Landscape Services, which serves Seattle, WA, and the surrounding region.

"You develop a certain customer base when you have an organic system," adds Harrington in Windsor, CT. "They're the people that recycle.

They're also people who will accept a few weeds on their lawns. It's a select group, but there are more and more of them every year."

Organic defined

But what exactly is "organic" lawn/landscape care?

"Organic don't mean good. It doesn't mean safe. It doesn't mean anything other than that it's a term," says Miles in Minneapolis. "The message I give to my customers is, 'If it can't be eaten, it's not being used on your lawns.'"

NaturalLawn's Catron also be-

lieves confusion often surrounds some of these terms. And not just the term "organic." Consider the word "pesticide," he says. Anything that kills a weed, insect, disease or whatever is, technically, a pesticide. And that's whether it's synthetically produced, a biological agent like a nematode or a biorational like horticultural soaps and oils.

Indeed, it's often difficult to look beyond marketing in describing an organic service inasmuch as most of these operations use some of the same pesticides as their so-called chemical competitors. The difference, they explain, is the degree to which they limit the use of synthetic products and their continuing focus on soil and plant health care.

"Pesticides are the last resort for us," says Gile in Seattle, echoing several of the company owners we interviewed. "Sometimes, you have to control a problem until you get the soil tilth to where it needs to be."

Gile says about half of his company's 1,000 lawn care customers opt for a completely organic program "and will tolerate some insects and weeds."

Likewise, Drake in Portland, OR, and Harrington in Windsor, CT, say between 50 to 60% of their clients select "all-organic" programs.

Nature's little helpers

Organic landscape/lawn services that use biological and biorational products to control turf and landscape insect pests realize their "windows" of control are small, and they must be well acquainted with both the products and the problems for which they're used.

To start with, biologicals are host-specific. Also, timing is critical. Most bios work best against the susceptible, juvenile stage of an insect pest. Other factors such as proper storage and handling, and soil moisture and temperature are vital in wringing the maximum benefits from these bio products, which are generally more expensive than traditional chemical products.

Commonly used alternative products include:

- Neem, made from a derivative of the neem tree for a variety of insect pests in greenhouses, nurseries and on trees.
- Insecticidal soap derived from fatty acids for controlling soft-bodied insects, mites and powdery mildew on shade and ornamental trees, turf, foliage and flowering plants.
- *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt). Targeted turf, tree and ornamental pests such as larvae (caterpillars) ingest the bacteria, which then kills them.
- Milky spore disease specifically targets Japanese beetle grubs and, once in the soil, continues to control them by producing spores that remain in the ground.
- Insect parasitic nematodes. *Steinernema carpocapsae* use an "ambush" strategy and work well against pests moving around on the soil surface.
- Heterorhabditids search for hosts deeper in the soil.

For an excellent discussion of insect parasitic nematodes and their role in combating turf insect pests, visit the Web site www2.oardc.ohio-state.edu/nematodes maintained by Dr. Parwinder Grewal, Dept. of Entomology, Ohio Agricultural Research & Development Center.



Careful inspection precedes treatment.

PHOTO COURTESY: ORGANICARE/HARRINGTON

Setting standards

Efforts are underway in some markets to establish standards for commercial companies that offer this type of turf/landscape care.

In Long Island, NY, for example, 16 of the 66 members of the Long Island Organic Horticulture Association (LIOHA) have qualified for its "Organic Landscaper Listing Program." To be listed, company owners demonstrate their knowledge of organic products and procedures before a board of directors, and signed an eight-page contract saying they would adhere to 100% organic methods on clients' properties and submit to periodic inspections.

"The response to this has been positive," says Beth Fiteni, spokesperson for Long Island Neighborhood Network, a non-profit environmental and government reform organization that publicizes and distributes the list.

"The companies that are

Mark Gile, left, and Ladd Smith say organic care is growing around Puget Sound.



doing it are really committed, and the people who call us will know they're getting a 100% organic program," she says.

A similar effort is underway under the aegis of the Massachusetts and Connecticut chapters of NOFA (Northeast Organic Farming Assn.). To gain accredi-

tation, commercial operators must complete 40 to 50 course hours in organic methods, then pass a test, says Harrington, who is on the standards committee. The standards are almost ready.

"The people who go through the course will receive an emblem they can use in their litera-

ture and their sales," says Harrington. "But they will have to keep up their credits annually."

Apart from these regional efforts, there doesn't appear to be a widespread effort to define and

standardize organic turf/landscape care.

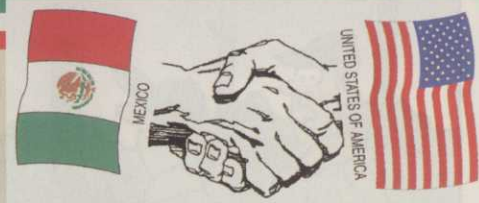
While competing traditional companies don't, as yet, feel the majority of their clients and potential clients need or want these services, owners who provide alternative services say demand keeps growing.

"I was the first here (Minneapolis) and I clawed my way through here," says Miles of Greener Pastures. "Now more companies are carrying on." **LMI**

RESOURCES

For more information on LIOHA and its listing program, visit the Web site www.longislandnn.org/LIOHA. To learn more about Harrington's Organicare, visit www.organicare.com. For NaturalLawn of America, visit www.naturalawn.com. For In Harmony Organic-Based Landscape, www.inharmony.com. And for Paul Drake's Organicare, Portland, OR, go to www.organicareinc.com.

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