

National Coalition for Pesticide-Free Lawns

Supporting healthy lawns and landscapes without the use of pesticides
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GRASSROOTS ACTION ALERT

September/October 2006

ACTIONS OF THE MONTH:

Fall Organic Lawn Care 101 Press Release

Action Needed: Fall is the perfect time to promote pesticide-free lawns. The simple steps provided in the press release below will help homeowners in your community get started. Send the enclosed press release to your local home and leisure newspaper reporters. You can also submit the article for your community, church, club, neighborhood newsletters, or any relevant publications. Feel free to put your contact information on the release.

You can also use the content, and additional content on our website, to develop a local factsheet, or just give the information to your neighbors.

Ongoing Campaign Activities:

Legislative Signatory Campaign

In late July, Beyond Pesticides and Defenders of Wildlife teamed up to inform your Senator and Representative of the broad movement for safer lawns and requested that they support our efforts by signing the Declaration on the Use of Toxic Lawn Chemicals.

We distributed information packets to all Senate and House Democrats, and select Republicans who scored above 50 on the League of Conservation Voters environmental scorecard. The information packets contained a letter, our Declaration on the Use of Toxic Lawn Chemicals, our doorhanger, a Harvard School of Public Health press release on yet another study linking pesticides to Parkinson's Diseases, and our new Pesticides and Playing Fields factsheet.

If you have not already, please take a moment to call or email your U.S. Senator and U.S. Representative and

tell them that you are a member of the National Coalition for Pesticide-Free Lawns, you support the Declaration on the Use of Toxic Lawn Chemicals, and they should too by going to www.pesticidefreelawns.org and signing on. Tell them about your local efforts to create pesticide-free parks or playing fields, pass local organic land care policies, or get pesticides out of your schools.

Find your Senators and Representative's contact information and copies of these campaign materials on the Take Action section of our website www.beyondpesticides.org/pesticidefreelawns/actions/index.htm.

This is a great opportunity to raise awareness both about your concerns and efforts, and the national movement for more sustainable land care. Lastly, let us know if you get a commitment to sign on!

Doorhanger Campaign

The Safe Lawn Doorhanger Campaign has been an amazing success thanks to all of your efforts across the country. We have distributed 22,000 hangers across the country to inform people that there are safer methods of maintaining their lawns.

Now, we want to hear from you activists who have distributed the hangers. Write to us and tell us how you distributed them and what the response in your community has been. Your stories will be compiled for our Grassroots News winter newsletter. Send your story to egunn@beyondpesticides.org.





BEYOND PESTICIDES

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For Immediate Release
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September 20, 2006

Organic Lawn Care 101- Take Simple Steps This Fall to Convert Your Lawn to Organic

Fall is the best time to start transitioning your lawn to organic. The key to a healthy lawn is healthy soil and good mowing, watering and fertilizing practices. Healthy soil contains high organic content and is teeming with biological life. Healthy soil supports the development of healthy grass that is naturally resistant to weeds and pests. In a healthy, fertile and well maintained lawn, diseases and pest problems are rare.

But doesn't it cost more you ask? If your lawn is currently chemically-dependent, initially it may be more expensive to restore the biological life. But, in the long term, it will actually cost you less money. Once established, an organic lawn uses fewer materials, such as water and fertilizers, and requires less labor for mowing and maintenance. More importantly, your lawn will be safe for children, pets and your local drinking water supply.

Getting Started- Late September- Early October

1. Mow High Until the Season Ends – Bad mowing practices cause more problems than any other cultural practice. Mowing with a dull blade makes the turf susceptible to disease and mowing too close invites sunlight in for weeds to take hold.

Keep your blades sharp, or ask your service provider to sharpen their blades frequently. For the last and first mowing, mow down to 2 inches to prevent fungal problems. For the rest of the year keep it at 3-3.5 to shade out weeds and foster deep, drought-resistant roots.

2. Aerate – Compaction is an invitation for weeds. If your lawn is hard, compacted, and full of weeds or bare spots, aerate to help air, water and fertilizer to enter. If you can't stick a screwdriver easily into your soil, it is too compacted. Get together with your neighbors and rent an aerator. Once you have an established, healthy lawn, worms and birds pecking at your soil will aerate it for free!

3. Fertilize, but go easy! – Fertilizing in early fall ensures good growth and root development for your grass. Nitrogen, the most abundant nutrient in lawn fertilizers promotes color and growth. Adding too much nitrogen, or quick release synthetic fertilizers, will result in quicker growth and the need for more mowing. Too much nitrogen can also weaken the grass, alter the pH, and promote disease, insect, and thatch build-up. If applied too late, nutrients can leach directly into nearby surface waters. Be aware of local phosphorus or nitrogen loading concerns. Your soil test results will ensure that you apply only what you need.

Your grass clippings contain 58% of the nitrogen added from fertilizers, improve soil conditions, sup-

press disease, and reduce thatch and crabgrass. So, leave the clippings on your lawn. You can also use a mulching mower and leave the leaves on the lawn too.

Compost is an ideal soil amendment, adding the much-needed organic content to your soil and suppressing many turf pathogens. In the fall and spring, preferably after aerating, spread ¼ inch layer of organic or naturally-based compost over your lawn. Compost tea and worm castings are also great additions.

Look for compost or organic slow release fertilizers at your local nursery or order online. A few fertilizers, such as Ringer® Lawn Restore®, are certified by the Organic Materials Review Institute, www.saferbrand.com. North Country Organics has a number of natural fertilizers, including phosphorus-free fertilizers for lawns close to fresh water bodies, www.norganics.com. Others choices include Peaceful Valley Farm Supply www.groworganic.com, Down To Earth's Bio-Turf www.downtoearthdistributors.com, and Harmony Farm www.harmonyfarm.com.

4. Overseed With the Right Grass Seed – Once again, Fall is the best time to seed your lawn. Grass varieties differ enormously in their resistance to certain pests, tolerance to climatic conditions, growth habit and appearance. Endophytic grass seed provides natural protection against some insects and fungal diseases - major benefits for managing a lawn organically. Talk to your local nursery about the best seed for your area. Check to see the weed content of the grass seed and that there are no pesticide coatings.

Lastly, develop your tolerance- many plants that are considered weeds in a lawn, have beneficial qualities. Learn to read your “weeds” for what they indicate about your soil conditions. Monocrops do not grow in nature and diversity is a good thing.

For instance, clover- considered a typical weed, is found in soil with low nitrogen levels, compaction issues, and drought stress - conditions that can be alleviated with the above recommendations. However, clover is a beneficial plant that takes free nitrogen from the atmosphere and distributes it to the grass, which helps it grow. Clover roots are extensive and extremely drought resistant, providing significant resources to soil organisms, and staying green long after turf goes naturally dormant.

It is highly recommended that you analyze your soil to determine specific soil needs. Contact your University extension service to find out how to take and send in a soil sample. In addition to nutrients and pH, ask for organic content analysis, and request organic care recommendations. Ideal pH should be between 6.5-7.0, and organic content should be 5% or higher.

For more information on starting and maintaining your organic or natural lawn, and to find local resources in your area see the National Coalition for Pesticide-Free Lawns website at www.pesticidefreelawns.org