

Planting Deep Organic Roots

Town health code Incorporates organic pest management

By Pat Beckett

The Board of Health in the Town of Marblehead, MA, on December 7, 2005, continued in its groundbreaking work to protect its historic, coastal community from unnecessary pesticide exposure when it voted to codify the town's 2001 Organic Pest Management (OPM) policy as a health regulation. "It puts teeth in the policy," says Wayne Attridge, Director of Public Health. "We already have a [OPM] system in place, and it's working. That's how we know the regulation is going to work." This move to regulate the prohibition of pesticides on all Marblehead town land, including athletic playing fields, strengthens and safeguards the Board's commitment to organic turf and landscape management in the future. The health regulation calls for financial penalties for any violation. It also makes provision for the possibility of a civil suit for damages to compensate the Town for all costs incurred as a result of any violation.

Board of Health Seeks Pesticide Phase-Out

First approached with the idea of considering pesticides as a public health issue by the citizen activist group, Marblehead Pesticide Awareness Committee (MPAC) in 1997, the Board of Health has shown continuous support for MPAC's "Awareness through Education" campaign. To this end, the Board of Health committed itself to the goal of reducing and eliminating the use of toxic chemical pesticides in Marblehead and issued its "Statement on Pesticides" as part of a public health education campaign on pesticide issues. This was followed with a *Spring Alert* educational flyer, which highlighted the inadequacy of little yellow lawn signs to protect the public from pesticide exposure. The *Spring Alert* flyers were sent home with every school child one year, and to every homeowner another year.

The 2001 policy prohibits known, likely or probable human carcinogens or probable endocrine disruptors, and those pesticides that meet the criteria for Toxicity Category I or II, as defined by EPA. It was a visionary step beyond typical integrated pest management (IPM) plans called for by the passage of the *Children and Families Protection Act* passed in Massachusetts in 2000. Pat Beckett, co-chair of MPAC and the Living Lawn Project in Marblehead, worked on the policy with the Board of Health. She recalls, "After a long study of the history of IPM and various policies that were out there, we decided to push for an *organic mandate*, as we felt that was the "gold standard" we should be striving for. We wanted a policy that would not only provide real protection for our children from pesticide exposure, but also move the town to develop an actual organic turf management plan for our athletic fields

– one that would mandate prevention over treatment of any pest problem.

Prevention Over Treatment

And that is exactly what has happened. Chip Osborne, a horticulturalist and member of MPAC and the Living Lawn Project, was elected to the Recreation, Parks and Forestry Commission. For the past three years, and as Chairman of that commission, he took on the task of developing the organic turf program now entering its fourth year. Mr. Osborne has become the "go-to" guy for expert advice on organic sports turf management in the Northeast. He has lectured widely from Maine to Florida to turf professionals, and groups and communities looking to replicate Marblehead's success in replacing the typical regime of toxic lawn care chemicals with an organic approach. "It's not rocket science," said Mr. Osborne, "but simple soil science, and sound horticultural practices that create the conditions conducive to growing and maintaining good turf. There was a lot of mythology out there when we started around the impossibility of maintaining playing fields without the use of chemical pesticides. In Marblehead, we had a mandate to dispel those myths – and as we begin our fourth growing season, we can say that's just what we've done."

For more information and a copy of the health regulation, go to www.livinglawn.org or contact MPAC at info@livinglawn.org or 877-332-3276, ext. 15. The Town of Marblehead Board of Health can be reached at 781-631-0212. Chip Osborne will be leading a workshop at the 24th National Pesticide Forum, May 19-20, 2006, in Washington D.C.

