

Going, Going..Green

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The conventional wisdom in field maintenance has always been that without the use of pesticides and commercial synthetic fertilizers, municipal fields simply can't stand up to the heavy public use. But for the last few seasons the Park & Recreation Department (P&R) has implemented a plan to move away from synthetics and go organic—and the results are better fields that take less tax money to maintain. The recent proclamation of the success of the first all organic field in Branford, Patty's Park, is proof.

Patty's Park, a two acre parcel behind the Mary Murphy School, was donated to the town two years ago and was the first attempt by P&R officials to go all organic. The field is fully irrigated and a key ingredient of the topsoil is straight from the compost of leaves out of resident's backyards.

It wasn't easy, according to both P&R Director Alex Palluzzi, Jr., and Chuck Sherwood, who has been the subcontractor for field maintenance in Branford for more than 15 years. It took some transition products, technological developments, and a bit of trial and error, but the two said they have found a formula that is making fields safer and easier to maintain.

The industry traditionally promoted the heavy use of fertilizers and pesticides and it wasn't easy to change minds. But experts like Palluzzi and Sherwood were convinced after results clearly showed the benefits and they were converts.

As part of the plan at Patty's Park, residents' leaves from the transfer station are composted and sifted, combined with poultry manure, and used as the primary fill at the site. The compost has huge benefits for the entire process of maintenance, according to Sherwood.

"With organic components you are feeding this population of beneficial microbes," Sherwood said. "When you put down this organic matter, we simply found you don't need pesticides and these other fertilizers. With synthetics you are creating an artificial environment and when you lay down pesticides you are knocking out beneficial organisms too. It is slightly more costly going organic, but you don't need

anywhere near as much product and that is where you save the money. Organics has become the better value."

According to Sherwood, the system they are currently adapting generates microbes in the soil that help grass grow more naturally. Growth is at a slower and steadier rate, lessening the need for cutting; saving fuel, time, and money. The grass is more resistant to disease and insects making the need for periodic pesticide treatment unnecessary, and it makes for a softer playing surface that can decrease sport-related injuries.

"The turf density goes up, and there is less soil compaction," said Sherwood. "There is definitely a more consistent growth through the season. You have much healthier root systems that can sustain the repeated use." Sherwood said that he has also noticed that because the grass is stronger, the need for seasonal aeration is not needed. With these healthier root systems, the grass naturally helps oxygenate the soil, making it less compacted and improving irrigation and drainage. According to Sherwood, there are a number of benefits that make going organic a more cost effective choice for municipalities.

"First off, everybody's concept of organic is different. You can use all natural products and still not be organic but they are an increasingly favorable choice," said Sherwood. "There is less work involved, less mowing, less fertilization, the fields are more in sync." Sherwood said that in his tenure working on Branford's fields he has never seen them look this good. Palluzzi concurred.

"These are the best these fields have been," said Palluzzi. "We hope we are leading the way on this. We've been successful and we hope to get some more state dollars and promote this even more."

Palluzzi and Sherwood are both confident they will be able to continue to fine tune the recipe and go organic on as many fields as possible. They are realistic in their goals, and say not all fields can be completely organic.

The use of pesticides is in some cases necessary to save fields and as a result money, but the benefits to the new plan are saving money and producing better fields.

"The plan right now is to adjust to each field's need and use different applications," said Palluzzi. "Our priority is always safety when it comes to the fields, not just for the kids but everybody who uses them, and this helps us do that. I think we can all work together on this. It's better when

everybody works together. That's good for us all-it makes the fields safer, better...and we save money."