A Greener View: Organic is not always safe

by Jeff_Rugg

Q: My friend says he has switched to a nonchemical approach to his lawn care. He says he went fully organic because it is safer. He wants me to switch, but I am not sure that I should.

A: First, we need to remember that the word "organic" is not synonymous with the word "safe." Organic gardening and lawn care practices try to be safe of course, but they can use certain products that might not be safe if not used properly. Safety depends partially on the product and partially on the user's ability to properly use it. The dosage amount greatly affects the safety of any product. In a gallon-for-gallon matchup, some organic products are more toxic to humans and pets than some synthetic chemical products.

Just being against chemicals is nonsensical. Water is an inorganic chemical that is necessary for lawn care. So is carbon. In the dictionary, the definition of "organic" says that the item must contain carbon to be organic. That eliminates the use of the chemicals of water, sulfur and lime as organic plant care products. Chemicals and the source of the chemicals are not the problems and neither are the people who use them correctly.

What some organically minded people are trying to say is that some synthetic chemical products are artificial substitutes that don't work well within the ecological system. They are typically used to treat symptoms, such as killing a weed in a lawn, rather than treating the cause of the weed's ability to grow in the lawn in the first place.

People want to use organic products (chemicals) that are an intrinsic part of the sustainable living system where they are applied.

Some municipalities have begun prohibiting the use of synthetic products within certain distances from schools and playgrounds where children congregate. It is difficult to argue against protecting kids. So companies that protest the new rules are looked upon unfavorably. The problem is, most synthetic chemical aerial drift and water runoff problems are caused by homeowners who misapply the products, not professional applicators who use them correctly. So to be a truly effective law for child protection, homeowners near the schools must give up their right to apply synthetic products. Now go back and reread the first paragraph and ask which organic products should also be restricted.

Many people see their property as theirs to do with as they please. Unfortunately, each property resides next to other properties and within a watershed that can be affected by chemical runoff. My grape vines occasionally show evidence of being exposed to broadleaf weedkillers, when I know that neither I nor my neighbors used any. So where did it drift in from? Just like secondhand smoke, a broad range of people are affected by products that drift in the wind.

The approach that restricts synthetic chemical use in a few scattered locations fails to consider the whole ecosystem. Many times, people in favor of restricting these products will say that the products harm fish, amphibians, birds and other organisms. If that is true, then they should also be pushing for the homeowner restriction of these products on an ecosystem approach near all waterways, retention and detention areas, forested and prairie areas.

I am not sure total bans on synthetic products are appropriate. I know I wouldn't use most of these products, but I also wouldn't use some of the organic products either. I do think it is appropriate that before any homeowner can be expected to make a proper application of these products, they need training. I think virtually all outdoor pesticides from both sides of the issue should be restricted for use by people who have been properly certified.

After taking a class covering product safety, how to apply and when to apply the products, and how to work within an ecological system, they could make better product purchasing and usage decisions. Regulating the education of proper product usage seems to me to be wiser than a willy-nilly ban on some products. And I know enforcement issues come up in both cases.

There are benefits to using an organic lawn care system. Notice I said system and not product. Problems are diagnosed not just for what they are, but why they are. By looking into the history and conditions that caused the problem, it is often possible to bypass the short-term synthetic product use for a long-term sustainable change in the local environment that reduces or eliminates the problem.

For instance, in many established lawns, a weed problem can be taken care of with changes to the soil, sunlight or moisture levels. Weeds tend to indicate that there is something wrong with one of the environmental conditions that weaken the grass to a point that weeds can grow. Fixing that condition can allow the grass to grow better than the weeds.

A landscape that is based on an organic soil that is alive, won't use or need synthetic fertilizers that can kill microorganisms. Adding compost to a lawn on a regular basis helps supply nutrients and beneficial microorganisms. A soil full of organic matter acts like a sponge to hold more water until the plants need it without becoming too waterlogged when they don't. This organic soil will need less additional water and the water that does runoff won't be contaminated with synthetic products. Applying water deeply to a thick soil will allow the grass to grow a large, healthy root system.

Mow the grass at the correct height and leave the clippings on the lawn where they will add to the organic matter and supply approximately half of the fertilizer requirements of the lawn.

Grass plants in even the best cared for lawns eventually mature and then expire. Mowing prevents the lawn from reseeding itself, so regular overseeding adds new young vigorous plants into the lawn.

Begin following these tips and then pick up "The Organic Lawn Care Manual" by Paul Tukey (Storey, $19.95) to get the complete guide to organic lawn care.

E-mail questions to Jeff Rugg at info@greenerview.com.

Â© Copley News Service

A Greener View: Organic is not always safe by Jeff_Rugg