



Simply Green

Live Well, Tread Gently

Spring 2010 / Lawn Care Issue

Warmer weather is finally upon us, and with it comes the daily whirr of mowers and blowers. As we prepare our lawns for the coming growing season, the SCA's Planet Manhasset suggests we re-assess what we are putting on them – what do they really need? What lawn products can be toxic to our children, animals and water supply? Can we have green, weed-free, pest-free lawns without worrying about health risks to our children, whose immature and rapidly developing bodies, coupled with their typical unwashed-hand-to-mouth behavior, make them uniquely vulnerable to pesticide exposure? The answer, according to numerous resources and homeowners, is a resounding YES!

According to a survey by the National Gardening Association, over 5 million homeowners in the US maintain their lawns exclusively with organic or natural lawn care methods. Maybe they're on to something . . .

We've culled these tips mainly from Grassrootsinfo.org and Richsoil.com; they can easily be administered by homeowners or shared with hired gardeners:

1. **Basic maintenance, in a nutshell:**

Must do:

- Set your mower as high as it will go (3" to 4"), and keep blades sharp; this offers the following perks:
 - More shade to the soil leads to less watering
 - Deeper roots which leads to less watering
 - Thicker turf which leads to fewer weeds
 - Slower growth which leads to less mowing
- Water only when your grass shows signs of drought stress; then water deeply (put a cup in your sprinkler zone and make sure it gets at least an inch of water). Once/week in early morning for several hours is best. Overwatering creates an ideal environment for pathogens to thrive. Fact: 30% of water used on the East Coast goes to watering lawns.

Optional/Additional:

- Fertilize with an organic fertilizer in the fall and spring. (Richsoil.com recommends the Ringer brand.)
- Have your soil's pH professionally tested. Add lime if it's below 6.0; add gardener's sulfur if above 7.0.
- How much topsoil do you have? See how deep you can dig a hole with a shovel in one minute. Four inches of topsoil will make for an okay lawn. Eight or more inches will make for a great lawn.

We highly recommend visiting this website, which offers a wealth of practical, valuable information:

<http://www.richsoil.com/lawn-care.jsp>

2. **From Grassrootsinfo.org, more details and specific instructions:**

- **FEED THE SOIL.** One of the best things you can do for your soil is to rake an inch or so of compost into your lawn each spring and fall. If you don't make your own, look for organic brands. If your lawn has been on a chemical diet, you may want to speed up the healing process by the addition of microbial inoculants. These "good" bacteria and fungi support beneficial microbes and earthworms. A soil test may identify the need for soil amendments, such as rock dust, kelp extract or lime.
- **FEED THE GRASS.** Leave grass clippings on the lawn. They provide nitrogen and reduce the amount of fertilizer needed by about one half. (By the way, this does not contribute to thatch build-up. Thatch is an accumulation of dead, partially decomposed grass caused by excessive watering and fertilizing). If you want to give your lawn an extra boost in the spring, choose an organic fertilizer with a NPK (nitrogen-phosphorus-

- potassium) ratio of approximately 3-1-2. Never use more than one pound per 1,000 square feet.
- RE-SEED ANNUALLY. A thick turf is one of the best ways to control weeds. Seed in late summer or early fall with a mixture of indigenous grasses, paying special attention to thin patches. Aeration of the soil will improve germination, but is not absolutely necessary unless you have compacted soil.
 - CONTROL THOSE WEEDS. If you really don't like dandelions, dig them out! But you can also use an organic corn-gluten product that kills weed seeds (including crabgrass) and seedlings. It must be applied to established lawns early in the spring for several years to control problem areas. Corn gluten will also prevent grass seed from germinating, so be careful not to seed for at least two months after an application. If you hand weed larger areas, fill with compost and grass seed and keep moist until grass sprouts. (For more on corn-gluten and dandelion removal, see: <http://www.grinningplanet.com/2006/03-16/dandelion-removal-article.htm#cgm>)
 - DEAL WITH PESTS NATURALLY. The most common pests (grubs, sod webworms, chinch bugs) can be controlled with applications of beneficial nematodes. Be careful to follow directions carefully, as they are fragile and must be kept cool and moist. Milky spore powder is an effective control for Japanese beetle grubs and just one application can last for many years. Fungal diseases can be successfully treated with several light applications of compost or liquid compost "tea".

For more natural lawn care tips, please visit these additional, very helpful resources:

- http://www.eartheasy.com/grow_lawn_care.htm
- <http://www.grinningplanet.com/2006/03-07/lawn-care-tips-article.htm#clover>

For a monthly lawn care schedule, please go to:

<http://www.planetnatural.com/site/xdpy/kb/lawn-care-calendar.html>

Each year the Neighborhood Network compiles a list of Long Island landscaping companies that can provide 100% synthetic chemical-free service. Each landscaper on the list meets educational requirements, demonstrates knowledge of organic methods, and signs an agreement with the Neighborhood Network to provide service that meets their organic standards to customers that contact them through their list. You can find the list on the website at:

<http://neighborhood-network.org/landscapers>



The section of lawn in the top of the photo is a typical chemical-treated suburban lawn. The greener section of grass in the lower portion of the picture is a natural, chemical-free lawn cut to a higher height.

For more information on Planet Manhasset or any SCA committee/event, please visit <http://www.manhassetzca.org>
Questions/comments? Please e-mail: PlanetManhasset@yahoo.com

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