



The Almighty Lawn Trumps Green Movement

By T.J. Clemente

Beyond the green barriers of the privet hedge, and before the ego boost of the trophy tree, the next coveted landscape necessity on the East End is the green lawn. Despite the fact that some Hamptonites plopped their houses on sandy soil, and others in the middle of woods, many homeowners believe they should have a sea of green, despite the odds against that for country living, that includes moles, voles, grubs, rabbits, deer -you name it, we got it.

But East End homeowners aren't the only gluttons of green. According to a Yale University study, there are 21 million acres of turf grass in U.S. home lawns. In fact 80% of all U.S. households have private lawns, with the size of the average American lawn at 1/3 acre. The Lawn Institute states that at least 50 million homeowners maintain residential lawns.

Needless to say, this increase in grass has created a growth area, no pun intended, and now the focus is naturally aiming at growing the lawns "naturally." Unfortunately, even with the push of the green movement, the use of pesticides and chemical fertilizers in lawn care has increased-the U.S. used 67 million pounds of pesticide products by 1994. That's 10 pounds per acre. Would you believe that this was much higher than agricultural applications, which average about 2.7 pounds per acre? Of the \$40 billion spent to maintain lawns, between \$1.5 and \$2 billion is spent on lawn pesticides each year. Pesticides cause a list of identified adverse health effects ranging from increased risk of lymphoma, leukemia, and various cancers to genetic damage leading to birth defects and decreased fertility. Is it any wonder the natural pesticides industry is growing as it is? In fact, Suffolk County Executive Steve Levy and local environmental organizations in Suffolk created a Comprehensive Fertilizer Reduction Plan to reduce the amount of nitrogen-based fertilizers used in the county. A Long Island research group stated that, instead of synthetic chemical pesticides or fertilizers,

which harm soil life and merely mask a symptom of an underlying soil deficiency, organic landscapers use products containing natural ingredients that build up the soil. An organic landscaper may use materials like compost, natural fertilizer, earthworm castings, biological controls, beneficial insects, and oils and soaps, and a variety of non-chemical techniques that work in harmony with the eco-system of a yard-such as mowing at 3" or higher to shade out weed seeds. There are lists of local firms now specializing in these procedures on the internet (2009 Long Island Landscaper list).

Local horticulturist Howard Goldenberg of Ray Smith Associates explained that with 95% of trees and shrubs his firm cares for, they use basically natural products for fertilizer. But he said it's different for lawns because, "people who pay money for lawn service want a very green lawn as soon as possible. Therefore **we use products for the safest quickest and best results.**" When asked what percentage are requesting "only natural fertilizer," Goldenberg explained that, although it is a growing trend, only one in ten actually firmly request using only natural products for lawns. "There are firms that specialize in this but quite frankly **what is 100% natural is open to debate. It is all in the definition,**" he said, "**It's important for lawn services to provide green lawns. We do it in a safe, smart way,** but we certainly entertain all requests to do the lawn 100% natural."

At the moment organic products represent a tiny share of the \$40 billion fertilizer market in the U.S., but demand is growing along with that for organic foods and other items. This has prompted several companies, mostly small and regional ones, but also including corporations such as Scotts, to bet on producing the planet-friendly fertilizer. "There's an organic market growing every minute," said Ari Stines, a director of marketing and sales for fertilizer maker Organic Growing Systems Inc. An example of this is sales of Scotts Miracle-Gro's organic products, which have been increasing by 15%-20% a year; conventional lawn-product sales grew by 5%. Miracle-Gro estimates the total organic lawn and garden market is now at \$400 million, with fertilizers at \$60 million.