

Specialty Medical Monthly

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Synthetic vs. Organic:

The Best Combination for an Almost Perfect Lawn

Written by Peter Orwig, agronomist for Ryan Lawn & Tree.

Spring is finally creeping in to our area. I can't wait to get outside again to garden, relax and tend to my lawn. If you're reading this article, I am sure you feel exactly the same way.

We are not alone. In fact, more people maintain lawns in this country than read books, go to movies, or watch sporting events on TV. With more than 5 million acres of home lawns, this is not difficult to believe.

For most of us, the idea of a well-maintained, green lawn is second nature and a common sight. However, lawns in this country did not begin to evolve until 1915, less than a century ago. By this time, the industrial revolution provided the means for United States citizens to travel abroad, where lush English lawns had long been a sign of genteel wealth. Upon returning to the States, these travelers set out to create their own lawns.

The real boom in lawn maintenance began shortly after the end of WWII. By this time, better-adapted lawn seed and a push from the American Garden Club had propelled homeowners into growing beautiful, green lawns. Since then, the green industry has steadily grown. In 2007, homeowners spent an average of \$300 per year on lawn care.

With the rise in popularity of home lawns, there has been increasing concern about the environmental ramifications of lawn fertilizers and weed control products. This has spurred a debate concerning traditional versus natural lawn products.

Traditional lawn products have been scrutinized by the press, the EPA and other various environmental organizations. This has become somewhat of an information overload for the average homeowner. This article will attempt to clear up some of this confusion.

The most common fertilizers are made up of three basic ingredients: nitrogen (commonly urea), phosphorus and potassium (usually potassium chloride). Urea is routinely used in hand creams and is a mainstay in cattle feed. Phosphorus is a naturally occurring element found in human DNA and in green plants. Potassium chloride is sold as "light salt" for those who require a low sodium diet.

Synthetic weed and insect control products are becoming more selective. This means that the formulas are so sophisticated that they affect only targeted plants or insects. For instance, the most commonly used preventative grub control targets beetle larvae (grubs) specifically, and will not harm other worms, caterpillars or butterflies that may be living in the lawn. In fact, veterinarians commonly apply this same active ingredient topically to pets to control fleas and ticks.



Article Continued

For homeowners using these products on their lawns, there are some tips and tricks to keep the fertilizer in the lawn and off hardscapes. If you get granular fertilizer on the sidewalk or driveway, use a broom to sweep the prills back into the grass. Likewise, if you need to rinse your spreader, do it in the lawn.

Correct application timing will also affect how much product you will ultimately need for your lawn. For instance, if you apply a product to prevent annual, grassy weeds too late, you will have to use other weed control products more frequently later in the season.

Some homeowners prefer to use a totally organic lawn program. This may be a viable option for those who are less picky about the overall appearance of their lawns. Organic weed controls are not as effective as conventional products, and homeowners will likely have to manually pull some weeds. The cost of lawn care will also increase as natural products are more expensive than traditional methods.

Corn gluten is an organic fertilizer that, as a byproduct, can prevent annual grassy weeds like crabgrass from sprouting. (To see maximum weed control benefits, you will have to apply corn gluten twice each year for 2-3 years). There are no selective, organic, post-emergent weed controls to date.

So, homeowners are faced with a decision: Use cheaper, traditional products that are more effective, or use natural, organic products and work harder to maintain a lawn that may not look as good as the neighbor's.

What is the answer? As an agronomist, I am constantly studying the positives and negatives surrounding different lawn care practices. Advances in research have made products currently on the market safer and more effective than ever.

Many cultural practices will help reduce the amount of products needed on your lawn. Watering in the summer, mowing frequently at the appropriate height for your grass type, and making sure your lawn receives enough nutrients will encourage a thick, lush lawn that will out-compete weeds naturally. Improve your lawn using the best seed available when seeding your lawn. Newer varieties will become more insect resistant and better adapted to growing conditions as research breakthroughs continue.

The lawn care industry is still in its infancy in the United States. As researchers continue to make advances, traditional and organic products alike will become more effective.

Peter Orwig is the agronomist at Ryan Lawn & Tree. Feel free to contact him with any questions you may have regarding your lawn at 913-381-1505.

Spring Cleaning

It's spring again and that means it's time to clean house. SMS is looking to evaluate and possibly purchase used endoscopy equipment. If you're looking to make a few bucks or just make some room for new equipment please contact your local sales rep. You can also contact Mary Hall at 816-472-4500.



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