

## CREATING HEALTHY CITY LAWNS AND GARDENS

The Organic  
Landscape  
Alliance  
Difference

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As advocates for health, we can no longer be satisfied to only improve the daily diet we consume. It is increasingly evident that our health is merely a reflection of the health of our planet, and we, as stewards of the globe that sustains us, are responsible to find a holistic approach to healing the land we walk upon. Urban dwellers can look no further than their own backyard to find an ecosystem in need of care. Issues such as global warming, tainted drinking water and topsoil depletion are closely linked to our own health issues, as diseases proliferate despite advancing medical discoveries. The twentieth century trend to medicate our bodies, has been mimicked in the way we treat our soil, by spraying noxious chemicals in order to suppress the symptoms of disease. All is not lost however, as the earth's wisdom is always available to those who seek it, and the universal law of forgiveness operates in all aspects of nature. Just like our bodies seek the path back to wellness when given the chance, our earth responds likewise under the care of the responsible steward.

### OLA CONFERENCE

In Canada, the issue of organic gardening and landscaping has taken the road of re-discovery. Where once our forefathers were nothing but organic, evolving culture took a turn for the chemical response. The pendulum swings both ways fortunately, and in the spirit of balance, we are feeling the need to return to sustainable ways. Those who remember the back-to-the-land movement of the seventies, and those who wish to never revisit it, will be encouraged to know that organic gardening is alive and well, but you don't have to leave the city limits to practise it. Toronto has passed its own pesticide by-law, which will restrict, but not ban, pesticide use for cosmetic reasons. Such by-laws are sweeping the nation, from Victoria to Halifax, and are hopefully the beginning of a more open discussion regarding conscientious land care. As individuals and concerned citizens, we can strive to legislate ourselves, and not wait for the law to dictate what is already common sense. We are all either parents, pet owners, home owners or owners of an awareness that our environment is in trouble. What can we do to make a difference? Where can we turn for ideas or help? The recent Organic Landscape Alliance Conference provided answers to these questions, and encouraged those in attendance to take hold of alternative methods when dealing with landscaping and gardening.

The OLA is a non-profit trade association and is in fact the *only* professional organization dedicated to organic urban landscaping in Ontario. Started by a small group of individuals, OLA is dedicated to providing education to home gardeners and also landscape professionals wishing to find alternatives to chemical practices. Organizations such as the World Wildlife Fund, the Toronto Environmental Alliance (TEA), and The Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment (CAPE), are part of OLA's co-operative network, providing solidarity in the

community towards a greener tomorrow. This year's conference took place at The Toronto Botanical Gardens, and offered a look at the future of the organic landscaping industry. Although there has been a conscious shift in many an urbanites thinking regarding the type of lawn care provider they hire, there is still a lot of confusion as to what can really be termed "natural" or "organic." The dictionary defines organic as, "a fertilizer of plant or animal origin" as well as "a pesticide whose active component is an organic compound or a mixture of organic compounds." An organic compound is also classed as being carbon based. DDT is classed as a chemical of organic synthesis. If we are to use the definitions of a chemical being either of organic or carbon based origins, there is a large boundary for the natural lawn care provider to operate within. As with any other purchase, the green consumer should be well informed and armed with questions for the service provider of their choice. OLA offers six questions one could ask a natural lawn care provider:

- "How will you determine what my lawn needs?" A company may claim to use Integrated Pest Management (IPM), which is supposed to promote reduced pesticide use, but might not have a regulated independent verification of their methods or their products. Some companies promote IPM to mean organic. An organic company will have a customized program for each lawns needs, and will look at things like growing conditions, test the soil, examine the roots, and obtain a treatment history.
- "Do you have an active spraying license? If you spot spray, how will I know?" A true organic provider will have no need for a spraying license, and will not suggest a "just this once" solution to your weed problem.
- "What products do you use?" Ask the provider to list in the contract the products he will use, watching out for phrases like "organic based" or "from an organic source." Ask to see labels. You will not get any opposition from providers who truly are organic. They will be proud to show you their product.

- "What preventative techniques do you use? What kind of education or information do you provide?" A lawn analysis will provide tips on cutting, watering, seeding, and other environmental factors affecting you lawn.
- "What do you do about weeds, grubs, and cinch bugs?" If the provider can only suggest chemical kills, then look elsewhere. Be aware that a government regulation of a chemical does *not* mean that it is safe, as some providers may suggest.
- "Do you belong to a organic landscape organization? What organizations do you belong to? OLA members pledge to use no chemical or synthetic fertilizers. They will work with you to improve your soil environment, and never suggest a chemical solution.

## **ORGANIC MEANS WORKING WITH NATURE**

Organic does not only mean abstaining from the use of chemical fertilizers. It also means observing your environment, building the health of your soil, and finding other design approaches to landscape concerns. Before chemical lawn care became the norm, the average lawn contained a variety of grasses, legumes and wildflowers as opposed to the sterile monoculture we practise today. Preserving beneficial organisms, using compost, and taking care to not pollute ground and surface water is all part of the organic experience. A new approach is to view your weeds as something other than a nuisance. What some may term as a weed, others may see as a food source. Many herbs and weeds are used for tonics and health rejuvenators. The urban dweller must, in most cases, be mindful of the proximity to his neighbour's yard, as well as specific by-laws that prohibit rampant growth of so-called weeds. Although there are some limitations, an alternative landscape design may be the answer to the conventional lawn space.

The OLA conference hosted a variety of speakers who offered ideas on creating turf free yards, woodland gardens and perennial borders which minimize the need to disturb the soil, and encourage the growth of indigenous plants. The

possibilities are endless, and even include ponds for the tiniest lot, using plants for filtration and beauty. Of special interest to the city dweller, was the presentation on rooftop gardens. A large city like Toronto has air an temperature eight degrees higher than its surrounding areas. Rooftop gardens help to lower the city's temperature. In addition, the massive expanse of concrete on city lands prevents the absorption of rain water runoff, which becomes a pollutant overflowing the storm sewer system and running unfiltered into the lake. Green roofs bring back the storm water retention capacity to the city, and create islands of biodiversity for birds, insects and plants. Some rooftop gardens even provide a source of food for community use.

According to information on the CAPE web-site, the World Health Organization estimates that at least 200,000 people a year are killed worldwide as a direct result of pesticide poisoning. A study in England and Wales demonstrated that 50% of pesticide poisonings involved children under the age of ten. Pesticide residues are found in pristine areas far removed from the source of pesticide use, and there is no body of water, no animal or human that has not been affected by the unlimited use of chemicals in the world today. It is no surprise that diseases of the nervous system, birth defects, and hormonal imbalances are on the rise. Children are suffering in unprecedented numbers from allergies and Attention Deficit Disorder. Our children are the most susceptible to the largest chemical experiment we have ever faced.

### **YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE**

Education is the key towards a greener landscape and garden. Armed with information, the urban gardener can make a lasting difference in the future health of our planet, not to mention the health of future generations. The OLA website offers seven fact sheets that are printer friendly featuring such topics as Organic Lawn Care, Groundcovers, and Fertilizers. There is a list of 10 reasons why you should ditch your garden chemicals and 12-step organic lawn care program. Simple measures such as mowing high, overseeding and leaving grass clippings on the lawn can greatly improve the health and look of the front yard. For further help, the site provides a

comprehensive summary of organic service providers and product suppliers. The members provide services ranging from environmental consulting to landscape design and organic lawn maintenance. Like any non-profit organization, OLA looks to its members to create a strong network of like-minded individuals. Serving the community and providing the information that creates change can only be accomplished through dedicated membership and a generous flow of ideas. OLA welcomes new members and associate members, and is looking towards a future where our ecological footprint will be light.

We are all significant pieces of the intricate tapestry woven by nature. As nature unravels, so do we, but we are also capable of being part of the solution to the problem we have created. Recognizing that we have a direct impact on the immune system of our planet and doing something about it will increase our own immunity and the strength of the fabric of our being.

*To reach OLA, go to [www.organiclandscape.org](http://www.organiclandscape.org) or call toll-free 1-866-824-7685. Email : [info@organiclandscape.org](mailto:info@organiclandscape.org), or write them at The Wicket, 777 Bay Street, P.O. Box 46009, Toronto, ON, M5G 2P6. For more information on the effects of pesticides and to reach CAPE, TEA or Green Roofs for Healthy Cities Coalition, follow the links on the OLA site. The links will also lead you to more sites that offer practical help and ideas on organic gardening.*

*A visit to the public library or your favorite bookstore/health food store, will reward you with any number of organic gardening and landscaping manuals. Likewise will a conversation with elders in the community who have gardened organically for years without having been told to. Education is power in the face of all things that look impossible.*

*The full text of the by-law is available at [www.toronto.ca/pesticides](http://www.toronto.ca/pesticides) as well as at [www.toronto.ca/legdocs/municode/1184\\_612.pdf](http://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/municode/1184_612.pdf).*

Two brochures will be available for at public libraries, community centers and on the City of Toronto's web-site. Extra copies can be obtained by calling the Toronto Health Connection at (416) 338-7600.

The brochures are entitled:

- How Will Toronto's Pesticide By-law Affect Me?...and other perfectly natural questions, and,
- Reducing Pesticides... a perfectly natural approach to lawn and garden care.

The Toronto Pesticide By-law (By-law No. 456-2003) was passed in May 2003, and comes into effect on April 1, 2004. Full enforcement of the by-law begins in September 2005, however, warnings and educational material will be issued starting in the spring of 2005 for those who do not comply.

This by-law applies to public and private property, and affects homeowners, renters or businesses in any outdoor capacity. Areas affected are city owned green spaces, cemeteries, golf courses, schools, hospitals and child care facilities.

Some limited use of pesticides is allowed to control or destroy pests that cause infestation or pose a possible health hazard. Among the pest control products allowed are sulfur, soap, dormant or horticultural oil, diatomaceous earth, nematodes, and pyrethrum