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## **Please stay on the lawn ; Interest in chemical-free grass care is sprouting; [Chicago Final Edition]**

*Mary Ellen Podmolik, Special to the Tribune. Chicago Tribune. Chicago, Ill.: Jun 2, 2006. pg. 1*

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### **Abstract** (Document Summary)

At The Chalet Nursery & Garden Shops in Wilmette, the fastest- growing part of its lawn care division is its organic segment. More than 350 of the lawn care division's clients--half of all accounts-- are on Chalet's organic lawn care program, although only seven customers are completely organic.

### **Full Text** (1212 words)

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#### LANDSCAPING YOUR HOME

Consumers can choose eco-friendly paint and furniture, wear organic cotton clothing and cosmetics, and pick from shelves of organic food at grocery stores. So why not, an increasing number of homeowners ask, commit to a naturally green lawn?

Organic lawn care isn't yet mainstream. But more products for the do-it-yourself market are cropping up at big-box stores such as Lowe's and Home Depot, and lawn care companies are sprouting to cater to the growing market. Interest among homeowners appears to be budding, too: Although only 5 percent of U.S. households report using all-organic methods in their yards, 21 percent said they are likely do so in the future, according to a National Gardening Association survey.

Still, as Kermit the Frog was fond of saying, it's not easy being green. Unlike traditional synthetic weed killers and fertilizers, organic products use no chemicals. Instead, they rely on animal, plant and other natural byproducts to turn the soil into a healthy, living organism.

That means the biggest impediment to a 100 percent natural, organic lawn remains the stubborn weed. Short of digging out weeds and their roots, there just isn't any wholly effective, natural weed killer on the market. So area residents are doing the next best thing. They are going almost totally organic, save for spot- treating the weeds.

At The Chalet Nursery & Garden Shops in Wilmette, the fastest- growing part of its lawn care division is its organic segment. More than 350 of the lawn care division's clients--half of all accounts-- are on Chalet's organic lawn care program, although only seven customers are completely organic.

"Three people call in and ask for organic for every one that asks for lawn care," said lawn care manager Bill Leuenberger. "Two of three years ago, I had hardly anybody asking for organic."

Right after potential converts ask about weeds, they ask about price. And in some cases, they are pleasantly surprised. Lawn care companies that put down product for customers, charging by the square footage of your yard, say prices for organic care are about 20 percent higher than if they were using traditional products. The price of products that you can buy and apply yourself run the gamut, from slightly above the cost of mass-market products to as much as 50 percent higher.

Jeff Trewyn, a Chicago franchisee for NaturaLawn of America, an organic lawn care company, says he sees the initial

conversations with potential customers shifting from price and to the products.

"They really want to be educated," Trewyn said. "Every year, I have more people reaching out to us via the Internet and the phone book, where we are not soliciting them. They are looking for safer ways to take care of their lawns."

Bull Valley resident Pam DeVoe just became a convert, three years after moving from a Lincoln Park townhouse to a home surrounded by more than an acre of grass, perennial gardens and trees.

When a lawn care service accidentally let a granular herbicide get into her perennial garden, killing a major section of it, it got DeVoe thinking. She's not averse to spot use of chemicals on her garden, but she started to worry about the distribution of synthetic products on her grass and how it was impacting her surroundings, including her drinking water.

"My well water is coming from whatever I'm putting in my garden and recycling back," she said. "It really became an environmental awareness as well as an accident."

#### Rethinking the perfect lawn

So far, for her, the hardest part of adjusting to an organic program is the longer grass; her yard no longer looks as well manicured as a golf course. "But I've never seen it greener," she said. "I've had neighbors saying, 'My golly, you lawn has never looked so good.'"

Connie Cunningham, an Oak Park landscape designer and lecturer on organic lawn care, advises clients to make the move to organic lawn care in baby steps. Get rid of weeds first by spot-treating the yard and then slowly delve into the science of organic soil care, trying different products to see what works best.

"It takes the edge off of people," she said. "You start moving into this more ecologically sound way of gardening. If you go right from one to the other, you will be bombarded with issues, what to do with weeds, grass in your flower beds and pests all over the place."

And there will be more insects, she warns, but beneficial bugs too. The first year will bring the bag bugs in the form of more slugs, aphids and earwigs. The second year, a yard will attract good insects, such as praying mantis and ladybugs that act as predators of the destructive insects. By the third year, the situation will start to normalize, she said.

North suburban resident Ron Tye has always taken a lot of pride in his lawn but opted to give organic products a try five years ago, after hearing they were better for the grass. He never went back to traditional products, despite the fact that keeping his lawn picture-perfect has required more effort.

"It's like the gym, it's a never-ending battle," Tye said. "You kind of take it for granted. We just think of it as grass. But it's a living organism."

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#### Healthy soil at root of organic lawn care

Here are five keys to growing a good-looking organic lawn:

- Think soil, not turf. Organic lawn care experts focus on creating and maintaining a healthy soil, reasoning that if it's fertile, a lush lawn will follow.
- Be prepared to see a weed. Because there are no chemicals widely spread over a lawn to prevent weeds, they will spring up. Once you see weeds, they can then be spot-treated with weed killer.
- Get used to a longer blade of grass. Organic lawns need to be kept 2 1/2 to 3 1/2 inches long in order to lessen stress on the lawn and leave less room for weeds. Make sure the mower blades are kept sharp to lessen the chances of shredding the top of the grass blades.
- Water correctly. Really soak the lawn twice a week for 45 minutes in the morning. Saturated soil means the turf will have to extend its root systems deep to find moisture.
- Be patient. Getting the soil healthy, rather than just the grass green, takes time. It's likely to take at least one year, but could take up to three years, to see the results of an organic lawn care program. "It's like getting your lawn off drugs," said Rachel Rosenberg, executive director of the Safer Pest Control Project, a Chicago-based group dedicated to reducing the use of pesticides. "There is a transitional period where your lawn will need extra care."

For more information, go to the National Coalition for Pesticide-Free Lawns, [www.beyondpesticides.org](http://www.beyondpesticides.org), and the Midwest Ecological Landscaping Association, [www.melaweb.org](http://www.melaweb.org), for articles and resources on organic lawn care and landscaping.

-- Mary Ellen Podomolik

**[Illustration]**

PHOTO GRAPHIC; Caption: PHOTO: Set the mower high. Organic lawns need to be longer, about 2 1/2 to 3 1/2 inches, to help crowd out weeds and lessen stress on the lawn. KRT photo GRAPHIC (color): KRT illustration by Kathy Hagedorn

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