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Organic Lawn Care Movement Spreading Across North America

Turf Wars

Armed with chicken manure, organic lawn product makers are battling for your backyard

By GWENDOLYN BOUNDS and ILAN BRAT April 15, 2006; Page P1

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Tucked in the back of a Lowe's garden center, wedged near grass-seed spreaders and jugs of weed killer, sits a pallet whose contents are quietly upending America's lawn landscape: \$24.97 bags of Cockadoodle DOO organic lawn fertilizer made from chicken manure.

With spring hitting full swing, a battle is shaping up over your backyard. Taking aim at consumers who have embraced organic products from vegetables to cotton sheets, some upstarts are pushing the idea that it's not enough for your grass to be green -- it should also be "green."

The approach is at odds with most of the \$35 billion lawn- and garden-care industry, which for years has been focusing on ever more effective synthetics. But the organic products are making inroads. Lowe's, Sears and Home Depot now stock several brands of organic fertilizers and weed control in their gardening aisles, and Lowe's, for one, says demand is growing. Even industry behemoth Scotts Miracle-Gro, is hedging its bets: At the same time it is testing genetically engineered grass, it's also pushing organic fertilizer and potting mix.

The organic-lawn movement is in step with a broader backlash against landscaping chemicals. That's giving traditional lawn and garden suppliers fits -- one industry group mounted a "Gloves Are Off" media campaign proclaiming "We're about to start fighting back."

Then there's the matter of looks. Building an organic yard involves things some homeowners -- and perhaps more importantly, their neighbors -- might consider incompatible with a picture-perfect lawn.

With organic methods, some weeds are likely to persist. Leaving unsightly lawn clippings lying around is encouraged to add nutrients to the soil. And organic lawns are trimmed more hippie-style -- roughly, three inches tall -- to strengthen roots and ward off invasion by weeds.

For Nancy T. Cabaniss, a homeowner in Lexington, Va., the organic approach means extra work. "With a synthetic spray, I spray the weeds once and they're gone," says Ms. Cabaniss. "With some organic products, I have to keep doing it over and over and over."

At first, champions of organic lawns admit, taking the organic route may be more work and more pricey: a 3,000-square-foot lawn that costs \$200 a year to maintain with synthetics might cost twice as much using organic substitutes. The payoff, advocates say, will be a yard that one day costs less to care for, is safer for the environment and handles stresses such as drought.

"Initially, it may feel harder, but in the long term, it's easier," says Scott Meyer, editor of Organic Gardening magazine. He likens using chemicals to "putting your yard on steroids." Over time, he says, "it weakens the system."

As with food, there's debate about how beneficial the all-natural approach truly is. Some turf experts say plants thrive equally well with synthetic and organic nutrients. Frank Rossi, a professor of turfgrass science at Cornell University, adds that organics give users a false sense of security. For instance, he says, runoff of certain organic fertilizers with high concentrations of phosphorus can harm streams and rivers. "Some people think because it's

organic, there's absolutely no harm you can do with it," Mr. Rossi says. "That's a lie."

A recent survey from the National Gardening Association and Organic Gardening magazine found that, while only 5% of U.S. households now use all-organic methods in their yards, some 21% said they would definitely or probably do so in the future. "It says to me that it's going mainstream," says Bruce Butterfield, the NGA's research director.

The issue of lawn chemicals is getting more visibility across the U.S. The little flags or warning signs posted around town by professional lawn services are required in some states; many tell people not to enter a chemically treated area within 24 hours of application. The same recommendation is on some off-the-shelf products.

Nearly two dozen states, including New York and Wisconsin, now require public notification when pesticides are being applied by professionals, according to Beyond Pesticides, a Washington, D.C., advocacy group. At least 13 U.S. towns, including Lawrence, Kan. and Chatham, N.J., have pesticide-free parks, and 33 states and several hundred school districts have laws or policies designed to minimize kids' exposure to pesticides. Just last year, New York City passed legislation requiring the city to phase out acutely toxic pesticides on city-owned or leased property and make commercial landscapers give neighbors notice before spraying certain pesticides.

The health effects of treating lawns with pesticides is hotly debated, but a growing body of research suggests that some commonly used synthetic pesticides may pose health risks, including cancer and kidney or liver damage, particularly to children and pets. One study published in a journal put out by the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences found that children exposed to herbicides and pesticides in the first year of life were significantly at higher risk of asthma than never-exposed children. The Environmental Protection Agency Web site says kids are at greater peril from pesticides because their internal organs and immune systems are still developing.

Other studies, including one published in the Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association, have suggested that exposing dogs to some herbicide-treated lawns and gardens may increase their chances of developing canine malignant lymphoma or bladder cancer. And environmentalists are concerned about chemical runoff into streams and rivers.

Scotts and other big players in the lawn-care business say that, when applied appropriately, EPA-registered pesticides are perfectly safe and stress that consumers should not overapply products. "You don't take an aspirin if you don't have a headache," says Tom Delaney, government affairs director for Professional Landcare Network, an industry trade association. "And if you do have one, you don't take three or four. You follow the directions."

Professional lawn-care services that have long depended on traditional synthetic products are moving into organics. Attendance at organic-accreditation classes for landscapers run by the Northeast Organic Farming Association has nearly doubled over the last five years. One NOFA member, Griffin Organics in Peekskill N.Y., now treats 40 clients' lawns organically, up from four just three years ago. Although most Griffin customers still buy chemicals, operations manager Tommy Eade is so impressed with organic results that he hopes to one day never touch another bag containing 2,4-dichlorophenoxyacetic acid (a common herbicide and component of Agent Orange). "Our goal is to be all organic," Mr. Eade says.

Golf courses are getting into the act, too. The founder of Pure Barnyard, which makes Cockadoodle DOO products, says he supplies his organic chicken manure fertilizer to about 20% of New England's courses. Marblehead, Mass., recently converted 15,000 acres of athletic fields to organic care. Even Walt Disney World has reduced its use of traditional pesticides by 70% since the 1990s and is using all-natural composts in some areas of the park.

Traditional makers, meanwhile, continue to develop new kinds of synthetic products. Scotts has a popular four-step program timed to the seasons with bags of "weed and feed" that combine fertilizer with insecticides and herbicides. And the company is angling to market a genetically engineered golf-course turf that's resistant to Roundup, a powerful herbicide for which Scotts owns U.S. residential-marketing rights. A consumer version of the grass is also on the horizon.

That prospect has organic purists digging in their heels. "Many people call pollution with a

life of its own," says NOFA coordinator Bill Duesing. He says such varieties endanger the ecosystem by giving transgenic grass a competitive advantage over naturally occurring varieties.

For Pam Delcore, the impetus to go organic was simpler. Shopping at a garden store in Dedham, Mass., last week, Ms. Delcore said she used to pay a pro to douse her lawn with pesticides, but got worried after nearby flowers started dying. She fired the lawn-care company and now she's ready to give organics a shot.

"It was just making me nervous," she says of the chemical solutions.

--Jessie Knadler and Marisa Milanese contributed to this article.

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Joining the Grass-Roots Movement

By GWENDOLYN BOUNDS

April 15, 2006; Page P5

After three years of staring at a patchy backyard filled with bare spots, dandelions and straggly stuff that might pass for grass, I've finally decided to get serious about my lawn.

I'm trying to keep up with the Joneses, or more precisely, the Johnsons. My neighbor, Josephine Johnson, is a horticulturist from Holland whose yard makes me green with envy. So I asked what products kept her lawn so lush and low on weeds. Must be something pretty potent, I figured.

Wrong. As it turns out, my friend is an organic landscaper. Jos uses no synthetic herbicides or fertilizers on her grass. With two sons, a dog and well water, it was never worth the possible risk, she thought. Since I too have a dog and in a couple of years may well have a kid, that got me thinking that I should consider going organic.

But how hard would it be? My time outdoors is limited, as are my environmental stripes. I don't own a compost bin or hybrid car and, for the record, have never considered donning a pair of Birkenstocks. To help me form a plan I could stick to, I enlisted Jos and two other pros, Scott Meyer, the editor of Organic Gardening magazine, and Bill Duesing, coordinator for the Northeast Organic Farming Association. TURF WARS¹

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There is a battle brewing³ over your backyard, as organic gardening advocates and others push for lawns that are truly "green."

Their strategy for my 3,500-square-foot space was pretty simple. First, get some grass growing in those bare spots to help fight the weeds. Second, feed the lawn during the summer and fall with organic fertilizers and other nutrients, and mow. In mid to late summer, throw down an organic herbicide called corn gluten to control weeds. (It's also good to do this in the spring if you're not putting down grass seed.) And in the fall I may add some calcitic limestone to get the pH of the soil up to a less acidic 6.5, or so -- I'd gotten a soil test last year and knew the pH was low.

I got started two weekends ago, raking up winter debris (not fun). Then I bought several bags of top soil with organic compost and humus, and tossed the contents together in a wheelbarrow with a spading fork (more fun). I spread the humus/soil mix on the bare spots and used a rotary spreader to drop organic fertilizer.

Next up, grass seed. I chose a sun/shade variety and distributed that using the same spreader. Then I covered all the bare spots with straw to keep moisture in and hungry birds out, and watered the entire lawn deeply. If I'm lucky, the grass will come up this week. In late spring and early fall, I'll fertilize; that should help thicken and green things up, I'm told. For general timetables, check a Web site like organiclandcare.net, organicgardening.com or extremelygreen.com.

Time permitting, I'll feed the lawn compost "tea" and seaweed blends, and try a Weed Dragon to torch pesky plants around the lawn's edges -- so much cooler than digging them up.

My lawn is a work in progress. If you have tips, write to me at wendy.bounds@wsj.com . Also, check back online this spring and summer, when I'll update readers on how the lawn progresses.

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