

## **Sustainable Belmont: Nurture your yard naturally**

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BELMONT – In a suburban setting such as Belmont, most land is owned and cared for by individual homeowners, with much of it devoted to lawns and gardens. To keep yards lush, healthy, and green, people often turn to chemical fertilizers and pesticides (such as crabgrass preventers and fungus treatments) assuming it is the best — or only—option available. However, these products are no silver bullet; in fact, they do more harm than good.

Pesticides are like antibiotics for lawns: they kill bad organisms. Unfortunately, like antibiotics, they also kill good organisms that store nutrients and provide natural defense against disease. Plants then become more susceptible to disease and larger insect infestations, which, in this scenario, leads to increased pesticide use to kill the pests. Fertilizers are used to compensate for the loss of soil nutrients sapped by the pesticides, but they do not provide a balanced meal for plants, and eventually more fertilizer is needed too. As you can see, it is easy for homeowners to quickly get trapped in a costly and unhealthy chemical cycle.

The dangers of this chemical dependency extend far beyond the backyard. Pesticides can pose potential health risks to your family (especially children, whose developing bodies are more vulnerable to the effects of environmental pollutants) and your pets, and have been linked to birth defects, cancer and other diseases, according to the Environmental Protection Agency. In addition, most commercial fertilizers are derived from natural gas (a fossil fuel) in a complex chemical process that releases carbon dioxide, the heat-trapping gas primarily responsible for global warming.

The easiest, cheapest and most environmentally friendly way to maintain a beautiful and healthy lawn is to work *with* nature, not *against* it. Yard “waste” becomes yard “treasure” when it is transformed into compost through the process of decomposition. Compost is a superior soil amendment to fertilizer because it provides nutrient-rich microorganisms and helps improve water storage and drainage. Healthy, well-drained soil promotes denser, deep-rooted plant life that is resistant to drought, insects and diseases, resulting in up to a 50 percent reduction in water use.

When mowing, keep the grass about three inches high and leave the clippings on the lawn. Both of these practices will keep the soil from drying out as quickly, and the clippings, when decomposed, will fertilize the lawn. And instead of bagging and disposing of leaves and other plant debris, spread it under shrubs or, for faster results, place it in a compost bin. Finally, in the fall, spread about half an inch of compost over the lawn and under shrubs and trees, to help keep them nourished during the winter months.

Organic lawn care is not just for do-it-yourselfers. If you hire a landscaper, tell them you are interested in organic lawn care and ask them if they provide this service. You can also find a list

of accredited organic garden professionals at [www.organiclandcare.net](http://www.organiclandcare.net).

It may take up to two years for Mother Nature to transform your formerly chemical-laden yard into a healthy, natural and self-sustaining soil system, but be patient. Knowing that you have helped make your property a safer place for you, your family, your community, and the global environment will no doubt make the waiting worthwhile.

To learn more about organic lawn care, visit the NOFA Web site at [www.nofamass.org](http://www.nofamass.org).