Lawn Care: Organics vs. Synthetics

With so many lawn care products on the market, there is a lot of confusion about the use of organic lawn care products versus synthetic products. The Professional Landcare Network (PLANET) represents landscape, tree care, and lawn care specialists nationwide that use both types of products. "We recognize that there is confusion about organic and synthetic products and services that utilize them," states Tom Delaney, director of government affairs for PLANET. "We have members that use both products in their services and want to make sure that the public is well informed of the differences," Delaney continues.

While there are no universally accepted definitions of "natural" and "organic," here are the most commonly accepted definitions:

Natural. A product substantially derived from animal/biological, mineral, or plant sources in form as it occurs in nature. The materials may be altered or manipulated to put them in a physical form that allows them to be efficiently used in the application process by homeowners or service providers.

Organic. Technically, any substance containing carbon is organic. Both naturally occurring and man-made products may be organic. The common misconception that "organic" and "natural" have the same meaning may cause non-technical consumers to believe that man-made organic material is natural when it is not.

Natural-based. This term is generally used to describe a mixture of materials that includes some materials that may be properly described as natural. The portion that is natural is frequently undefined. The other portion may be man-made pesticides or fertilizers.

Organic-based. This term is generally used to describe a mixture of materials that includes some organic materials. The portion of the product that is both organic and natural is frequently undefined. The other portion may be manmade pesticides or fertilizers.

While PLANET does not promote one kind of lawn care product or service over another, the organization does promote the safe and proper use of all state- and federally registered products used to maintain customers' properties. PLANET also encourages consumers to thoroughly research the products that are being used on their lawns.

"As consumers search for safe products, it's important to remember that the legal definition of the word 'safe' is 'without risk,'" Delaney explains. "No product is without risk, organic or synthetic, and it is of the utmost importance that consumers recognize that fact." If misapplied, both organic and synthetic fertilizers can damage landscapes and potentially pollute the environment. For example, if either product (organic or synthetic) is inadvertently left on paved surfaces, rainfall may move the nutrients into storm drains where they can find their way into rivers and lakes. Over application to lawns in an attempt to enhance color, may force unhealthy turf growth, which can reduce root growth and make a lawn more susceptible to disease. Applied properly, both organic and synthetic fertilizers provide lawns with the necessary nutrients without harm to the environment.

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Control of weeds and insects is more difficult with organic products. Soft-bodied insects, such as webworms and aphids, are easily controlled by many organic-based insecticides, including soaps containing fatty acids or botanical oils. They are not effective, however, on hard-bodied insects such as mole crickets and billbugs.

Researchers have tested numerous biological control agents, including milky spore disease for some grub species as well as beneficial nematodes, with some success.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has been giving priority in reviewing reduced-risk products that are not defined as organic. These may be synthetic or naturally occurring. Under criteria established by the EPA, these substances have lower toxicity yet can be as effective as other products used in the past.

If there is one area that both lawn care operators and proponents of organic-only programs can agree on, it's the knowledge that integrated pest management reduces the use of control products of all types.

Healthy and well-cared for lawns are important to our environment. More than 30 million acres of lawns exist in the United States. It's estimated that these lawns remove 5 percent of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and provide a significant amount of oxygen. Lawns also trap more than 12 million tons of dust and dirt annually, trap and filter rainwater, and prevent erosion. In addition, they provide a cooling effect in summer months, help boost energy efficiency, and provide children and families with safe areas to play and recreate that are free from dangerous insects and weed allergens.

"Consumers need to recognize that to maintain healthy lawns, it is essential that organic and synthetic coexist," adds Delaney. "There's a misperception that because it's organic, it's safe and because it is synthetic it is not, and that misleads the public. It is about choices and what works."

Here are some questions that consumers should ask about organic lawn care products:

- Do the products used or services rendered contain or use any materials that are subject to Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) regulation and registration? Any product claiming to prevent, destroy, repel, or mitigate any pest, such as insects, weeds, or disease, requires state and EPA registration and is classified as a pesticide.
- Are these materials man-made or naturally occurring?
- Are weed, insect, and disease controls a part of the product or service?
- What proportion or percentage (25 percent, 50 percent) of the active ingredients and of the total applications are man-made materials?

"The bottom line is that consumers need to pay close attention to the instructions on the products they're buying or hire state-licensed professionals to apply these products when unsure of the pest or the proper control measure," Delaney cautions. "Lawn care professionals have the safety training and certification to identify the pest or lawn and landscape problems, and to choose and apply the proper products when needed. With professional application, both organics and synthetic products might take care of a problem and be applied without harm to our environment."