



The approach of spring with longer days and rising temperatures, brings on a longing to trade our inside world for the world that awaits us outside. That outside world includes our own yards where we are gearing up for yet another year of lawn maintenance. Before we launch into our usual lawn care regimen, a few facts may be of value.

Each year, Americans use approximately 70 million pounds of pesticides to maintain their lawns, mostly for aesthetic purposes, making those lawns the largest, most toxic “crop” in the U.S. This, while researchers continue to uncover the links between pesticide exposures and serious human health problems, including several types of cancer, neurological and reproductive problems, as well as birth defects. Children are especially vulnerable to these chemical exposures, due in part to their immune systems which are not yet fully developed.

Beyond human health, environmental impacts include destruction of beneficial soil bacteria, contamination of water resources, and the deaths of millions of wild birds, pollinators, insects, butterflies and other wildlife.

But the good news is that with some modifications to our maintenance plan we can have a safe and attractive outdoor space with less effort, cost and maintenance.

If you switch to a more natural maintenance plan, you can take advantage of what nature has already provided for you. Leaves and compost are natural fertilizers - an inexpensive way to feed your lawn. The use of these free additives also helps the soil to retain water, a plus during times of low rain activity. It also improves the texture of the soil, maximizing conditions for beneficial micro-organisms who help to improve overall soil quality.

A few changes in your mowing schedule will reduce costs and emissions. Most people mow their lawns too short and too frequently. Mowing at 2½ to 3 inches promotes deeper root growth, making the grass less vulnerable to draught and other stressors. Mowing less frequently, especially in the heat of summer, makes sense and will save time and money, as well as reducing noise and air pollution. It may be surprising to know that traditional gas-powered lawn mowers produce up to 5% of the nation’s air pollution.

If you are transitioning from a chemical-based lawn program to a more organic one, you may find that some “weeds” will begin to appear. Paul Tukey, organic lawn care expert, tells us that “Weeds and insects usually appear on lawns when something is wrong with the soil. Even if we kill the weeds and bugs, they will come back unless we fix the underlying problem within the soil.” Tukey’s *Weed Identification Guide* as published in his book *The Organic Lawn Care Manual*, provides recommendations for reduction of specific lawn weeds by such measures as amending the soil, aeration, and over-seeding.

And remember that some so-called weeds may be tolerated. Clover adds nitrogen to the soil while violets and dandelions provide pollen and nectar for bumblebees. Learn to appreciate the look of grass that is not manicured to perfection. A little variety can be viewed as a good thing.

You might also rethink your lawn in terms of its size. Are there parts of your lawn that could be converted to a native plant garden? Such gardens support native pollinators, encourage beneficial insects, thrive with little or no special care, and create interest to your landscape. Increased

biodiversity is key to adding to the health of your yard and by extension the health of your neighborhood.

Additionally, if you let part of your lawn remain uncut for a while you may be surprised to find native flowering plants emerge, creating a mini-meadow. Establishing such wild areas provides places for insects, pollinators and other wildlife to thrive. These areas are low maintenance (except for removal of any invasive plants) and are resistant to pests.

These changes to your lawn care regime reflect a paradigm shift from the use of harsh commercial products to using what nature already has provided for us (leaves, compost, native plants, beneficial insects). It also may mean that we readjust our definition of a perfect lawn – from what one sees on a golf course to a more diverse and interesting (and healthy) look.

In our modern lives we are already assaulted daily by chemicals over which we have no control. Why add to this burden when it is not necessary? Because of the extraordinarily large acreage devoted to lawns in this country, elimination of lawn care pesticides could have a huge impact on our overall reduction of chemical exposure. We think you and your family deserve to have minimal exposure to these risks.

A final thought. Lawn care chemicals such as neonicotinoids and weed-and-feed products have already been banned in Canada and parts of Europe. Until the U.S. enacts similar legislation, lawn care companies could proactively offer less toxic options, moving to a more organic approach. This is the perfect opportunity for lawn care professionals to be our heroes by promoting safe and effective practices that protect ecosystems as well as public health.