

Pesticides & the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Project

Organic Land Care – Practical & Cost-Effective Stewardship for Faith-Base Institutions

By Robert SanGeorge

Attitudes are changing throughout the Chesapeake Bay region in the way we view the management of our public spaces. Growing concern about the health and environmental impacts of pesticides – on our health and on the Bay – is causing organizations and agencies that manage parcels of open spaces to adopt a non-toxic, organic approach to lawn and land care. Chesapeake Covenant Community members can be a leader in meeting this challenge, while setting an example for their congregants.

A wide range of local institutions – eldercare institutions, hospitals, local departments of parks and recreation, as well as faith-based institutions – have good reason to be increasingly worried. A steady drumbeat of news reports, based on scientific research, suggest an association between pesticide exposures and chronic diseases such as certain cancers, as well as reproductive, neurological, respiratory and developmental disorders.

For faith-based congregations, concern about the impact of pesticides on their members is fully justified. Children playing on lawns and playgrounds adjacent to places of worship [are most at risk](#). They are closer to the ground and more likely to crawl around while playing – and they are generally at greater risk of accumulating concentrations of these hazardous chemicals in their bodies. This issue is especially important for faith-based institutions because they are not required to follow [Maryland's "Integrated Pest Management in Schools Law"](#) requiring pesticides only be used when non-toxic options have been exhausted. As for adults – especially for pregnant women and people with compromised immune systems – the risk also is significant.

Fortunately there is a solution that simultaneously will eliminate these health hazards, reduce land maintenance costs, help protect the Bay watershed – and at the same time enable congregations to keep the land around their places of worship looking green and attractive. This trend toward organic land care is growing. Nearly all Canadian provinces have banned so-called “cosmetic” use of pesticides on lawns, and more than 100 municipalities in the United States have implemented pesticide reduction ordinances that make use of “integrated pest management” and/or organic land care techniques.

Congregations using lawn care services will need to question them carefully. Many companies claim to employ “natural” techniques that are at best partially organic – and actually involve significant and continuing applications of pesticides and fertilizers. Specifics issues to raise with lawn care contractors are listed in the bullet points below.

Genuine organic landcare, however, encourages non-chemical methods of pest prevention and management based on a “feed the soil” approach. The objective is to create and maintain high quality turf grass that is environmentally friendly and free from toxic chemicals. And once established, an organic turf management program can result in savings of greater than 25%. This approach involves:

- ✓ Developing healthy soil with proper pH – having the soil pH tested.
- ✓ Planting well-adapted pest-resistant grass varieties.
- ✓ Using phosphorus-free compost fertilizer.
- ✓ Adopting proper management practices to reduce susceptibility to insects, disease and weather stress – including aerating, dethatching and top dressing.
- ✓ Employing effective watering methods that can cut lawn irrigation by as much as 40% and [which can save money in an era of ever-rising water costs](#).
- ✓ Mowing with blades set to three inches, which minimizes adverse effects.

The Pesticides and the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Project has freely available fact sheets with details on organic turf management, as well as an online brochure, *The Healthy Garden Alternative* (www.mdpestnet.org/publications/HealthyGarden.pdf).

Transitioning to organic land care around places of worship will both protect our health and our fragile Bay ecosystem, while at the same time setting a positive example of Earth stewardship for others throughout our region.

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