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Think soil, says organic lawn expert

Paul Tukey visits Kimberley



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Paul Tukey with Martha Stewart after an appearance on her show last year.

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Noted organic lawn and garden expert Paul Tukey was in the East Kootenay, courtesy of Wildsight, last week for various Earth Week events.

Tukey is an ardent campaigner for pesticide free lawns and his message differed depending on which community he visited. If the community, like Cranbrook, doesn't have a bylaw against cosmetic pesticides, Tukey concentrated on the need for such a bylaw, along with lawn and garden advice. In Kimberley, however, the bylaw is in place, so Tukey's message was, you can still have a great lawn the organic way.

The fact is, even without pesticides, most still want a lawn. Some in Kimberley have adopted xeriscaping with mulch and native plants, but the overwhelming number of Kimberley yards have grass. And it's still possible to have great green lawns without pesticides, Tukey says.

His advice, think soil.

"When you go natural in lawn care, embrace the idea that soil is key. Instead of focusing on growing plants, think of growing the soil."

What is sprouting in your lawn is sending a message about the health of your soil, Tukey says.

Lots of dandelions, for example.

"That's what a lot of people in this area are saying is a major problem - dandelions," Tukey said. "Dandelion's deep tap root goes to the subsoil to pull nutrients to the surface. When you have dandelions, the message is there's not enough calcium in your soil. You need to add limestone, gypsum or wood ash."

However, it's not an instant fix, just as transitioning to organic lawn care won't happen over night.

"It doesn't mean the dandelions will die over night. It means as you condition your soil and get it healthier, your lawn will improve. You can modify your soil so it doesn't want to grow weeds. It's a process not an event. Spraying fertilizer is an event. If you put down Miracle Gro, it gets taken up by plants, or pesticides kill plants. With organic lawn care you are not killing things or growing instantly, but growing the soil.

"Once you do those things, you focus on Mother Nature's own processes."

For example, Tukey asks, how do trees grow?

"The reality is Mother Nature knows how to grow things or we wouldn't have trees. The natural fertilizer is living organisms in the soil, like earthworms. The soil is alive. When we fertilize we are bypassing the natural process, killing all those organisms."

A lot of organic lawn care is common sense, he says, like leaving grass clippings on the lawn as a natural fertilizer and deep watering less often.

Tukey presented his ideas in Kimberley at open workshops, but also at a workshop for the City, School District and golf course operators.

Natural lawn care guide

Obtain a Soil Test - Never spend money on any fertilizer or soil amendment without first consulting the results of a soil test first.

Grow the Right Grass - The most common lawn grasses in North America, Kentucky bluegrass and Bermudagrass, also need the most water and fertilizer to grow well. Other species such as perennial ryegrass, fescue and buffalograss grass may be better for your region.

Water Well - Morning watering is always recommended so that the surface of the lawn dries off during the day. Water deeply and infrequently so the roots of the grass learn to grow down into the soil.

Think of Your Soil as Alive - "Dirt" is what you track into your house. The material that grows your lawn, the soil, is alive with organisms large and small that need nurturing.

Mow Properly - Recycling your grass clippings by leaving them on the lawn will provide approximately half of your lawn's fertilizer needs for the season. Keep your mower blades sharp. Lawns should be mowed no lower than 2.5 inches, even higher in the summer.

Avoid Synthetic Materials - Fertilizers manufactured in a laboratory often burn lawn grasses and soils. Fertilizers and soil amendments should come from materials that were once living.

Add Compost - Compost contains all sorts of beneficial microorganisms that add life to the soil. Compost in liquid form, known as compost tea or extract, should be used in the years of transition from a synthetic system.

See Weeds & Insects as Messengers - Weeds and insects usually appear on lawns only when something is wrong with the soil. Even if we kill the messengers, they will come back unless we fix the soil.

Overseed Regularly -By overseeding in spring or fall, you are introducing robust young plants that will fill in bare areas and compete against weeds.