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## The Easy Organic Lawn

**Goal** – easy, lasting, inexpensive, safe

**How** – strengthen grass to weaken weeds

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## Introduction

In 2008, my husband and I built a small house. It was my first home. I wanted everything to be done God's way, including the lawn. When I began, I knew nothing but four facts:

1. The sod had been laid on hard clay and rocks that gave the grass roots little chance to thrive,
2. Our yard was next to a field of weeds at the time,
3. I wanted the lawn to be safe for us, our friends, their children, and pets, and
4. I knew conventional lawn treatments were toxic to the environment, lingered on the grass and in the air, and were difficult to remove from the water tables underneath.

I wanted **shalom** over my yard. Shalom is a Hebrew greeting offering a blessing upon every part of life. The shalom of God means harmony, wholeness, purity, and completeness in our bodies, emotions, mind, relationships, provision, and **environment**. Shalom is the stability and contentment that comes when nothing is emphasized at the expense of something else. Shalom is fulfillment and restoration.

As I began to learn, I was fascinated to understand how God created this world to work together in a gentle balance, and how we were given the privilege to cultivate it. I knew it would take some time to have a healthy lawn that required less effort with each year. I am sharing this paper so that you can bypass the mistakes, frustration, perseverance, and doubt. So, come along with me and see how amazing our Creator God is!

## Benefits of an Organic Lawn

Organic lawns:

- Are less expensive to care for than conventional lawn treatments,
- Are safe for all creatures,
- Absorb water, reducing storm runoff,
- Improve water quality by filtering rainwater contaminants,
- Cool the yard,
- Provide oxygen to your environment,
- Trap dust and dirt,
- Promote healthful micro-organisms,
- Prevent erosion, and
- Create a restful landscape.

## The Main Goal – Strong Grass

Strong grass diminishes the weeds and survives most droughts. **Instructions:**

### Use Tall Fescue Grass Only

Tall Fescue has deep roots making it durable, drought-tolerant, and thatch-resistant. It stands at five inches, shading weeds. It thrives in sun, shade, and frost. Three years after our sod was laid, we had the lawn split-seeded (not over-seeded) with tall fescue by *Elfner Organic Lawn Company*. This was our first, best action! If you can, *before* your sod is placed, hire a company to rid the ground of rocks and debris.

### Encourage Soil Nourishment

Since our soil was clay and rock, I had to change the composition of the soil underneath the sod to add nourishment. I did this by **encouraging microbial activity**. After a few years, the soil became healthier (softer and darker) with less clay. Encourage microbial activity by allowing God's natural processes:

- **Microbes.** Let them live! Microbes are tiny, naturally occurring organisms in the soil that provide full service to the grass. Conventional lawn treatments kill their masterful work. Microbes:
  - Decompose dead plant and animal residues into humus
  - Combine nitrogen and carbon to prevent nutrient loss
  - Suppress disease and clean up chemical residues
  - Produce plant growth regulators
  - Develop healthy soil structure that promotes good water penetration and water retention thereby aerating and nourishing the soil
  - Balance the soil pH and control the nitrogen supply to the grass according its need
  - Retrieve nutrients from distant parts of the soil
- **Earthworms.** Let them live! Conventional lawn treatments kill valuable earthworms.
  - Earthworms aerate the soil providing drainage and water retention, so you will never have to hire someone to aerate your lawn.
  - Their burrows create pores allowing oxygen and water into the soil and carbon dioxide out.
  - They decompose plant matter releasing nutrients locked up in dead plants and animals. This process allows the grass to assimilate the nutrients.
  - They mix soil layers. This process incorporates and disperses organic matter into the soil and clay improving its fertility and nutrient retention.
- **Organic fertilizers.** Conventional, chemical fertilizers weaken the grass's resistance to weeds, insects, and diseases, and kill beneficial microbes. Organic fertilizers promote healthy grass. *Elfner* fertilizes our lawn, but it is easy to do yourself with a spreader.
  - Use protein-based fertilizers. *Elfner* uses dried distiller grains, a pre-emergent that prevents germination of weed seeds. The grains also provide microbes and other nutrients.
  - Use a mulching mower to leave grass clippings on the lawn for nutrients.
  - In early fall, *Elfner* spreads composted chicken manure pellets, a safe, great source of nitrogen and calcium. They break down slowly to provide steady plant and root growth.
  - Use organic dry fertilizers, such as Espoma, which are protein-based and may be applied any time of day in any amount without fear of hurting the turf. Give three weeks for the microbes to process the protein before seeing the benefit.
  - Mulch your flower beds with undyed, hardwood mulch.

## Water the Right Way

- **Water infrequently.** Unless you are growing new seed, water only when the grass shows signs of stress (grass starts to curl before it browns). Keep the surface of the grass dry as long as possible. This forces the grass roots to go deeper than most weed roots and causes the weeds to die in the upper dry soil. If you must water, water deeply; put a cup in the sprinkler zone, and water until the water is 1 inch or ½ inch deep; wait, then water another ½ inch.
- **Water early** in the morning. Watering in the evening encourages pathogenic fungus disease.

## Mow and Seed

- **Mow high** (3 to 4 inches). High grass shades the weeds and weed seedlings preventing their growth. Also, when grass is cut short, it grows fast causing it to use up stored sugar thereby weakening it. Grass needs the sugar to make rhizomes (more grass plants) and thicken the turf.
- **Mow frequently.** Grass grows near the soil, and weeds grow near the top, so mowing cuts the heads off some weeds. Also, grass suffers if more than one-third of its height is cut.
- **Mow dry.** Mowing wet grass spreads disease.
- **Mow sharp.** Change the blades. Damaged grass blades cannot as easily resist disease.
- **Seed in the fall.** You may need to split-seed each year in the beginning (I only had to do it once). Split-seeding strengthens the grass that is already there. Always seed in the fall, so the young grass has the benefit of lower temperatures to root.

## Control Pests and Disease

- Grubs are a common, unwanted beetle larvae that eat grass roots. *Elfner* sprays Beneficial Nematodes on our lawn in a compost tea solution during early spring when grubs are in their larval stage. The Nematodes are microscopic round worms that eat grubs. Since our neighbors on two sides of us have a grub problem, *Elfner* sprays extra Beneficial Nematodes on the borders of our property. We can see the difference. We have never been affected by grubs.
- Even though some problems cannot be avoided, treating your yard and garden organically will give it the best fight against pests and disease. *Gardens Alive* offers many organic solutions.

## Weed Facts

- Weeds are better than pesticide.
- Weeds cannot germinate in thick, tall grass.
- Weeds are weakened by repeated digging and mowing.
- Be patient. You will see fewer and fewer weeds each year. Twelve years later, we only get a few dandelions. I use an organic weed killer, Iron-X, from *Gardens Alive*. One 16-fluid-ounce bottle of concentrate lasts at least two years. I mix the liquid in a gallon spray pump. I spend about 45 minutes a year spraying the dandelions in the spring. *Elfner* will do this for me with a similar product, but I like to spray it myself, because it is so easy.
- Do not dig dandelions up, unless you are working in your flower beds. Digging them out creates a hole for another weed seed. Spraying the leaves with Iron X causes the weed to take the Iron-X to the root, killing it. The weed eventually disintegrates into the soil.
- You can spot-treat weeds on your patio in many ways:

- Initially I used a sprayer containing one gallon of cheap distilled white vinegar, plus one cup of Morton salt, and one Tablespoon of dish soap. I stopped using this mixture, because the vegetation around my patio eventually suffered a bit. So...
- Now I use a weed burner. I kill the weeds with a flame.
- Sometimes, it just makes sense to pull the weeds yourself. It does not take long and provides a quiet time on a sunny day.
- Never use Round-up.
- For nasty weeds like crabgrass (I do not have crabgrass anymore), vinegar or boiling water works. Crabgrass usually does not survive cold winters.
- For other weeds, such as clover, Purslane, Wintergrass, and others, I ignore them because there are fewer and fewer each year, although I do pull them from my flower and herb beds.

## Family Fun

Nurturing the lasting organic lawn can be a great way to learn and share tasks as a family! The times I spent in the yard with my Dad are my strongest memories of him.