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By Jim Alexander, Trustee, on behalf of the Board of Trustees.

A similar article will appear in the Fall 2008 edition of the Society Hill newsletter.

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"An ethic of constant improvement is the way to go," Mike McGrath, garden expert and Society Hill consultant.

For an overview on Society Hill's Landscape Management, including trees and grounds, go [here](#).

Landscape Goes Natural at Society Hill

Society Hill's already attractive lawns will soon look even better, be free of chemical treatments, and more in harmony with our environment. We're leading the way among condominium associations, and doing it in a managed, affordable, and sustainable manner.



Several years ago, Society Hill introduced organic lawn fertilizer to our landscape program, started integrated pest management, and began reducing the use of chemical weed controls. Starting this fall, the Board of Trustees has taken a major additional step by adopting an organic strategy for both fertilizers and pesticides.

Here's what's happening:

- All fertilizer will be organic – clean, rich, odor free.
- Compost from Lawrence Township's own Ecological Facility will be applied to several courts. Compost revitalizes the biological activity at the grass roots while providing enriching organic matter. Next year, we'll do this on other courts.
- Several other courts will receive fertilizer based on worm castings, a very rich natural source of nutrients. Both the compost and worm casting applications will be coupled with soil aeration and reseeded in these courts.
- The balance of the lawn areas will receive composted poultry-based products, free of biosolids and chemicals, similar to what we have been using.
- Weed control methods will no longer include chemicals. We're going to be working with a variety of new methods including natural pre-emergent materials, natural weed killers, and other methods.
- Simply stated, we're focused on revitalizing the soil so that grass may become stronger, better able to resist pests, and take advantage of the amazing biological activity that takes place in the



Landscape Chair Marc Tolo, Consultant Mike McGrath, and Landscape Contractor Joe DiGiovanni, examining soil sample at Society Hill.

soil under natural circumstances.

How are we doing it?

It's not just a matter of switching from one product to another. It's the development of a new philosophy, with new techniques and understanding of how nature works. Devising and implementing it has been a team effort directed by the Board of Trustees.

When some residents applauded our introduction of organic fertilizer but asked us to move farther in that direction, the Board recognized that any changes had to reflect objective, expert advice, that it had had to be workable within our limited dollar resources, and should maintain the established good appearance of our great lawn and shrub areas.

By happy coincidence, the township's Sustainable Lawrence organization had scheduled Mike McGrath to speak on organic home lawn methods at the Lawrenceville School, and several Society Hill representatives were in attendance. McGrath is a nationally recognized garden expert, hosting a weekly radio program *You Bet Your Garden* on the National Public Radio network. Having served earlier as editor of Rodale Press's *Organic Gardening* magazine, McGrath is a sought-after speaker and author of publications including *Mike McGrath's Book of Compost*. Of special interest, he not only researches and writes about organic methods, he maintains his own garden and grounds using these methods.

The Board of Trustees was then able to engage McGrath as a consultant to guide our transition, with a series of visits and conversations leading to a practical strategy tailored to our situation. McGrath was quickly impressed by the availability of high-quality compost from the Lawrence Township Ecological Facility on Princeton Pike. He also helped us shape a multi-year approach that would be workable.

A critical asset in this effort has been Joe DiGiovanni of DeVries Landscaping. DeVries has been our landscape contractor for a number of years, and had already introduced us to concepts of integrated pest management, various organic fertilizers, reduced use of pesticides, and as he sometimes puts it "outthinking the pests by understanding how they live." The additional challenge presented to Joe was to implement the enhanced strategy in a way that wouldn't break the budget, and which would involve his forces using modified labor and equipment techniques.

As the "man on the ground" who had already demonstrated a keen commitment to our landscape, Joe devoted major thought and exploration of techniques to the challenge, and worked with McGrath and the Board to complete the specifics of transition. Some techniques that



Mike McGrath scooping up samples of Lawrence Township's "Black Gold" compost at the Ecological Facility on Princeton Pike.

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might work well on a small home lawn don't work in a situation with large open spaces coupled with tight lawn areas in front of town homes and garden apartments. For instance, pelletized fertilizer can be applied quickly by mechanical spreaders, but compost is bulkier and requires greater labor to spread it and not get it on sidewalks.

Joe is still exploring techniques with us. Weed control in particular is a challenge, especially in the early part of such a transition.

How Do We Afford It?

The traditional maxim is that some organic materials are more expensive than chemicals, but in the case of compost, it's cheaper, yet involves higher labor costs to apply. Overall, the new efforts would cost more, but our commitment was to hold total spending level.

So we began a process of evaluating current practices, understanding the implications of our growing knowledge of natural processes, and seeing what tradeoffs we might develop. Several things emerged:

- McGrath taught us that by their nature lawn grasses in this region don't want to grow much during the hot summer months, and forcing growth with extra fertilization and watering really just stresses them. So we skipped the traditional mid-summer fertilization, freeing up funds for the overall strategy.
- The Board also sought a review of our irrigation system practices. The system, in place since original construction in the 1980s, had traditionally applied water to parts of the property through the summer. McGrath pointed out that excessive watering discourages grass from sending its roots deeper into the soil in search of moisture, at which levels they also find new sources of minerals. So, given that the summer was somewhat dry but not overly hot, we did not turn on irrigation all summer. While slight browning did occur, on balance the property remained green, and the grass roots were challenged to become stronger. And, several thousand dollars of savings were achieved in the water account!
- Analysis also disclosed that by removing water meters from the seven pump houses during the winter period when the system is not in use, we could save several thousand dollars additional in meter charges. Our plan currently is to maintain the irrigation in basic readiness, but not turn it on in the summer until and if needed; and to irrigate any courts in the fall if they have been reseeded, to assure the young grass will take root. The ability to manage this process was aided by expert advice from Rick LiSanti, of our irrigation contractor Growing Concern, Inc., who also participated in our strategy development.
- We also learned that the practice of spring application of wood mulch around trees, while attractive and aiding mowing practices, can actually be bad for the trees, so that will be skipped to free up further funds.

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How Long Will the Transition Take?

To further improve our understanding of the organic approach, Trustee Jim Alexander and Landscape Chair Mark Tolo attended a full-day seminar on Organic Lawn and Turf Management, held at Duke Farms under the sponsorship of the Northeast Organic Farmers Association. There, we heard from landscapers and experts who have successfully implemented these practices, and acquired a wealth of practical advice. Their experience validated McGrath's recommended course of action.



Happy Trees,
Healthy Lawns

They noted that the benefits of organic practices take several years to realize. (In our case, this will be especially true since full implementation of things like compost application will be phased in over several years.) Weed control is one of the biggest challenges of transitioning to the organic method; we'll be trying various ways to cope with them. You may see a few more weeds at first ("Weeds are messengers of problems in the soil; deal with the message, don't just kill the messenger.").

They also confirmed that our practice in recent years of mowing grass no lower than three inches (except in early spring and late fall) makes for healthier grass that shades and crowds out weeds better. And that using sharp mower blades helps protect grass from infection. And that leaving the clippings on the ground is the equivalent of one annual fertilization.

There will be a heavier emphasis on fall fertilization, which is the time when grass builds its roots systems; we will be working more closely with nature's cycles, and not fighting it. You might see some fall irrigation in the early or daylight hours where seeding has occurred: that's the most effective way to do it.

How long? To achieve all this within budget, the use of compost will be phased in over several years. Greenup from compost may not be as quick as with other fertilizers, but the soil will achieve greater biological activity, leading to stronger grass that will be better able to crowd out weeds. As new weed control methods are implemented, lessons will be learned and adjustments made.

Yes, we'll be learning every step of the way, calibrating strategy as needed. Would we ever use chemicals again? We've made the decision not to use chemicals not out of blind opposition to their limited use, but because we believe we've found a better way. So if we were confronted with some intractable problem with pests or weeds in the future, we retain the right to use whatever methods are needed. But we don't want to use chemicals if we can avoid it, and it's increasingly clear that natural methods are the way to go. McGrath counseled that this is a process rather than instant change, and we should move forward with "an ethic of constant improvement."

What Are the Other Benefits?

After several years of organic management, lawns look and are really

healthy! But there are more benefits.

- Once organic and biological strength has been established in the soil, costs tend to level down. Chemicals, on the other hand, often derived from petroleum or using energy in their production, are likely to become increasingly expensive.
- Natural methods help keep carbon locked in the soil, not released to the atmosphere where it contributes to global warming. Natural products break down, and do not persist to become contaminants in soil and water.
- While some organic weed controls require careful handling, they do not raise concerns of cancer or hormonal disruption. An example is the use of "vinegar" to kill weeds. Actually it's a stronger concentration of acetic acid which is technically classified as a pesticide, subject to posting and licensing of applicators. Nobody would want to be sprayed with such a strong acid, so care must be exercised when it's applied, but it's natural and doesn't persist in the environment.
- Products such as compost are sustainable. It's just decomposed leaves, in this case falling from local trees every autumn. Have you ever walked in a natural wooded area? What's on the ground? Leaves from last year, gradually decaying and returning nutrient to the soil from which they came. Composting just speeds the process up a bit and adds valuable biological vitality.

In summary, while the road ahead may not be entirely smooth, the new lawn management strategy reflects the Board of Trustees willingness to evaluate new methods, manage practices, pay attention to costs, and most importantly, to keep this wonderful place we call home in the best and healthiest condition possible!



Trustee Jim Alexander and Landscape Consultant Mike McGrath. Jim is also Society Hill's webmaster. See his own site [here](#).

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