

# Organic Entrepreneurs



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Two companies see the future of the green movement



A company that has taken advantage of the organic boom is Ecolawn, which maintains lawns and sells its exclusive Ecolawn Top Dresser. Photo courtesy of Ecolawn.

There is a growing consciousness in the United States of the desirability to “go green.” From food to cleaning compounds, from vehicles to building materials, there is a demand for products and services that are at least perceived as being gentler on the environment. Reflecting this, the burgeoning organic landscape management industry is growing by leaps and bounds.

Daniel Cote is a good example of an entrepreneur who saw the demand early in his career and recognized that there was a future in it. In the early '90s,

Cote was a recent college graduate with a business background and a house on a lake in his hometown of Sherbrooke, Que. His lawn needed fertilizing, but local bylaws restricted the use of certain chemical-based products that could contaminate the lake. Having worked for a compost company at one time, and knowing the benefits of natural products, he used a compost topdressing on his lawn.

The lawn grew in spectacular fashion and impressed his neighbors so much that they asked him to topdress theirs as well. By the time he had put compost on several lawns, he realized that nobody else in the area was doing this and there was a need for a topdressing service. In 1993, he started Ecolawn ([www.ecolawnapplicator.com](http://www.ecolawnapplicator.com)), a lawn maintenance company. Now he has about 300 clients.

"The organic lawn care segment is a growing segment even in this economy," Cote says. That's particularly true in Canada, where there are severe restrictions on the use of chemicals. The extra dimension to his business came about as a wild idea. He realized that the spreading of organic compost was a large portion of his service, and he was doing it mainly with a shovel. So he began to think about building his own mechanical compost spreader.



Topdressing  
can be a  
lucrative  
component  
of a  
landscaping  
business.  
*Photo  
courtesy of  
Tech Terra.*

Working with a friend who had a mechanical background, Cote came up with a design for a topdressing machine. He wanted a small, easily maneuverable piece of equipment that could be used to spread compost in small backyards and other contained areas where it was impossible to deliver compost and other soil amendments with a truck. After five generations of improvements, he came up with the finished product, his Ecolawn Top Dresser, a machine that carries 11.5 cubic yards of material. With the machine, one person can topdress 10,000 square feet of yard in an hour. The self-propelled unit has lawn mower-type controls and an agitator that can break up materials from the hopper if necessary. A rotary disk spreads the product—it is designed for compost, but can also spread materials such as sand, salt, lime and granular products like commercial fertilizers, as well as turfgrass seeds mixed with compost—and the machine is not only maneuverable, but can also easily make 90-degree turns in tight spaces.

Cote went a step further and had the machine manufactured, and now offers it from his sales headquarters in Norton, Vt., marketing it to other landscapers and turfgrass managers in the U.S. and Canada. He found a ready market with

companies that do maintenance on residential yards.

This all grew out of a thriving organic lawn care service that Cote still operates in Quebec. It also took some research, and he went about it systematically. He knew he had to have more training in horticulture and organics, so he took some university classes and attended seminars put on by the Northeast Organic Farming Association. After learning about the different products and methodologies used in organic landscaping and turfgrass management, he has cultivated many new clients eager to use more natural means of establishing and maintaining their yards. There is a lot of work to be had, especially in the first couple of years when a lawn has to be gradually taken from traditional maintenance to organic.

"When we've finished that, it's going to be about the same cost as a chemical-based program, or cheaper," Cote says. He has become a big promoter of organic landscaping. He's discovering new tricks of the trade, such as using grass/clover mixes and other methods of finding permanent, disease-free solutions that can be sustained naturally. Between his lawn service and his equipment sales, he now employs 45 people.

Barry Draycott took a similar path toward establishing a place for himself in the organic landscape industry. He's worked in the green industry for about 30 years, first in tree care. Five years ago, he started to work in turfgrass maintenance and purchased a business that became Tech Terra Organics ([www.techterraorganics.com](http://www.techterraorganics.com)) in Mt. Laurel, N.J. He also saw a need for organic products and services in commercial and residential maintenance, with his focus being on soil.

"I saw how improving soil health promoted plant health and reduced the need for some pesticides," Draycott says, and he began focusing on how to take an organic approach to turf maintenance. There is a huge potential in the residential business, in particular. He has noticed that young homeowners are especially eager to embrace organic landscaping and lawns, and that side of the industry is growing faster than the economy.

"Since I've been in business, there's been a dramatic change in the attitude toward organic products," he says. Part of this change is because the price of organic products has become comparable with traditional chemicals, especially with the price of oil-based fertilizers fluctuating so much. In addition, his residential clients are often willing to pay more for organic products. He now has about 200 clients in southern New Jersey for his soil management programs.

Draycott's services are based on initial soil testing followed by the establishment of an annual fertility program based on client expectations and budget. If clients want to go organic they can, and those who don't care as much can go for the mixed products. He notes that commercial clients may be less inclined toward pure organic programs.

The company he purchased produced compost teas and sold worm castings in volume to landscapers, and like Cote, Draycott saw an opportunity in the product side of the industry. He gradually began adding new products to his

company's line. At first he added liquid fish, liquid kelp and humates. Business really took off when he added granular fertilizers high in organic matter. Now his website lists over two dozen products, and Tech Terra has become a national distributor of materials for use on landscapes.



Barry Draycott  
has turned a  
small organic  
landscape  
business into a  
thriving  
distributorship  
of natural  
amendments.  
*Photo courtesy  
of Tech terra.*

Not all of Draycott's products are organic, because he doesn't want to be a fanatic about it. He sees that the transition from commercial fertilizers and weed control, for example, can be a gradual and touchy process. Thus, some of his natural-based weed control products have a commercial, EPA-registered preemergent herbicide incorporated, which gives the landscapers who buy his products a way to take their clients gradually from a commercial program to an organic program, and all the time they can say that they are becoming "greener."

Most of his products are aimed at amending the soil with organic or natural-based fertilizers that will be gentle on the environment and utilize the microorganisms in the soil as intermediaries in getting the nutrients to the plants. The concept is the same as in traditional horticulture: produce good soil and healthy plants that will require fewer inputs over time. Paralleling a traditional integrated pest management program, Draycott has called this his integrated nutrient management program.

Draycott believes that traditional turfgrass management is like a patient with an IV inserted in his arm; it delivers limited nutrients to the bloodstream. An organic-based program is like a person who gets his nutrients through healthy foods and an active lifestyle; it's a more complete and sustainable system, with natural amendments not only building soil nutrients, but also good soil structure. Adding to the "green" side of the equation is the fact that the manufacture of organic products is accomplished more naturally, he says.

"I'm not a purist. There are ways you can use the traditional pesticides in the right way and in the right amounts," he says, but by building good natural soil you will need less corrective measures later. He must be onto something. Now, 70 percent of his sales are in product, and only 30 percent in services. Sales of his natural and organic products are growing by 20 percent annually, with pure organic sales a growing percentage of that.

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He has covered the green industry for more than 10 years.