

Organic Turf Care

The logo for 'Turf' features the word in a bold, black, sans-serif font. A green grass blade graphic is integrated into the letter 'u'.The logo for 'Tree Services' is in a bold, black, sans-serif font. A small green leaf icon is positioned above the 'e' in 'Services'. Below the main text is the tagline 'Taking Tree Care to New Heights' in a smaller, italicized font.The logo for 'DesignBuild' features the word 'Design' in black and 'Build' in orange, both in a bold, sans-serif font. A small orange square icon is positioned above the 'i' in 'Design'.The logo for 'PLOW' is in a bold, blue, sans-serif font. The letters are slightly slanted to the right.

Source: www.TurfMagazine.com

Richard Mertz runs a successful NaturaLawn franchise

According to Richard Mertz, no matter how big a house someone builds or how extensive or expensive a landscaping job, if your lawn isn't nicely kept, it deters from everything else.

Of course, he's a longtime turf guy. The owner-operator of Mertz, Inc. in Kutztown, Pa., he's a successful convert of NaturaLawn of America, a Frederick, Md.-based company that markets and applies more natural controls for lawn care. His franchise serves two territories.



A NaturaLawn technician making an application on a client's lawn.
PHOTOS COURTESY OF PHIL CATRON, NATURALAWN, UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED.

After growing up on a dairy farm, 69-year-old Mertz has spent his career working in either agriculture or turf. In 1966, he was hired as a manager of a fertilizer plant, and a year, after he built a home in Kutztown with a sizeable 1.5-acre lawn. He began caring for what would be, and always was, his experimental laboratory, his own 48,000-square-foot lawn. Neighbors were constantly stopping and asking, "What are you doing for your lawn?" "That gave me the idea to get into the turf industry, but it was always the farmer in me that I wanted to have my own business," Mertz says.

The more he was around the production end of traditional products, the more he began leaning toward organics. "But, in those days, there wasn't much. I tried blood meal and bone meal," Mertz says.

In 1968, he began working part-time on his own; the local nursery said there was no way he could be an independent turf professional. "You have to understand, it was 1968, and it was just the beginning of the turf industry as we know it today," Mertz says.



Richard Mertz, second from right, looks over a schedule with his employees, Randy Schroeder, Erica Jones and Carlton Schlegel.

PHOTO BY ERICA JONES.

Along with his son, Scott, what was first known as Mertz Landscaping did it all, from mowing and fertilizing to installing brick patios and fencing. As time went on, Mertz began aligning himself more with turf care, his “first love.” By 1984, Scott was working full-time in the business, too.

Mertz began looking for alternatives to spraying with a tanker full of fertilizer, weed control and insecticide, all in one. Still, the alternatives had to be affordable for clients to change from traditional to organic. And, customers had to be patient, too, in order for results to kick in.

The natural breakthrough

In 1990, Mertz attended a conference in Grantville, Pa., where the owners of NaturaLawn offered a session that caught his interest.

He met with founders Beecher Smith, who has since retired, and Phil Catron, the current company president, in August and September of that year. Mertz opened as a NaturaLawn franchise in January 1991, making this year his 20th year anniversary. At the time, he was just one of about five in the country, and remains one of the oldest NaturaLawn franchises.



An application in process, as well as one of the proprietary fertilizer products that Richard Mertz uses on his clients’ lawns.

“He is one of the few guys who is as honest as the day is long, and I’ve thoroughly enjoyed our relationship, both as a businessman and a friend,” Catron says. “He’s a hard worker, who does not give up. He has a high level of faith in people, and he’s willing to follow a system and stick with it.”

The bulk of the franchises remain on the East Coast and into the Midwest, but there are some in California, Texas and elsewhere. There are 66 franchises in 24 states, and nine in Pennsylvania (11 including Mertz). Both Chem-Lawn transplants, Smith and Catron began NaturaLawn in 1986.

“With a franchise and with a system, you begin to realize that the system already has a successful way, so you don’t have to reinvent, and that’s helpful,” Catron says. “Sometimes it’s hard to do everything by yourself, so with a support structure in place, it makes it easier.”

NaturaLawn has an in-house program designed to retain and promote technicians who, after three years, can begin to take advantage of a \$5,000 per year credit against a \$29,500 franchise startup fee, up to a \$20,000 total discount.

What caught Mertz’s attention were the numbers. His clients reduced chemical use by 50 percent the first year, and 80 to 90 percent by the second year. “It’s a matter of educating the consumer, and getting the owner to have

realistic expectations," he says.

If there's a complaint he hears all the time in the industry, it's with crabgrass, but with NaturaLawn he claims he never hears that complaint.

Making the sale

Mertz often talks in trade-off terminology. While it may take more time to see results with an organic approach, he believes his treatments are safer for the environment. "I'm convinced that no matter what you do to your lawn, no matter what you put down, you can keep it green, but some systems move more slowly to get from point A to point B," he says.

Per application, NaturaLawn may cost more, but it's not all extraneous cost because with the company's integrated pest management (IPM) plan, he insists he's growing a much healthier grass plant, and that the natural, organic-based products are designed to improve the soil, which in turn takes care of the plant.

Every new customer gets a soil sample, and the client's individual program is then designed based upon that. "The pH is extremely important," Mertz says. "We're feeding the soil, not the grass plant. The soil is the foundation. We are feeding the grass plant, but in a round-about way." For example, a lawn the size of his own that could take 48 gallons of diluted control materials under a conventional maintenance program only requires 2 to 5 gallons per year as a NaturaLawn of America client.

Change and evolution

In 2000, his son Scott left Mertz, Inc. and went into the trucking and excavating business. Then, in 2003, Mertz had a heart attack. But, coupled with gradual expansion in his customer base, Mertz now has five additional technicians and two full-time office staff, including a general manager and an office manager, and another part-time employee in the office. "I have really good help," he says. "The foundation of any successful business is good employees."

His franchise services over 1,000 customers, but Mertz says there are larger NaturaLawn of America franchises. Mertz had 205 clients when he started the initial landscaping company, back when he was using chemical applications on properties. "We lost a few of them the first year, but then we gained some," he says. "Now, we're holding steady."

He'd still like to increase his client list every year, and he's expanding his marketing budget with increased and targeted radio and billboard advertising. Three billboards went up in early spring in Berks County, and not in high-traffic areas so much as residential zones where drivers are more likely to slow down and take notice. "We're being aggressive, especially with the state of the economy," Mertz admits "But, we see lots of interest right now. I'm pleased with the number of estimates [during early spring]."

Cost doesn't seem to be an issue like it once was. "I made a statement to one

customer a few months back that the more expensive treatments were more of an issue in the early '90s than it is now," Mertz says. "Back then, unless what you were offering was cheaper, they stuck with what they were doing. Now, we have green building associations, lots more environmental articles, even entire [green] publications."

A standard service covers seven treatments. The first is always a fertilizer and crabgrass reducer as needed, often designed to bump the soil's pH up. But, essentially every job is custom.



Richard Mertz goes over a service schedule with Lester Miller, who has been a customer for 33 years.

PHOTO BY ERICA JONES.

"We do different things," Mertz says. "We carry several kinds of fertilizer. What we use is based on analysis. If we're doing one customer's lawn and he has a shaded area in the back and full sun up front, we're going to use different fertilizers. In the shaded area, we won't use a crabgrass reducer because crabgrass won't grow in shade. What works on one lawn won't necessarily work on the next – there's different soil, different organic matter. Now, we're testing the soil every second year."

Mertz believes that once a client starts the program, it's best to keep it. One client with a large lawn wanted to do some of the applications himself last year. In the drought, he "lost his lawn," Mertz says. "His soil pH dropped to 4.8. It should be up at 7, so we've come in again and we'll add lime three times this year, then do another soil sample."

He also believes that a natural approach leaves more leeway for experimentation. Mertz says new products are coming out constantly, and he's always using his own lawn, or family members' lawns, as "guinea pigs." All the treatments he uses have to be approved by the home office.

His average client's lawn is between .25 and 1/3 of an acre. He gives a \$50 credit for the year to any existing client who refers him to what becomes another client. "A good lawn and a satisfied customer are the best recruiters," he says. "Those who are referred by excellent customers are our best new customers."

He's doing little commercial work, though, because most businesses want to cut down applications to twice a year, and that makes it hard to get results. "I don't feel like that's a good way to go," Mertz says. He has worked some with local schools and their athletic fields, like the Kutztown High football field, where he donated his services. "Now, they tell me it's one of the best fields in Berks County without [an] irrigation system," he says.

The author has been published in national and regional magazines as well as daily and weekly alternative city newspapers. A gentleman farmer in Quakertown, Pa., he writes about people, social trends, historic preservation and 18th century America, agrarian culture, land use and sports and recreation topics.