

The Switch to Organic

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Fire Belly Organic Lawn Care makes it easy



Tom Kelly, CEO of Fire Belly Organic Lawn Care, began to take a strong interest in providing organic methods for lawn care service about five years ago. He used to be co-owner and vice president of Lawn Dog, a chemical lawn service company.
Photos courtesy of Tom Kelly.

When it comes to lawn and garden consumables, one industry supplier references a business market report showing a 4.5 percent annual demand through 2012—a demand that will increase to \$9.2 billion.

On the Fire Belly Organic Lawn Care's Web site, the company emphasizes one particular aspect of that market: organics.

"Increased concerns over synthetic fertilizers and pesticides used on lawns

and gardens, particularly in regard to how these chemicals affect bodies of water, and the health of people and animals, will provide opportunities for organic products,” the Web site notes.

That was a factor that Tom Kelly, CEO of Fire Belly Organic Lawn Care in Milford, N.H., began to explore years ago.

Kelly is formerly the co-owner and vice president of Lawn Dog, a New England chemical lawn service company in New England he helped start in 1997 and eventually sold. While he relied solely on traditional chemical practices throughout his career, in the past five years he began to take a strong interest in providing organic methods for lawn care service. He researched alternate methods, all the while noting a growing interest in the industry in providing alternate methods of lawn care.

“If you search the Internet on organic lawn care products, it’s an ocean of information and gets very confusing,” notes Kelly. “I set out to put together a step program that would make it easy for a homeowner to make the switch.”

Kelly came up with a six-step method:

1. A growth activator to awaken the lawn in the spring.
2. A biologically enhanced spring fertilizer to build turf growth applied late in the spring.
3. A mid-season kelp spray.
4. A bio fertilizer applied in the summer to help the turf adjust to hotter temperatures.
5. A late summer organic compound to help with root development.
6. An end-of-season winterizing formula to protect against harsh temperatures.

“There was a very strong interest by landscape and lawn care companies,” Kelly notes of his company’s product system. And, although he sells directly to homeowners for do-it-yourself application, “many consumers obviously don’t want to do the work on the lawn themselves [and] have lawn care providers and they’re requesting more natural methods to treat their lawn.”

The company’s market area is throughout the United States and Canada.

Driving that interest, says Kelly, is a changing environmental culture and legislation that is being enacted to protect water quality, control storm water run-off issues and soil quality.

“One of the biggest issues with chemical fertilizers, nitrogen and phosphorous particularly, is that they are very water soluble and leach into the water,” says Kelly, referencing problems with the “dead zone” at the base of the Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico relating to those two chemicals. “Whether it be from farming or lawn care, most people don’t even know about it,” Kelly adds. “That’s the kind of stuff that was getting to me and now knowing there are safe alternatives that didn’t create issues like that, it just made sense to me to put it all together.”

Kelly says although he doesn’t promote his company’s products as a “first-in-

the-air anti-chemical approach," he has witnessed "absolute anger" over the promotion of alternative lawn care methods.

"There is a big resistance to change," he says. "The bigger companies, including the one I owned and worked for, is very resistant to making that change and I don't know why. There are many small to mid-sized companies that are not resistant to change, and we like working with them."

The response from the lawn contractor community has been so "overwhelming" that the company is introducing a line of professional products this year—Fire Belly Pro—to help landscape and lawn care professionals become certified providers and integrate organic turf products into their line-up of services to meet client requests. The product line is being augmented by an education component and support.

There is learning curve to using alternative products, Kelly says. "It's a completely different approach," he says. "The chemical approach is to fertilize with chemical fertilizers, nitrogen, potassium and phosphorous, and apply pesticides to keep out insects, then weed. We always said you just fertilize the good stuff and kill the bad stuff, and it works, no doubt about it. But, the organic approach is very different. You need to improve the soil profile to have healthy turf and you do that by introducing natural products, but also biological micro-organisms. There is much less need for pesticides."

An organically-treated lawn does however require more maintenance. "There are basic things we all concentrate on but get passed over in the interest of productivity," Kelly says. "You need to mow the lawn appropriately, keep the height of the grass as high as you possibly can and water deeply."

There is also a period of transition when changing from a chemically-treated lawn to an organically-treated one, Kelly adds. "It depends on how long and how intense the chemical approach was," he says. "I've seen lawns that with chemical fertilizers and pesticides, it's almost as if they've become dependent on the product. The more you apply, you more you need. Having done this for 20 years, I've watched the same lawns for a long period of time and you need to increase the amount of product that you use because of the soil. Eventually it becomes void of any biological activity so the only nutrients that are available to the plants are the nutrients that you apply, meaning the fertilizers."

If, in transitioning to organic, that is the case, that the soil is very sterile, "sometimes you don't want to completely jump in and go completely natural and organic because the turf will look lousy," notes Kelly. "In most cases, there is a three-year transition period where you have to pay more attention. The goal is after three years, you can literally have the turf be free of any chemical inputs whatsoever. Once the soil becomes high enough in organic matter, it becomes independent of any other particular inputs."



Tom Kelly came up with this six-step method for organic lawn care. From left: a growth activator for spring; a biologically enhanced spring fertilizer for late spring; a mid-season kelp spray; a summer bio fertilizer; a late-summer organic compound; and an end-of season winterizing formula.

Organic lawn care products can be more expensive, although not in every case, Kelly says. "A real popular organic lawn care product is granular corn gluten," he says. "But, it's terribly expensive because the amount of granular corn gluten that you need to apply doesn't justify the cost. If you're applying 30 to 40 pounds of product per thousand square feet, it's crazy to think you can do that all of the time."

His company focuses on liquid products, which makes application easier and doesn't require large amounts, Kelly says.

There are some regional considerations in establishing organic-maintained turf, "but not to the extent you would think it would be," notes Kelly.

"What you're trying to accomplish is improving the soil and whether you're growing bluegrass, ryegrass, palm trees, pepper plants or St. Augustinegrass, if the soil is healthy, it's going to be able to maintain a healthy plant. The way we treat a lawn in New England is very similar to the way we treat a lawn in the Midwest. When you get to the deep South, you're dealing with a lot of southern turf types. St. Augustine, for instance, is a very heavy nitrogen feeder, so we do the same exact program, but we recommend keeping a close eye on the quality of the turf and sometimes a supplemental application of nitrogen is definitely necessary."

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