

# Organic land care takes longer, but it's safe and it lasts longer

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The grounds surrounding Theatre By The Sea in Charlestown are maintained with organic methods.

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Early autumn is the time to strengthen your landscape in anticipation of winter's challenges, says Dana K. Millar, of Dana Designs, an organic land-care company based in West Kingston.

For the best long-term value and a nontoxic environment for children and pets, Millar suggests strengthening the soil organically.

The number of organic land-care companies is growing in New England. However, in Rhode Island only 14 land-care professionals, including Millar, are accredited by the Northeast Organic Farming Association (NOFA) which sets the standard for growing organic food, including plants, meat and milk. NOFA also offers organic land-care courses for professionals, and workshops for homeowners.

To earn NOFA's Organic Land Care accreditation, candidates take a five-day course, a written test, and continuing education courses. The program's mission is "to extend the vision, principles and expertise of organic agriculture to the landscapes where people live their daily lives."

NOFA's land-care website, [organiclandcare.net](http://organiclandcare.net), lists accredited land-care professionals by state. Connecticut and Massachusetts have many more certified land-care professionals than Rhode Island, Millar says, because Connecticut law requires natural care for public property used by children. Massachusetts is moving in a similar direction to protect kids' health. Rhode Island does not require chemical-free lawns for kids, but Millar says the Charlestown Town Council has approved a measure aimed at ending the use of pesticides and chemical fertilizers near waterways.

“Synthetic chemical fertilizers, such as 10-10-10, are usually highly water soluble, releasing all their nutrients within a short time,” according to NOFA. “Excess nutrients are washed into our groundwater, polluting our lakes, streams and drinking water with nitrates and phosphates. After a few weeks, the synthetic fertilizer has completely dissolved and is no longer available to the plant. These petroleum-based chemical fertilizers also tend to kill off beneficial soil organisms.”

Applying synthetic chemical fertilizers, Millar says, “is like taking vitamins without eating.”

Organic care is an investment that pays off in the long term. “Commercial products say they work in 72 hours,” he says. “What we do may take 72 weeks, but it’s safe and it lasts.”

It’s a sunny morning, and Millar and his assistant, Matt Fountaine, are working on the lawn and gardens at Theatre By The Sea in Matunuck, a village of South Kingstown. During the summer, the lawn endures a lot of foot traffic by theatergoers, but it remains lush, and the flower beds are brilliant.

Here and there, bits of clam shells are visible in the soil.

When Millar took over the theater’s land care, he started by spreading organic compost from Earth Care Farm in Charlestown. The farm blends crushed clam shells, seaweed and other marine organisms with tree leaves and other terrestrial plants. Earth Care Farm’s compost is neither acidic nor alkaline, Millar says. It is neutral.

Before treating any soil, Millar advises, have it tested.

The Extension Service at the University of Rhode Island tests soil for acidity and alkalinity, and an extension agent will recommend measures, such as spreading lime, to make the ground neutral. Test kits are also available in garden supply stores and some nurseries.

At the University of Massachusetts and the University of Connecticut, Extension Service agents also test soil for its composition, and they recommend measures to make it more nutritious for plants and the living organisms that nourish plants. Adding fresh organic matter — compost — is usually a good bet, Millar says. Autumn is a great time to spread about a quarter inch of compost over existing lawns, as well as gardens and around trees and shrubs. Nutrients in the compost will feed the soil slowly over a long time, and the organic matter will offer more depth for the roots, so they require less water during the growing season.

With a layer of fresh compost on the lawn, fall is a good time to plant grass seed, Millar says. Turf seed specialists, such as Allen’s Seed Store in Exeter, offer new hybrid grasses that are more disease and drought resistant than some older varieties, he says.

Does Millar ever fertilize the land around Theatre By The Sea?

Occasionally, he says. He sometimes sprays the flower beds and lawn with organic liquid fish fertilizer.