

Organic Options

Make the world better, one garden at a time

By Alisa Gordaneer

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While the idea of having an organic yard or organic backyard garden sounds like a good idea, figuring out ways to make it happen can sometimes be a challenge. Do you need to have all-organic compost? Is it okay to use natural pesticides if you really really need to? Should your vegetable garden be certified organic? How on earth does that all happen?

Enter the Society for Organic Urban Land Care, or SOUL. A non-profit group devoted to educating individuals and landscapers about small-scale organic gardening, it's a one-stop clearinghouse of information for would-be gardeners and landscapers, and lists landscapers on Vancouver Island devoted to organic principles.

Christina Nikolic, the current president of SOUL, is a long-time landscaper who became interested in the organic way when she moved to Victoria several years ago.

"Our mission is to promote and help our transition toward organic land care, whether it's for gardens, veggies or golf courses," she says. The group started in 2003, when some local landscapers decided "they were no longer willing to follow the established practice of having a problem and spraying something onto it."

They started looking at each garden, no matter how big or small, as an ecosystem, with its own soil structure, nutrients, insects and plants. By treating it as such, it became easier to understand what each area needed to flourish.

Making the organic switch doesn't have to be complicated, and it certainly doesn't have to be expensive says Nikolic. "You do things differently so you don't even need a product," she explains. By increasing the amounts of compost and mulch used, and allowing beneficial insects to have a habitat, artificial chemicals for fertilizing and killing bugs become unnecessary. The insects, like ladybugs, ladybug larvae, soil nematodes and predatory wasps, take care of the pests. And the plants do better because their soil contains more nutrients and microscopic insects that aerate roots and allow for better drainage around plants and trees.

One of the most important things Nikolic recommends gardeners do, even if they're not inclined to go all the way towards an organic yard, is to "swear off

synthetic nitrogen fertilizer.” She likens it to junk food for gardens, and points out that because it’s petroleum-based, “it’s tying in to the whole oil dependency.”

Beyond avoiding chemicals, organic landcare requires a certain amount of “tolerance and openness to natural processes,” says Nikolic. Letting plants do what they do – like trees dropping leaves in the fall, which provides a natural mulch for plants over the winter – also means a lot less work for the gardener, which of course means more time to sit back and enjoy. And isn’t that what a garden is all about?