

# Think Organically

by Robert Auger

At its monthly meeting on 19 May, Tom Manley gave an interesting and lively presentation on organic growing. Tom is the owner of Homestead Organics, in Berwick, which services the ever-expanding community of organic farmers in Ontario, Quebec and Atlantic Canada. The firm also caters to the needs of homeowners wishing to care for their lawns organically.

Below are a few of the comments and suggestions he shared with us.

At the outset, Tom pointed out that many organic products are not very well known because as natural products they are not the subject of proprietary rights which means that companies cannot own them exclusively and make big profits from them. Therefore they are not promoted or advertised or tested in expensive scientific trials that could demonstrate their effectiveness. Also because those selling organic products generally don't have the means to test them in accordance with Health Canada's Pest Management Regulatory Agency standards, they must be extremely circumspect in making claims about the benefits of using these natural products. As a result, the present system is biased against the broader use of organic products. Yet, it is known through long-standing practice and traditional knowledge, that they do work.

Successful organic growing requires good soil management practices and a sensible approach to pest control.

Good soils normally contain four basic elements in the following proportions: i) about 50% (by volume) minerals, ii) about 25% water, iii) 20% air and iv) 5 to 8% carbon and organic materials. The organic materials produce the nitrogen that is needed for growing – and a good source of nitrogen are legumes such as clover. Tom suggested that growing nitrogen-fixing clover either on its own or together with other grass seeds would result in much improved lawns. He also encouraged us to use limestone to increase the pH of growing soils – that is to make them less acid. Tom stressed the importance of crop

rotation to break the pest reproductive cycle and to provide soils with a diversity of nutrients.

Amending soils with natural products is helpful in increasing soil productivity, especially those that release the nutrients gradually. Chemical fertilizers are generally water-soluble so that they can get to plant roots quickly but the downside is that they are more likely to run-off into nearby ditches and enter into the water system. Tom referred to several natural soil amendments, including Spanish River carbonatite and Calphos, both of which contain trace minerals necessary to healthy soils.

He reminded us that in nature for every plant there is a pest and for every pest a naturally occurring predator. Tap root plants (such as dandelion, thistle and burdock) have a natural advantage in poor soils often characterized by hard clay, low pH and low organic materials and so can beat the competition from grass. To control these weeds, one should increase the pH by adding limestone, aerate the soil in the Fall, and sprinkle organic materials (compost) on the lawn or soil.

Maintaining an organic garden or lawn is mainly a question of good management, and is a knowledge-intensive undertaking. In other words, you've got to do your own research and planning. For lawns, Tom recommended using Dutch white clover as it is a nitrogen fixing plant (and thus nourishes the soil); is drought resistant because of its deeper roots; and provides diversity to grass. He suggested cutting grass 3 inches high, no shorter. Thus the grass and clover will produce shade cover areas that will make it harder for weed seedlings to survive.

To fight a variety of insects both inside the house and outdoors, including the ubiquitous Japanese ladybug, diatomaceous earth is a good solution. When ingested by insects, the tiny glass-like pieces of this material will tear into their digestive system and cause them to die. For the same reason, our President, Lindley McPhail wisely cautioned that diatomaceous earth can irritate or even damage our lungs and should be treated with caution and applied wearing a mask.

As is usual for our Monday evening talks, we chatted with the speaker and among ourselves and left the meeting with the happy feeling of having spent our time usefully and having learned something new and practical, as well as meeting old and new friends and fellow gardeners.

Please have a look at Tom's website ([www.homesteadorganics.ca](http://www.homesteadorganics.ca)) to access more information about organic growing and to learn about his company and the organic products it offers. The site also contains information about Tom himself, including his attempt to get elected to the House of Commons. He is pictured with a few famous Canadian politicians – some still active, others less so.

