

# Eco-Turf Talk



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*PJC Organic is the manufacturer of ProHealthy Turf Organic Products & distributor of soil amendments.*

*We provide product, & support to landscapers, schools & municipalities that want to transition from a conventional approach to an All-Natural Organic Turf Care program for the maintenance of their lawns & athletic fields.*

## Soil Testing

Take any course on organic lawn care, view an article on the internet or read a book, the first thing you are told to do is take a soil test. So, you dutifully take a soil sample, send it off to a lab; get the results back – then what? If it's not Greek to you, it may be to your clients.

PJC Organic can provide you with soil sampling supplies, the report and product recommendations in an easy-to-understand format.

## Soil Health by Pam Newcombe

Why are we sooo into soil testing?

An organic fertilization program is all about the soil – soil chemistry, soil biology and soil structure. The goal is to cultivate soil conditions that support the diversity of life in the soil food web. The soil food web refers to the multitude of life forms in the soil ranging from microscopic one-celled bacteria, algae, fungi, and protozoa, to larger nematodes, arthropods, earthworms, insects, plant roots, and small animals. These life forms are necessary to break down organic matter, aerate the soil, prey on unwanted pests, and make nutrients available to the grass. In order for your lawn to thrive it needs healthy soil to grow in.

Unlike synthetic fertilizers that feed the grass plant directly, organic fertilizers feed the soil biology and the biology feeds the plant. Nutrients are released at a rate which the grass plant can absorb to promote healthy, steady growth that results in more uniform shoot and root growth than in a chemically treated lawn. Organic fertilizers also add organic matter and encourage beneficial microorganisms to live in the soil. These beneficial microorganisms will seek out and attack the bad microorganisms and help keep

them in check. It is critical that the soil food web is taken into account when trying to grow grass.

Achieving soil health may require extra patience depending on your starting point and a soil test assists in charting the course. It's not hard -- using a combination of the right all-natural products and proper cultural practices an Organic Turf Care Program can be started this spring to create that healthy, sustainable lawn!

## New Year, New Staff!



**Sean Breckin**  
Regional  
Account  
Manager

PJC welcomed Sean to the team in November 2021. Sean comes to us with a BS in Plant Science from the University of Delaware and worked as a landscape superintendent in Philadelphia, PA before moving to Steamboat Springs, CO where he owned and operated a landscape company. Sean is now back on the east coast and responsible for caring for PJC's valued customers and cultivating new opportunities. Joined the family business when he married Collette (our Marketing Specialist).

## Customer Spotlight:

Meet Britt Phillips, Owner of Complete Land Organics PJC customer since 2009



**Q: What was your biggest challenge when you first started working with PJC in 2009?**

**A:** I went from being a traditional landscaping and fine gardening company, to doing organic turf management, and that was a whole new ballgame for me. The biggest challenge was understanding the importance of the soil test, how to use the products, and the timing of when they needed to go down. There was a lot of very specific information that, because I was so new to organic lawn care, I really needed people like Pam and Fred who were standing behind me saying, 'Whatever you need, whatever questions you have', and actually be able to reach out to them at any moment in time.

**Q: What did that do for your business?**

**A:** It grew it. Once I said, 'Okay I have this team behind me,' it gave me confidence that I can do this and I'm not alone in it. I knew that if I ran into a situation with this new part of my business, I could reach out...they were a huge support system. I started selling more lawns and I started to feel like I have a really good program in place and this is going to work and I can do this.

**Q: What is the biggest challenge that you see for someone getting in the organic lawn care business?**

**A:** There's so much misinformation out there about what true organic turf management is. A lot of the misinformation is they don't include the soil science part of the equation. It's simply the idea that we're going to swap a product for a product—a traditional, conventional turf management way of looking at it—rather than looking at it like it's this entire system from a scientific perspective.

**Q: How do you feel about your business now?**

**A:** I've grown my business a lot since 2009. I started out with 3, or 4, or 5 accounts—which were all fine gardening accounts from my old company—they were simply existing clients who I started to talk to about organic lawn care. Now I only offer organic fertilization services and have 200+ organic lawn care clients and am completely on track to take more people every season. I feel solid with my business at this point and I really am running a successful, organic lawn care company!

## In the News Behind the Seed Crisis

by Fred Newcombe

Seed prices took a big leap during 2021: *What was behind the increase and what can we expect for 2022?*

Price increases like these are not typically the result of one event, but a collection of events that result in the perfect storm...

- This Spring and early Summer, ScottsMiracle-Gro acquired two seed companies: Turf-Seed, Inc (Hubbard, Oregon) and Landmark Seed (Albany, Oregon). This shifted seed supplies from the commercial market to the retail market.
- During the pandemic, homeowners purchased an unusual amount of grass seed throughout the Summer of 2020. This left the industry short of seed reserves going into the Spring of 2021 (especially perennial ryegrass), therefore relying on this year's crop to offset the shortage.
- Oregon's Willamette Valley produces almost all of the country's annual and perennial ryegrasses (91%), and fine fescues (93%) due to its usual stable climate for growing cool-season grasses. However, Oregon experienced wildfires in summer 2020, mice and vole damage, an ice storm in mid-February 2021, followed by extreme drought and excessive heat conditions.
- Fewer acres were dedicated to cool-season grasses in 2021, leading to an expected shortage in the harvest of roughly 20% before factoring weather conditions.
- March 1st - June 1st is a critical time for the cool-season grasses to tiller and fill seed heads. Due to this season's lack of precipitation during this time, yields were expected to be down 50%. The lack of precipitation was the worst it has been in over fifty years.
- Along with the drought, there was a punishing heat wave in June with temps as high as 117°F. Unfortunately, due to the drought and high heat, the impact of swathing (cutting the grass and placing in windrows) prior to using the combine can cause the seeds to break off the stem (called shattering), leading to further yield loss.

In light of all of the above, what was predicted to be a 20% - 50% reduction in the 2021 crop yield is likely closer to a 70% reduction. While the crops affected

## Behind the Seed Crisis (cont'd)

have been the ryegrass and fine fescues, the other common cool-season varieties (Kentucky bluegrass and Turf Type Tall fescue) have also experienced upward price pressure because of the lack of alternatives. Simple economics dictates that a scarce supply results in higher prices.

### What might we expect going into 2022 and what can we do to prepare for it?

While we will not likely know about the 2022 seed harvest until we are well into our Spring season, we can expect prices to remain high throughout the 2022 season. Already Ryegrass, Creeping Red, Chewings and Hard Fescues are in very short supply. Hopefully Oregon and Washington state farmers will see an advantage to placing more acres back into cool-season grass seed production due to the higher seed prices. The same may be true for growers in Minnesota and other north central states suitable for cool-season grass seed production. If we do see an increase in the cool-season seed harvest in 2022, there may be some downward pressure on seed prices in 2023 but it could take 2 years to course correct contingent on a few good crop years.

### How could these pressures change our existing programs?

#### 1. We need to be judicious when we choose to seed:

While most of us do not do major lawn renovations in Spring, this would be a real no-no in 2022. Spring overseeding should not be done, unless you know your client has the ability to water (an installed, functioning, properly set-up irrigation system and lives in a community that does not impose outside water restrictions) and has limited areas of thin turf. Push customers to wait and overseed in the Fall!

#### 2. Make the right choice in seed blends:

- o It's common for municipalities to use seed blends like Sun & Shade or Park mixes on athletic fields.

These blends contain up to 40% Creeping Red Fescue, which is a good cool-season shade variety, however, most athletic fields do not have significant areas of shade so you won't get good results. We recommend a Kentucky Blue/Perennial Rye blend.

- o We like TTTF but don't recommend using it in the spring because of cool soil temperatures and a short germination window. TTTF needs warmer soil temperatures to germinate than other cool-season varieties and does best in the fall.

- o Consider using blends that contain more Kentucky Blue due to its ability to thrive in cool and hot temperatures, and its ability to spread through underground runners or rhizomes. It will also be more readily available.

#### 3. Change how we seed:

Focus on overseeding in the Fall thin and bare areas rather than the whole lawn. With higher seed prices, the practice of broadcasting seed after core aeration may not be cost effective. While more time consuming, seed slicing will ensure better seed-to-soil contact, increasing the likelihood of seed germination which is key.



In light of the seed shortage PJC will be revisiting their seed blends regularly to make use of available cultivars. As a result, pricing will fluctuate throughout the season. PJC Organic will be working closely with our customers to keep them abreast of changes throughout the season and manage the impact this will have on their budgets and programs.

Check out our [Instagram](#) & [Blog](#)!

