

Organic Landscape Practices

"Whether installing or maintaining a landscape organically, we believe it must be kept simple."

By Richard Bajana, CLT



The best landscape installations that I've known have involved this key element: a carefully balanced mix of good management practices, dedicated team work, and respect for natural interaction among insects, birds, and humans. I have learned this as the result of my own background as a horticulturist, and during nearly a decade of experience working with high-end landscape companies in the Washington, D.C., region. Believe me, over the years I saw the best and the worst of landscape practices. Today, as the owner of a modest organic landscaping company in Bethesda, MD, I try to embrace the same mix of principles that I know result in a good installation.

The organic land care program we use is very simple, and is based on my own insights as a horticulturist, and my experience utilizing different landscape techniques. Over several seasons, I had direct responsibility for IPM programs—where I had the opportunity to test many products, and evaluate the results. Using that knowledge, I've been able to narrow our program's cultural practices to avoid dead ends, wasted money, and lost time. We don't use practices that I've found to be either ineffective, redundant, or have the potential to actually introduce foreign microorganisms that are not endemic to the client's landscape environment (this is a topic that is not well publicized).

So what is it that we do at Richard Landscaping, LLC? Our first step is always to prepare a custom program based on a site inspection. This involves inquiring about previous management of the property, conducting a complete soil test, and clarifying the client's expectations (*Note: It is important to educate the client about what is going to happen in their landscape, and what is not.*) The site inspection should include site pictures (for posterior analysis and observation). We also note key plants and weeds that can give us some idea of the pH, compaction, drainage, shade, and even fertilization we'll need to deal with as we prepare our program.

The second step is to do the work. Of course, we need to gather the necessary materials and equipment, and evaluate and inspect the actual property. But one critical step—that is often overlooked—is the time you need to spend explaining the job to your crew. This is of primary importance in our company. I believe this interaction between manager and crew is what keeps companies together—it saves time, money, and ensures a good work environment. Ultimately it results in successful projects and happy, loyal clients.

The third step is to evaluate, evaluate, evaluate. We follow up on our project sites annually. This means conducting a

new, complete soil test and surveying the client about their observations throughout the year. This process also helps us determine if their property is ready to transition into a fully organic land care program, or if we first need to adjust the program.

So, what do we consider before we start maintaining a client's property organically? Sometimes we must first add a component that might be missing (this sometimes means a new installation project!) For instance, we might recommend that we solve an existing drainage problem. Whether installing drainage systems or collection gutters, we always try to do so artistically and, of course, in an environmentally friendly manner. Perhaps a client has everything in place, but they have chosen a poor selection of plantings with little variation in color, texture, and seasonal interest that actually don't add much to their ecological environment—not enough birds, butterflies, praying mantises, etc. Maybe your client is trying unsuccessfully to grow grass where it isn't thriving, or perhaps there is insufficient organic matter to sustain healthy soil biology, resulting in lack of performance. We consider all these things before we begin designing a new outdoor living space for our clients.

Finally, we promote sustainable maintenance of these properties—offering tested and proven approaches that require less energy and water consumption, fewer products or applications, and usually a transitional program prior to organic land care, to allow the microorganism and plants to integrate and establish better interactions. We have determined from our experience and observation that lawn and planting beds respond better to compost applications than any other amendment—it improves the physical and chemical properties while enhancing the soil biology, without introducing foreign populations that will require special conditions to get established (like compost tea). Compost works well with the structural properties of the soil and helps to balance water management—improves water retention on sandy soils and drainage on clayey soils. As with any cultural practice, organic land care requires good timing. Other practices well known in the industry that we employ—like mowing height, correct watering of lawns and plants, clippings management, the use of horticultural oil, constant IPM and organic weed prevention—are part of our organic land care program. However, each property is treated individually—there is no magic pill!

The goal of organic land care is to build up a good sustainable soil to provide plants with what they need to grow, and reduce human intervention after establishment. The concept also involves rocks, creeks, rustic stone work, water features and a diverse selection of plants that will attract and maintain beneficial and desirable insect and bird populations. With all these tools, we know we can prepare the best installations, and offer truly organic land care services for any particular property. 🌱

What are LCA members doing to be more sustainable?

Please share with us ways you are working in your businesses and/or with your clients to be more environmentally sound. What do "green practices" mean—is it the ways you're recycling materials, cutting down on waste, fueling your vehicles, the types of vehicles and equipment you're using? Are you offering organic land care to your customers? If so, how? What are some ways that your company is conserving resources? Please share, in an article or news release, ways you are making a difference!

Send submissions to Penny Willocks at pwillocks@mgmtsol.com.

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Contribution

Brookside Gardens	<i>Testing Venue</i>
Montgomery College/Germantown	<i>Training Venue</i>
Shemin Nurseries, Inc.	<i>Ice, Water</i>
Wray Brothers Landscapes	<i>Site Set-Up</i>

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