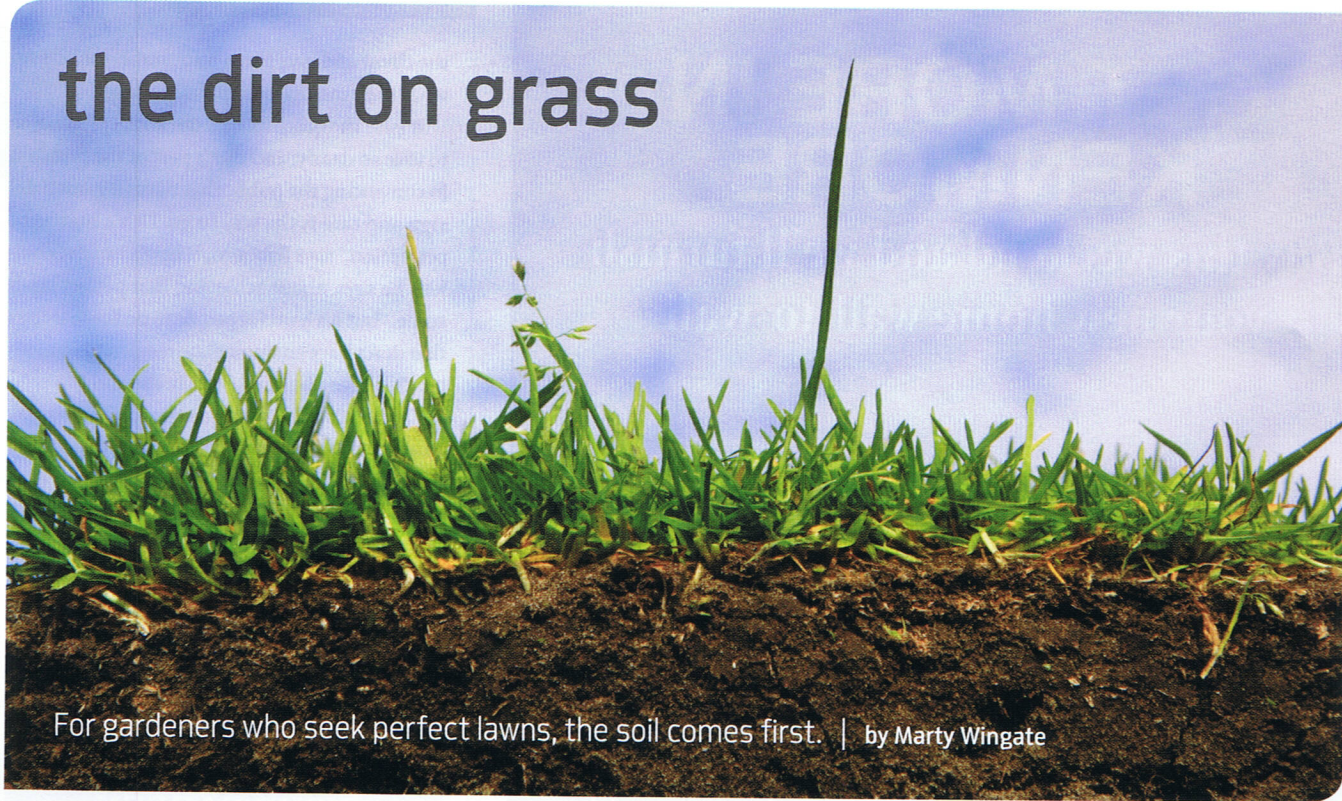


the dirt on grass



For gardeners who seek perfect lawns, the soil comes first. | by Marty Wingate

Like many busy home owners, Daphne Kuhlman and her husband employed a maintenance service at their house in North Bend to keep the lawn a dazzling emerald green. But the yard company's regular applications of unknown chemicals—"They never said what was being used," Kuhlman says—came under suspicion when their dog developed seizures. A battery of tests, including an MRI, resulted in the catchall diagnosis of idiopathic epilepsy and led to heavy medication for the dog. "He went through two rounds of medications, but he was failing," Kuhlman says. "We took him to a naturopath, and he went through what amounted to detox for the medications. We put him on natural food and we looked at all the possible ways he could be exposed to toxic substances." Though she allows it's "pure speculation," when the dog's health improved in conjunction with reduced exposure to toxic substances, Kuhlman began to believe that there was a better way to tend a lawn and garden.

We like our lawns to be perfect and perfectly green—all grass and nothing else. To obtain this unobtainable perfection, both home owners and maintenance services often apply copious amounts of "weed-and-feed," as products that contain both fertilizer and weed suppressants are known. They usually contain 2,4D, a chemical that

has been connected to health risks in children and animals. According to the United States Geological Survey it has been found in Northwest waters in levels that exceed standards. "With weed-and-feed," says Greg Raboun, cohost of King County Television's *Yard Talk*, "you're broadcasting herbicide all over the yard, whether there are weeds there or not." There's no way for dog paws or tiny feet to avoid walking in the yard and tracking the chemical into your home, so it becomes both an indoor and outdoor problem.

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When Kuhlman and her husband moved to a new home in Maple Valley last spring, she sought a company that uses more natural methods to create and maintain gardens. "I called In Harmony out initially to ask about spray service," she says, "and then I got interested in their design services." As Kuhlman discovered, poor soil is the root of all lawn and garden evils. "The builder had sprayed grass seed over a thin layer of topsoil, and we were away during a hot part of the summer. We lost the whole thing."

Kuhlman looked beyond her initial concern—a healthy lawn—to find that what pro-

motes a good garden is good preparation, a key element of In Harmony's mission. Ladd Smith, the co-owner, says "Eighty percent of garden problems are cultural." Poor soil, incorrect watering, and "wrong plant, wrong place" set up gardens and lawns to be sitting ducks to pests and diseases. "It's typical for builders to include a landscape fee and put in plants when the house is finished," Smith says. "But they're planting into unfit soil because the topsoil has been scraped off. The plants don't have much of a chance there. In

my perfect world builders would say to the new home owners: 'We'll take the landscape fee and build up the soil instead.'"

In Harmony begins with the basics. According to designer Malissa Gatton, the results of both a visual soil assessment and analysis of samples chart the next steps. Soil amendments and missing trace minerals restore balance, and natural fertilizers—including kelp—add nutrients. The overall process provides useful lessons for the home owner. "Getting people interested in what's going on helps me get ideas for how to do it better," Smith says. "We work to educate

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the client and give them information sheets on what they can do to help the garden.”

It isn't the quick fix that our society has come to love so dearly, and that's part of the problem in convincing the public that natural garden design and care is the way to go. "It's a matter of perception," says Rabourn. "There's no silver bullet," he says, about achieving that perfect landscape, "but it's hard for people to do these things that don't have an immediate result and remember, 'I'll have a better garden in the end.'"

Conventional garden practices are giving way to a more thoughtful long-term approach; the benefits are enjoyed not just in our own landscapes but throughout the region. Fewer dangerous chemicals on the lawn (and on children's feet and dogs' paws) mean a healthier community and cleaner water. And a beautiful garden, too. This year, the Kuhlman's new garden is filling in, full of color and texture from redtwig dogwood, fothergilla, and *Pieris* shrubs. ✨

HOW TO GREEN YOUR GARDEN

A bundant information is available, whether you want to turn your lawn into an eco-friendly area or feel the impulse to get your entire landscape redesigned for easy, natural maintenance.

In Harmony

23622 Bothell Everett Hwy, Bothell, 425-486-2180; www.inharmony.com

Natural Yard Care

The King County Solid Waste Division provides information, resources, and techniques for good gardening. www.metrokc.gov/dnrp/swd/naturalyardcare

Saving Water Partnership

Seattle Public Utilities and other municipal water conservation programs in the region provide practical information for home owners and landscapers on how to garden without laying waste to the environment. www.savingwater.org

EnviroStars

Landscapers and builders are rated according to their environmental practices. Find one for your project here. www.envirostars.com

Natural Lawn and Garden Hotline

Sponsored by Seattle Public Utilities and hosted by Seattle Tilth; find answers to your questions. 206-633-0224, info@lawnandgardenhotline.org