

Going Organic in Springfield, Massachusetts



TURI Grant Funds Municipal Training, Six Pilot Sites & Future Plans

By Kathy Litchfield
Springfield, MA –

Springfield is going organic, thanks in part to a \$20,000 community grant from the Toxics Use Reduction Institute (TURI) in Lowell, MA that funded trainings and technical assistance for implementation of organic land care practices at six public pilot sites over the last year and a half.

The properties include the Frederick Harris School grounds, Sweeny Athletic Field at the High School of Commerce, Forest Park athletic field, Tree Top Park, Camp Wilder and the terrace at Mason Square. The results from these pilot sites have provided the foundation to expand the program to 50 school properties and 900 acres of managed public land, according to Lynn Rose, Project Coordinator.

In recognition of the City's efforts, the NOFA Organic Land Care Program will award the City of Springfield with an Organic Leadership Award on Dec. 14 at the NOFA Annual Gathering. Chip Osborne will present the grant project and specifics on the rewards and challenges of how the work in Springfield is progressing.

"We are extremely proud to accept the \$20,000 grant from TURI, which will start the vital process of integrating organic fertilizers in the maintenance practices of our open space across the City. It is time we take the lead in the Pioneer Valley by encouraging both residents and businesses to join us in the protection of our open space and water resources by using organic fertilizers. I am convinced this will have long-term impacts and improve the overall health of our urban environment," said Mayor Domenic Sarno at the time of the grant award.

The project came together through a perfect storm of events, according to Lynn Rose, who has worked with the City of Springfield for seven years developing and implementing environmental programs in the City, including integrated pest management (IPM) techniques and laws on public properties. She's a member of the Northeast IPM School Working Group, and conducted extensive research into pest IPM methods, but over time found herself frustrated with the



restrictions of IPM. She had hoped that eliminating all toxic pesticides and synthetic fertilizers was possible.

At that time, she was approached by Maryanne Jule, a resident, who was interested in helping the city lands become organically managed. Together they pursued additional resources.

She called the national organization, Beyond Pesticides to identify resources specifically designed for municipal issues. As a result, she enlisted Chip Osborne to teach a municipal training in organic care for athletic fields, city terrace and building grounds. Springfield then partnered with several citizens, Better Life Whole Foods, and the cities of Northampton and Holyoke, and applied for a TURI community grant to help train employees to implement organic land care practices on six properties in Springfield, and train residents on organic lawn care.



Since the grant award, the Springfield Department of Parks, Buildings and Recreation Management, under the leadership of Executive Director, Patrick Sullivan, has been hard at work testing soil, developing bid specifications for materials and labor, creating a program budget to implement organic land care practices and conduct trainings for staff, community groups, residents and homeowners and the grant's municipal partners -- all with Chip Osborne at their side.

“Chip Osborne is a force of nature – he has made a pivotal difference in how the staff and administration see and do things,” said Rose. “It was fascinating, at Chip’s very first training, to see how everyone came together. There were people who didn’t realize how willing the administration and the staff were to consider organic management. Chip brilliantly illustrated how feasible it was and how much sense it made.”

Osborne also outlined how it is possible to save 20 percent of costs in the long run once organic methods are established, said Rose, which will ultimately help the City defend its decision to make this transition to organic. After Chip’s training, the staff all came away thinking, “Why would we do anything else (but organic)?” said Rose. Over the last year, Sullivan and Osborne have worked closely to integrate the “systems approach” to building soil fertility to prevent disease, insect and weed infestations, maintain soil biology, use proper fertilization for optimum plant health, choose the right grasses to thrive in the different conditions of the six pilot sites, and integrate preventative strategies and products for long-term care.

The parks involved in the grant had challenges the program would need to address – bare spots on fields that pose unsafe playing surfaces and encroachment of poison ivy and other weeds that pose life-threatening bee allergic reactions. Rose said the City is committed to choosing organic methods to battle these issues.

Sullivan said, “The green industry now offers organic products that are affordable and will have a long-term impact in improving the overall health of our turf eco systems. We also will be saving money in the long run.” According to Rose, the City is moving away from using synthetic fertilizers “that can leach into groundwater, streams, rivers and lakes and cause negative health effects in children and pets.” They are basing their fertilization on soil testing results.

She said they have already expanded the number of pilots, and will continue to transition all of the public lands. Future initiatives include writing a grant to the Environmental Protection Agency to identify and address stormwater runoff issues from herbicide and synthetic fertilizer use by residences and businesses in Springfield; and working with the Operational Services Division (the agency that establishes contracts for state agencies and municipalities to purchase products and services from) to source organic products so that they are attainable by municipalities and state agencies.

“Once the products are available on state contract, state agencies can also begin the transition to organic,” she said. “Maybe the transition will take years, but it is doable and we can make changes statewide.”