Wheaton, Illinois

TOPDRESSING WITH COMPOST

Desire of homeowners to avoid the multiple deleterious effects of pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers by turning toward more natural means of keeping their lawns green and healthy includes using compost, says Keith Schuler, who has seen his Wheaton, Illinois-based organic residential lawn maintenance service, Lawnstylst, grow steadily over the past 12 years. "It's bigger on the coasts but it's slowly growing here in the Midwest," he says. "It's coming. People are more open to trying more natural methods — particularly those that yield results."

Schuler always includes a topdressing of compost with his lawn service, anywhere from one-quarter to one-eighth inch annually. "I overseed at the same time if I can sell the client on it because compost is a great medium for overseeding," he says. "His tool of choice for compost application is the Ecolawn Top Dresser, which he finds both faster and more efficient than other models he has used. When spreading compost, "the drier it is the better," he adds, along with having a C:N ratio of at least 10:1. "Twelve to one is even better," Shuler says. "The one I apply is 16-to-1 manure-based compost. But even more critical than providing fertility is giving the soil microbiology a boost. "You're adding biology when you're putting compost down," he says, "and your applying nutrients at a proper ratio."