

Falling for an Eco-Lawn

· A Kitsap man's business focuses on completely chemical-free lawn care.

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Five years ago, Nick Penovich's lawn became a patchwork of test plots.

He'd become a born-again landscaper. He swore off the chemicals he'd used at his Seattle landscaping business and experimented with natural fertilizers and homemade compost teas.

He turned the knowledge into a new business called The Lawn Jockey. Now, he rides around Kitsap County in a bright green and blue truck emblazoned with the words "organic" and "natural green."

He became the local expert on natural lawn care.

"When we want to know about organic lawn care, we usually send them to (Penovich)," said Peg Tillery, horticulturist with the Washington State University Extension office in Bremerton.

For the past decade, concerns about pesticide and herbicide use have led to bans on use of some chemicals and a growing interest in natural lawn care.

Penovich fields calls from as far away as Pennsylvania. He teaches workshops for the county and advocates for reductions in pesticide and herbicide use.

The move was a combination of chemicals being banned from the market, a concern for the environment and the effect of chemicals on people.

And, he added with a laugh, "Part of it was my mother's upbringing. She raised me right and told me what to do that's right and wrong."

The Environmental Protection Agency has linked some weed killers with long-term health risks. Oryzalin has been linked with cancer and a weed-killing chemical called 2, 4-D is linked to long-term damage to the nervous system, kidneys and liver.

Nitrogen — an integral nutrient for plants — tends to break down more slowly in organic fertilizers, while up to 90 percent of some herbicides, such as glyphosate, are washed into waterways during a storm. Excess nitrogen has been linked to the algae blooms, like the ones choking off life in the Hood Canal.

This time of year, Penovich is out at area lawns, fertilizing with customized blends of organic and inorganic nutrients.

"What you do in the fall determines what you lawn's going to look like in the springtime," Penovich said.

The key is to build up a good mix of nutrients and organisms, such as worms and bacteria that chemicals often kill off.

Penovich blends bone meal, cottonseed, phosphorous, potash and other compounds, but stays away from manures.

The better the soil beneath the grass gets, the less his customers need him.

"On the business side, that's not a good thing," he said. But, he said, "my deal is trying to get people into a more natural program. We don't need to see three-headed fish."



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Nick Penovich, the Lawn Jockey, sprays his customer's lawns, trees and shrubs with an organic green tea mixture to promote green growth and keep weeds at bay.



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Nick Penovich shows the granular mixture of organic and inorganic material he uses on lawns in need of the most care.



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Nick Penovich opens a bag filled with a mixture of organic and inorganic material that he uses in place of pesticides to help combat weeds and create a greener lawn for his clients.

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