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**DID IT MYSELF****Organic Lawn Care: Not for Wimps**

Our first try at chemical-free grass ends with weeds and frustration. How to save it? Rip it to shreds

By GWENDOLYN BOUNDS

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This summer, I fought the lawn, and the lawn won.

Six months ago I began a quest to turn my lawn-care regimen organic. This hot landscaping trend -- using things like chicken manure and plant fibers instead of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides -- is driven partly by Americans' infatuation with all things green but also by studies questioning the safety of lawn chemicals for children, pets and the environment. Now all-natural lawn products are being sold at big retailers such as Lowe's, Home Depot and Sears.

But as I learned, if you're looking for an easy way to show off your earth-friendly credentials, you're better off buying a hybrid car. Taking your grass organic is not for the lazy. The \$35 billion lawn- and garden-care industry has spent decades refining synthetic weedkillers and lawn enhancers that can achieve in a season what it might take years to accomplish under organic care. The slow progress can feel as tedious as, well, watching grass grow -- and the lawn might not look so great even after that.



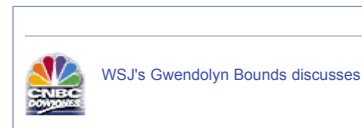
War of the Weeds: On the author's lawn, clockwise from top right, ugly weeds triumphant; the rototiller takes action; ready for reseeding; weed-free -- for now.

When unsightly dandelions proliferated on my organic lawn, there was no herbicidal nuke-'em approach. Instead, I engaged in ground combat with hand tools -- among them, a flamethrower and water pistol. Blisters formed, neighbors scoffed and weeds, nevertheless, proliferated until defeat seemed certain.

So, in a last drastic measure, three weeks ago I plowed the whole mess up and started over. Things are looking up -- but more on that in a moment.

While pesticide defenders say their products are perfectly safe if used properly and far cheaper than organic alternatives, the organic camp maintains that all-natural lawns might cost more initially but ultimately will be less expensive to maintain and help grass better weather stresses such as drought.

That's what I originally hoped when I got started back in April. In months to follow, I dropped roughly \$600 caring for my 3,500-square-foot space organically -- roughly double what I'd have spent with synthetics. But the real cost came in sweat equity and time. Aside from dandelions, I had a serious problem with plantains -- a broadleaf weed that proliferates like cockroaches. I hadn't stuck to a regimen in the past, just haphazardly throwing down grass seed, synthetic fertilizer and herbicides, and was plagued with bare spots where weeds tend to thrive.



In late spring, I attempted triage by putting down new soil and grass seed in the worst zones. Unfortunately, the enemy was already rooted and quickly choked out my efforts. That's when I resorted to my hand weeders.

I've chronicled my organic-lawn efforts in these pages since the spring and have posted additional updates on WSJ.com -- and heard from hundreds of

readers offering support and advice. Some of the readers following my progress online suggested their favorite hand-held weeding tools, among them the Weed Hound, used by Jerry Cupples of Dallas, and the Dandelion Terminator, a knife-like power-drill attachment built by Ed Reed of Helena, Mont. To enliven the mundane task, I clocked how many dandelions I could remove in a minute -- the Terminator won, at 13 -- and graded them on fun factor. Top marks for the latter went to the Weed Dragon, a torch that attached to my grill's propane tank and wilted the offenders.


My efforts earned some cheers -- "Hang in there," coached A. Grant Macomber of Auburn, Calif. -- and some bemusement -- "Whatever happened to just pulling up the weeds and crab grass?" chided Byron Krause of Naperville, Ill., perhaps referring to the water-pistol garden-hose attachment I tried. A few folks even proffered recipes, including one for dandelion salad with spicy bacon-bit dressing from Jackie Aldridge in Alameda, Calif. (I did toss some dandelions in an arugula salad ... not bad.) Other potential remedies, such as spraying distilled white vinegar, didn't seem practical for my large swath of land, but some readers swore by it.



The low point came during a dinner party in late June, when a favorite neighbor told me my grass looked like "s-." (He uses pesticides.) Dismayed, I called up my expert, Scott Meyer, editor of Organic Gardening magazine, who agreed to assess the damage. The good news, he determined, running fingers through my dirt, was that the soil was in good condition: loose and fertile -- partly a byproduct of leaving unsightly grass clippings on the lawn all summer for nutrients. And what grass there was looked pretty healthy, too. The only fertilizer I'd put down was something called Terramend, a product made from natural plant fibers that purportedly rids soil of toxic chemical residue.

But he graded me a low 4 out of 10 on overall appearance because of my weed problem. So we made a strategic decision: rototill the lawn -- which would destroy grass and weeds alike -- and plant new grass seed. The bet: with cool night air, the new grass would thrive with existing weeds gone, giving the lawn a fighting chance to root before spring. On a recent Sunday, my New York City cop neighbor Cris Batignani brought over his rototiller and did the destruction. After raking up the churned-up weeds, my girlfriend and I spread 1,400 pounds of McEnroe organic compost made from cow and horse manure, stable bedding and plant material (OK -- not

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fun) and laid down hand-mixed grass seed with clover -- it nourishes the soil -- from extremelygreen.com³. We covered it with a chopped hay/straw mixture called Mainely Mulch, watered deeply and prayed.

Last week, we drove up to witness a small miracle -- a real lawn shining lemon-lime, sans weeds. Despite his organic bent, Mr. Meyer is a realist. He warned that while the grass will be better equipped to survive, come spring the weeds will return, especially where grass is thin, and I'll need to work fast to annihilate them. Until then, he suggested laying down corn-gluten meal in late October; the substance, such as that sold at purebarnyard.com⁴, is known to destroy weed seeds.

Despite this summer's frustrations, I'll probably never return to pesticides. The turning point came when Mr. Meyer, after hearing my confession that I'd contemplated giving up, told me my feelings were completely normal.

"Let me ask you this, though," he counseled. "Is your lawn that important to you, and does it reflect that much on who you are and what you are capable of, that it's worth even possibly putting kids, your dog and the environment at risk?"

Now that we're heading toward colder days, I'll be turning my attention to more indoor projects. But I'm keeping Mr. Meyer's words in mind, so stay tuned for Round II with my lawn in the spring.

Do you use organic lawn care? Send a photo of your lawn and details on what works and what doesn't to wendy.bounds@wsj.com⁵. Please include your full name and location in case I mention your information in future columns.

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