



This popular ornamental grass is called the "fiber optic" plant.

Marvin's Organic Gardens

Horse manure is never a dirty word at this full-service nursery

By Joyce Rosencrans
Post home editor

LEBANON, Ohio — How green was your garden last spring, summer and fall? Not the foliage or grass blades but the soil all around and underneath that nurtures life and encourages vigorous plant growth. Yes, we mean that kind of "green," as in ecologically correct and environmentally safe, when the dirt is friable and the microorganisms, earthworms and "good" bugs are alive, wiggling and well.

Many homeowners with grass to cut and gardens to grow no longer want to rely on chemical fertilizers, fungicides and pesticides that cause harmful runoff into streams and eventually pollute groundwater. Also, so many harsh products are like using a hammer to kill a flea. They can kill off beneficial insects along with the bad pests.

One self-taught scholar of Mother Earth science is Marvin A. Duren. He founded Marvin's Organic Gardens near Lebanon in 1999. He returned from Vietnam as a "fully disabled vet" and proceeded to work hard running Waffle House restaurants, eventually acquiring 28 in the regions south of Columbus and Dayton.

About 1980, Marvin decided to turn off the TV and started building a home library, acquiring a dozen books a week. The only major news event he recalls watching was the Challenger tragedy.

As a result of all that reading as opposed to watching sitcoms, he's a self-educated organic grower and guru who sounds like a college professor when discussing his favorite topic — taking care of the land and water.

The family business has expanded steadily, now employing his son and son-in-law, who've earned environmental science and horticulture degrees. Steve Nichols, educated at Cornell University and who earned a doctorate, is the senior grower at Marvin's.

Still, Marvin is the master of public speaking on his pet topic. He's an oracle of organic growing methods, traveling the tri-state and a bit beyond to inspire and inform.

In fact, he'll be speaking at one of the free seminars held on successive Thursdays this month at Marvin's Organic Gardens at 2055 U.S. 42, which is not far north of Kings Island. Check dates, times and programs online at www.marvinsorganicgardens.com. Or call (513) 932-3319 for details.

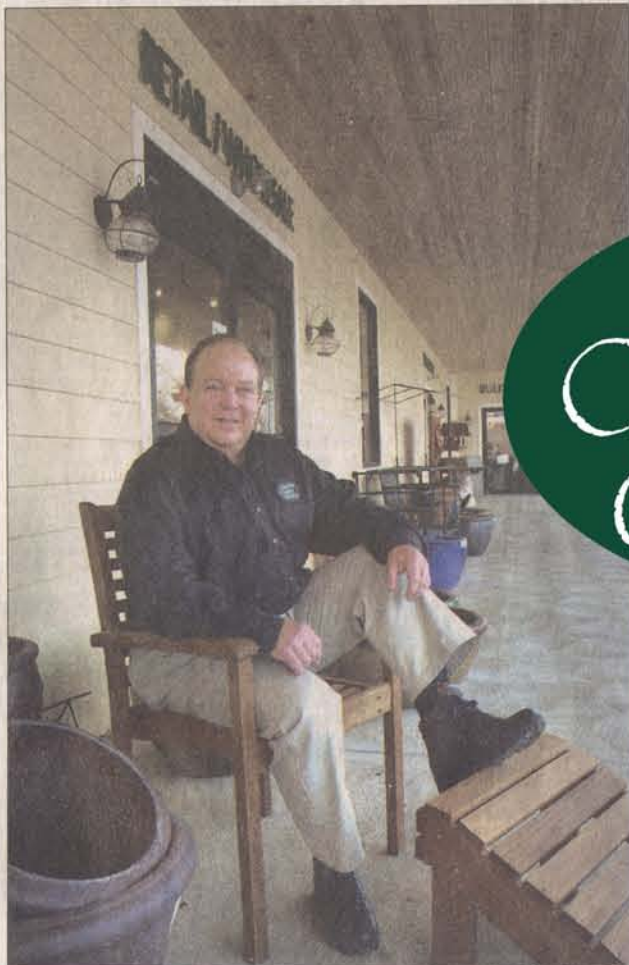
Whether or not you catch a seminar, visiting Marvin's Gardens is an education in itself. Just read product labels in the garden center or question one of the center's knowledgeable employees.

Other aspects of the business occupying 63 acres in Warren County are landscape design and installation, an organic nursery and both wholesale and retail sales.

"Over 90 percent of plant material is produced here," Marvin says. "If a customer asks for something, we can answer, 'That's House B,' and we give them a map. They can then pick the best."

The annual spring rite of mulching mania has begun, and Marvin is all for it. Bare soil is subject to erosion, he warns, and weeds soon take root in ground left uncovered by plant material or mulch. He cites the discouraging fact that 200 to 600 pounds of weed seed per acre are blown into Ohio per year.

But he discourages hand-weeding by homeowners.



Marvin A. Duren owns and operates Marvin's Organic Gardens on 63 acres near Lebanon. He likes the friendly front-porch design of his retail garden center.

Photos by BRUCE CRIPPEN/The Post



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Marvin's own low-dosage 3-3-3 fertilizer comes in 25-pound bags.



Decorative items for gardeners line the porch at Marvin's. A wagon filled with hydrangeas, left, has some pots already in bloom. The pots can be easily moved to suit the weather.



BRUCE CRIPPEN/The Post

A birdhouse, an old-fashioned clock as tall as a lamppost, organically grown plants and garden tools are found in the retail shop at Marvin's.

Go organic by the numbers

"Treehugging Dirt Worshipper" is a sticker in the back window of an employee's car parked at Marvin's Organic Gardens, 2055 U.S. 42 South, near Lebanon, Ohio. It indicates Marvin Duren's dedication to organic principles. Here are numeric indicators of his dedication:

- > "It's easy for gardeners to convert to organic in one day. It's a mindset about using no more pesticides, herbicides, fungicides or synthetic fertilizers."
- > "We have two composting facilities, one here at the office and another 2 miles south at my home. We test our product." And that product is more than a million cubic yards of compost.
- > Lebanon Raceway hosts hundreds of horses a day, and the manure is delivered to Marvin's for aging in mixed compost.
- > "The soil is alive, but sometimes we treat it like dirt," Marvin says. "Billions of microorganisms are in a pound of soil. The purpose of applying a low-balance dosage of fertilizer with slow-release nitrogen is not to feed a plant, but the microorganisms."



Organic: Compost, mulch, and no shortcuts, please

From 1C

ers. "If you pull a weed," he says, "you've given the soil a shot of air and light," just what weed seeds need to germinate. Marvin says soil needs mulching to be "smothered and covered," a food description he picked up during his Waffle House days.

He adds, however, that mulch is often "oversold and applied too thickly. Hardwood mulch is high in carbon and ties up nitrogen for several years as it decomposes. Then you want to apply a low-balance nitrogen fertilizer," he advises.

A favorite mulch for some uses at Marvin's is pine straw — bales of dried pine needles. "It's airy," he says. "Hardwood mulches always need to be flat, never mounded, because water runs off. Pine straw allows nutrients and water to go right in. It should be applied more thickly than hardwood mulch — about 5-12 inches deep — because pine straw condenses."

Marvin warns homeowners never to apply mulch that's hot to the touch. He's speaking of shredded hardwood mulch again. Cool it, he says, by running water through it before it's applied. Research indicates that rogue fungi are encouraged by hot mulch.

The surface of the mulch can be marred eventually by unsightly puddle-like formations, lighter in color than bark mulch, hence the name "dog vomit" fungus.

Worse is "shotgun fungi" that forms in mulches made from ground-up wood pallets and sawdust. This, too, ties up available nitrogen for plants. And nothing can remove the black dots thrown from shotgun fungus formations in the mulch onto the walls of a house or a car parked unfortunately close. Marvin says that a major problem for insurers is replacing the siding on houses dotted by this mulch fungus.

Another mulch in favor at Marvin's is called "pine fines." This is the scraped bark of pine trees, low in pH, so it's great for growing blueberries, he says. On the other hand, pine nuggets "float" in a big rain, and they're expensive.

New at Marvin's this summer will be a pond free of duckweed — replanted with natives such as a yellow lotus that's "big and aggressive." Other lotus plants were from China, he explained, but "we love our Ohio natives. The pond is a work in progress."

Marvin's Organic Gardens is not only a catchy name for Monopoly fans but indicates that the growing operation is certified or-

ganic by the Department of Agriculture.

There are now national standards that govern the use of the term "organic." For example, a small grower who wants to raise organic strawberries and asparagus for sale at a farmers' market would be advised at Marvin's that it will take three years to be certified "organic."

Marvin takes no shortcuts. "Making compost," he says, "is the No. 1 way to improve soil. It's the elixir that fixes all soil."

Another goal is plant diversity. "We have no top sellers. If we have 10 customers, we've probably sold 10 different plants."



Marvin Duren stands in a rustic garden structure at the foot of the driveway to Marvin's Organic Gardens. Visitors to the nursery near Lebanon, Ohio, should wear shoes suitable for walking the acreage through greenhouses and open fields.

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