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Nursery owner says organic is cheaper

By Beth Burwinkel

From the late 1970s, when he planted elaborate gardens in front of Tristate Waffle House restaurants that he and his father owned, Marvin Duren has been passionate about growing plants organically.

About three years ago, the former restaurateur opened a nursery and garden center called Marvin's Organic Gardens along U.S. 42 in Lebanon. In late July, his company received its organic certification for plants and operations from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. There are about a dozen organic-certified nurseries in the Tristate.

"My main goal is to help promote things that are safe for the environment," Duren says. "With organics, it's safer. We don't use anything that would hurt a bug, a reptile, a bird or a worm in the ground."

We recently discussed the basics of organic gardening with Duren.

Question: Is it expensive to garden organically?

Answer: No. It is a whole lot cheaper to raise plants organically. I don't need to buy fungicides, pesticides, herbicides or synthetic fertilizers. I have many acres of compost and I top-dress gardens with homemade compost.

Q: What are some organic substitutes for popular gardening chemicals?

A: Instead of using herbicides, we do some hand weeding. We also use regular household vinegar to kill weeds. Just make sure to apply it to the weeds when it is 75 degrees or warmer and when the sun is shining.

If we have an insect problem, we bring in other insects to help control them. For example, ladybugs are readily available and they

do a great job eating unborn insects. If you attract birds to your garden, you will have fewer insect problems.

For fertilizer, we use our own brand of organic fertilizer. We sprinkle it on the top of the ground. If you use it once in the fall and once in the spring, you might be able to skip fertilizing for two or three years.

There are many good organic fertilizers. Some of them include fish emulsion, sea kelp and soybean meal, which is very plentiful and a good source of nitrogen.

Q: What advice would you have for people interested in working toward gardening organically?

A: Start by switching from a chemical fertilizer to an organic fertilizer. Chemical fertilizers that contain ammonia aren't good for earthworms. You want to encourage earthworms because they create pores in the soil for air or water. Worm castings provide nutrients in the soil. To encourage earthworms, use compost. Worms enjoy eating decomposed plant remains.

Q: If people want to improve their lawns organically, what would you recommend?

A: Cut grass higher. If you set your mower blade so that you mow at 3 1/2 to 4 inches, grass will become healthier and will choke out the weeds. Cutting high is the key to a healthy lawn. Don't rake the grass clippings. Instead, leave the clippings on the lawn for the worms.

If you feed your lawn, use an organic fertilizer. I put organic fertilizer in a hopper and scatter it across the lawn and even into the flower beds.

If you water your lawn, use a rain gauge so that you know when you've watered 1 inch. Then stop and wait for one week. It is enough to water once a week but make sure that it is a thorough watering.

Q: How do you create a compost pile?

A: Stack up sticks, stems, grass clippings (if you don't leave them on the lawn) and household organic waste. Add a shovel full of top soil. I turn the compost pile to mix it. Depending on the size of your logs, you will have good quality compost in one to five years.