

The organic niche

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Organic seeds, control insects, organic land care certification, alternative retailing, organic recycling...all are proven business opportunities for progressive B.C. green industry professionals



B.C. puts SOUL into the organics business

A small group of organic land care professionals on Vancouver island, a hot-bed for conservation, can be credited with developing an organization and certification process that is growing into a nation-wide force.



"It's just the tip of the iceberg," says Heide Hermary, past president and one of the founding members of SOUL – the Society of Organic Urban Land Care Professionals. In just three years, the organization was formed and has developed operational guidelines, a means for certification and also a lined itself with an educational process to upgrade and maintain professional standards for its members. A Quebec company is now looking at translating these guidelines and adopting them for its own use. SOUL has also developed an extensive web site with information for the public and the professional landscaper. Currently it lists 50 members (see membership list at www.organiclandcare.org) in British Columbia, Alberta and Ontario, with queries coming in on a daily basis.

Hermary says the formation of SOUL was a natural response to the changes faced by many land care professionals as municipalities started banning the use of chemicals and as consumers look at organics as an alternative. The chemical debate began in Hudson, Que., when council banned the use of pesticides. In June 2000, after a 10-

year battle, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that municipalities did have the right to enact local pesticide bylaws. The trend has spread, with 60 or more municipalities across Canada now restricting the use of chemicals. In B.C., cities such as Port Moody have taken even deeper action, wanting to ban use of all pesticides by homeowners for cosmetic purposes by 2006. Municipalities in B.C. like Vancouver, New Westminster and neighbouring cities have taken similar stances, following the lead of smaller cities.

The effect is that homeowners and environmentally-conscious consumers will be looking for non-chemical means of dealing with pests and weeds. There will be an increasing demand for qualified land care professionals who are able to work without chemicals. Initially, there was a debate amongst the SOUL founders as to how organic land care could be qualified, adopted as a body, and worked into a certification process suitable to the industry. "We were a little lost at first," Hermary admits, as the handful of Victoria, B.C. landscapers sat down to consider the whole picture. Hermary, who is finishing her master's degree in sustainable agriculture through the

University of Sydney, and landscaper Michael Cowan of Edibella Organic Landscapes, along with others, decided it made more sense to certify the individual, rather than the land. Otherwise, the homeowners would have to bear the cost of the process. One of Hermary's master's courses helped her flesh out the guidelines that would be useful for defining organic land care. They were reviewed by the core group of land care professionals and then adopted. The SOUL guidelines (found on-line) state:

"Organic land care fundamentally differs from conventional ornamental horticulture in its underlying philosophy: to work with natural systems, rather than seeking to dominate them. While Organic land care practices are not unique, they are employed with the specific

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goal to encourage and enhance biological cycles within landscapes, involving micro-organisms, soil flora and fauna, plants and animals. The landscape is seen as an interdependent system, itself being an integral part of the larger regional and global ecology. Conventional ornamental horticulture is chiefly concerned with the culture of plants. Here the landscape is an accumulation of independent elements, and landscape management practices have a largely cosmetic focus. Horticulturists often specialize in the culture of specific plants, or in specific management practices. Organic land care, on the other hand, is an integrated approach to landscape management, bringing together expertise from all horticultural specialties to create

flourishing ecosystems."

"It is a more difficult approach," acknowledges Hermary, as it relies on balancing all elements of the garden to achieve plant health. The landscaper needs to be part detective, part manager and part scientist to identify and harmonize all the plant, soil, weather and nutrient levels within an eco-system to achieve plant vitality. "It is not a prescriptive approach where you can say, it's March, so it's time to do this," she adds.

As the founding group of SOUL forged the guidelines, word-of-mouth attracted (and continues to attract) new members. "We don't see ourselves as a local group anymore, but as a national one," says Hermary. "I think we all believe what we are doing is the right thing – and that's very empowering."

With the guidelines set, certification was the



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next step. So, the core group set up a certification process for landscapers and land care professionals, along with an educational program. Hermary, who teaches courses on horticulture to landscape professionals at the college level, was instrumental in putting together a course on organic land care available through SOUL's web site. The course fee is \$200 and the site offers 1500 pages of information. The actual certification process costs another \$200, and involves meeting set standards of education, practical experience and writing an exam. The individual can write the exam within the community, but only with an appointed proctor present. The individual must re-certify every three years, and he must prove that he's participated in continuing education courses during the interim. As with many professional organizations, there is the personal responsibility to remain current on new



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concepts and knowledge. Hermary says SOUL certification is intended to be a standard that consumers will recognize and trust, to ensure organic care in landscaping and gardening needs. The certified individual will have the knowledge to not only know how to balance ecosystems, but also keep abreast of developments in organic treatments. Plus the certified individual can differentiate between products that are "organic-based" and truly organic. Organic-based products are often an attempt by companies to cash in on organic trends, Hermary points out.

Hermary and husband Michael have also established Gaia College (unrelated to Gaia Green Products), a private training facility that responds to the professional and domestic demand for organic land care. It has developed the educational component for SOUL, and also set up eight, one-day land care lectures for professionals through four community organizations in B.C. They are: Malaspina College in Duncan (on Vancouver Island), the city of Saanich recreation program (near Victoria), Burnaby's continuing education program (in the B.C. Lower Mainland), and Delta Recycling Society in Delta (also in the B.C. Lower Mainland). The target market is primarily landscape professionals, but may also interest master gardeners, those concerned about environmentally-sound practices, people involved in landscape development and restoration, as well as educators and individuals looking for alternatives to chemical use in the garden.

SOUL's web site also offers information

and links to other educational facilities around the province and country, including links to SOIL – Stewards of Irreplaceable Land – which will serve as a liaison between organic farmers and those wanting to undertake apprentices on organic farms. Realizing that the movement is spurred by consumer demand for organics, SOUL has now launched a garden club for home gardeners, says Hermary. But, while consumers have embraced the organic movement, the reality is that organic gardening is still a niche market in the industry. Mainstream industry has not jumped onto the bandwagon, says Hermary, although key players are beginning to notice the rumbling. It is the managers and company owners who are showing up at various professional courses, she says, and it's only a matter of time before being a certified organic land care professional will be a competitive advantage