



# ORGANIC LAND CARE FOR YOUR COMMUNITY

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A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE FOR COMMUNITY MEMBERS  
WORKING TO CHANGE MUNICIPAL POLICIES  
FOR A GREENER FUTURE

The Canadian Society for Organic Urban Land Care

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# Organic Land Care

## What it is and how it can help Municipalities Reduce Costs and Increase Resilience

Organic urban land care is much more than simply restricting the use of synthetic chemicals, it is working with natural systems to create healthy and resilient landscapes. It is a process of planning and caring for spaces with an ecosystem approach, relying on various elements of that ecosystem to support each other so there are fewer inputs needed and less waste produced. At its core, organic land care is about increasing the biodiversity and subsequent resiliency and function of landscapes.

Most municipalities have recognized that diverse urban tree canopies are less susceptible to pest and disease pressures, both by breaking up pathways for the travel and transmission of pests and diseases and by minimizing the chances that a single pest or disease will cause extensive damage to an entire urban forest. There is growing awareness and acceptance of the fact that mixed species turf areas are less bothered by pests and diseases than monoculture lawns and are usually the first to return to active, lush growth at the end of a drought.

The next step along this path is the understanding of the function and benefits of diverse soil biology and how it helps increase resilience of other elements in the landscape, especially during unusually wet or dry periods. By learning how to replace current horticultural practices that harm soil biology with practices that support its function and diversity we can create conditions that are healthy both for the landscape and the people who spend time in it.

On its own organic land care won't fix all of the issues that municipalities will face with changing growing conditions but it is an important piece of the puzzle, complimenting and supporting green infrastructure,

urban forestry plans, and improved green space design.

It can also help municipalities reduce the cost of maintaining and renovating landscaped spaces. Organic land care provides a toolkit for working with available resources to create conditions where soil biology provides plants and turf with the bulk of their required nutrients and water. It can help mitigate increasing pressures on storm water systems caused by intense rain events by maintaining healthy, stable, porous soils that hold water and allow it to infiltrate into the water table where it belongs.

Organic land care helps to create conditions that improve urban tree survival rates and life span and can keep the plants in green infrastructure projects healthy so that they can do their job of filtering water, cleaning the air and further stabilizing soils to prevent erosion and nutrient leaching.





## What to Expect

With many municipal land use and planning policies being disrupted by the need for, or the requirement to develop, plans for climate change mitigation and adaptation, especially in relation to increased flooding and reduced summer water supply, this may prove to be one of the best times to suggest a new approach to green space management in your community.

Keep in mind that changing public policy is a slow process, one that requires time and persistence, but presenting your municipality with well supported information and an existing Standard that they can reference when developing project specifications and drafting contracts may prove to be a solution to challenges that they are already facing.

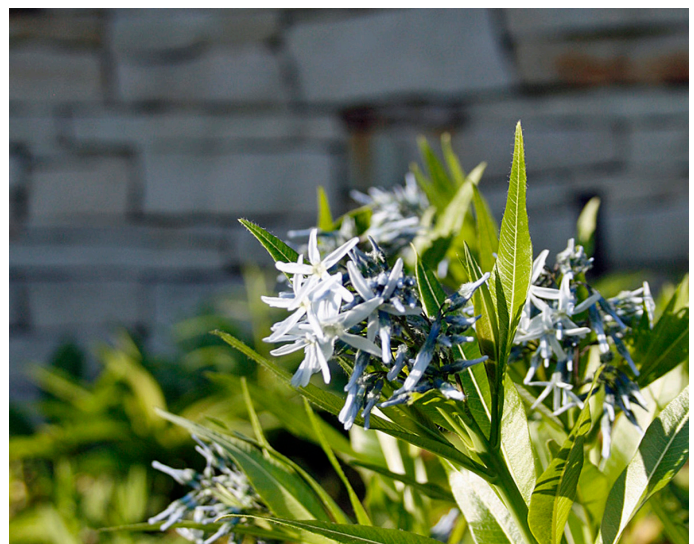
In most situations you will find it easier to gain support from your municipality if you can present solutions to problems that they have already identified. Spend some time researching what your council already has planned for upcoming projects and if there are any existing priorities that organic land care can help them to achieve.

When starting conversations about changing how things are done, try to keep the focus on positive outcomes from organic techniques. Manufacturers of chemical based fertilizers and pesticides have plenty of carefully phrased and targeted information that they can use to challenge claims of environmental and human health harms and conversations can quickly breakdown into a deadlock between competing claims split along political lines.

A good way to begin is by gathering information. Try to find out what policies and standards are currently in place and if there are any existing short or long term

plans for changes. Also look into whether there is a framework or policy that you need to follow for making a proposal to Council. Compile supporting information for the changes you are proposing. Work on building up a group or team to support your efforts and help amplify the issues. If several Councillors hear similar things from their constituents it increases the odds that changes will be seriously considered.

And, finally, don't expect immediate, extensive adoption of organic practices. Municipal governments have legal requirements that they need to meet regarding fiscal responsibility and large scale change in a short time frame can make them nervous. They may choose to start small with trial areas or pilot projects. Stick with it and follow up, find out if projects are implemented, cared for and data collected and used to fine tune and expand projects and inform larger policy changes. Check in, ask for updates and keep lines of communication open.





## The Current Situation

A clear understanding of the current situation is a vital element for planning how to get from where you are to where you want to be.

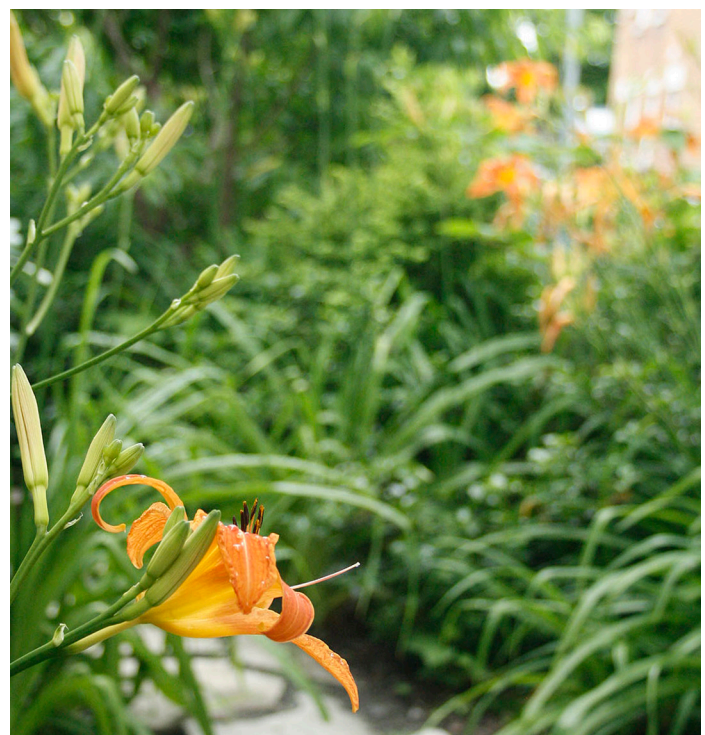
A practical place to start your research on how public lands are currently being designed and maintained in your community is your municipal website. You likely won't find a specific policy posted unless a sustainable or organic plan has already been adopted but you can likely find the contact information for someone who can answer your initial questions about current practices. If you can't find an appropriate contact start with the general information desk, email address or telephone line. Let them know that you are looking for information on how municipal lands, including turf, garden areas, natural spaces and trees are maintained. They should be able to direct you to someone who can answer your questions.

Keep in mind that this is the research stage, taking the time to understand the existing policies and to research any information about products or processes that are described to you will help you formulate an effective case for change. You don't need to be advocating for changes yet, just collecting information.

You can find a list of questions to help get you started on the SOUL website.

Some additional avenues of research can include:

- Does your municipality have a strategic plan and are there any goals in it that organic land care could fit into or help them meet?
- Has your municipality set environmental goals of any kind? Climate change, clean water, plant or wildlife conservation etc. Are there provincially imposed outcomes that they are required to meet?
- Is there an Environment Committee? Have they set goals and do they have a plan in place to reach them?





## Assembling Your Resources

When working to change opinions and policy you will need a variety of resources. Assembling them before starting to actively advocate for change will help keep things moving forward when you encounter questions and concerns. The process of assembling them is also helpful since it can be a good way to meet partners and allies.

Depending on your community and the changes that you are proposing, you will likely need a variety of resources. These can include examples of projects and policies implemented by other municipalities. You can find a list of resources on the SOUL website.

### Local Resources

If available, landscape and garden professionals in your specializing in organic or sustainable practices area are a good place to start. They will likely be well informed about local issues and challenges and be able to offer guidance and technical information specific to your region. Other places to find local partners, resources and advice are organic and natural food stores or cooperatives, contractors advertising green building services, schoolyard greening projects, local food programs etc. These are usually run by people who are concerned with how our choices and actions affect our environment and can make excellent partners in your efforts.

### Experts

It can be very helpful to have contacts that you can reach out to with difficult questions or even to invite to provide presentations or as contacts for municipal Councillors or staff who are interested but need more information. Accredited and Certified Organic Land Care Professionals can be found on the SOUL website,

along with a list of Organic Land Care Advocates across Canada who aren't specifically associated with SOUL but who can support you in your efforts in a variety of ways.

### Online Resources

Research is continuously evolving and green infrastructure and organic land care projects continue to be implemented across Canada and around the world. Please check out the Resources page on the SOUL website for a list of articles and research papers that may be useful to you and/or your municipality.



# Provide Solutions to Existing Problems

## Problems Organic Land Care can Help Solve:

- Meeting climate change goals - Organically maintained landscapes tend toward a net increase in soil carbon, sequestering it in the ground where it is beneficial, rather than harmful, to our environment. Many municipalities are being pressured by the public and by other levels of government to develop and implement a climate change mitigation and/or adaptation plan. Organic land care can help them meet those requirements.
- Reducing stormwater runoff and soil erosion. Healthy soils are both more stable and more effective at holding excess water, leading to a reduction of the speed and volume of the runoff and subsequent combined sewer overflows and flooding.
- Improving water quality in streams, rivers and lakes. By allowing water to infiltrate into, rather than drain across, the soil it is filtered and cooled before it reaches aquatic ecosystems.
- Reduced input costs. Once implemented, organic practices require fewer inputs and, frequently, fewer staff hours to maintain them in good condition.
- Responding to pressure to 'go-green'. There is increasing public pressure to eliminate the use of synthetic chemicals in natural areas, especially where children play. Organic land care is a means of accommodating that change while still maintaining healthy turf and green spaces.
- Organic land care practices can also help keep other sustainable projects, like low impact development, tree planting and green infrastructure, from failing due to lack of symbiotic soil biology, insufficient moisture or waterlogged soils.
- If your municipality is near a body of water, such as a lake or river, there may also be concerns regarding nitrate or phosphorus contamination in the water, both of which can cause algae blooms or other environmental issues of concern to your community.

## Healthy Soil and Flood Mitigation

Heavily compacted soils, low in organic matter, are common in many urban spaces. Disturbance during construction, frequent foot and vehicle traffic and applications of concentrated chemicals which stress or kill some types of soil biology can all contribute to decline in soil life and loss of organic matter.

For every 1% increase in total organic matter, soil can soak up an additional 2cm of rain. Increasing soil organic matter in a 1 hectare city park from 2% to 5% will allow it to absorb and retain an additional half of a million litres of rainwater, reducing loading on storm sewer systems, protecting downstream ecosystems and keeping that water available for the trees, lawns and other plants in the park.

Switching to a land care approach, with mixed species planting, applications of compost or slow acting organic fertilizers and reintroduction of soil biology, either through inoculation or compost application can be a very low cost part of long term flood mitigation.



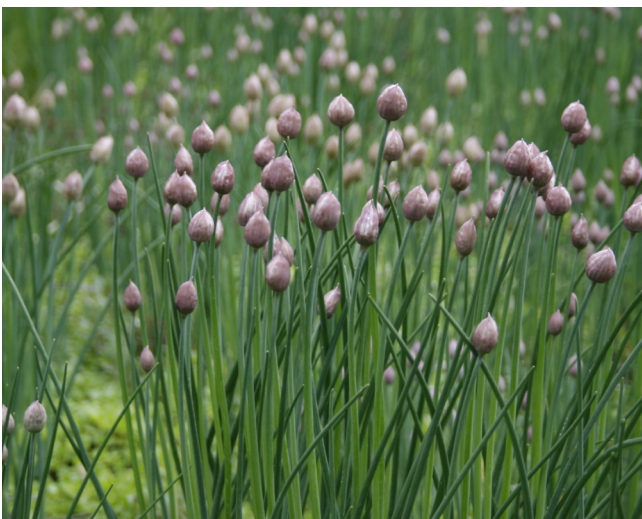


## How Change Can Happen

In almost all cases a change in policy will need to be introduced or sponsored by an elected official. It will at the very least need to be included in a municipal budget, which is voted on by municipal Councillors.

There is generally a process that you will need to go through to recommend a change in policy or budget and contacting your Councillor's office for information on local policies is a good starting point.

Engaging with elected individuals early on in the process will help ensure that you have an ally once you are ready to move ahead with a proposal. The Councillor representing your community is a good place to start when you are gathering information about process and existing policy. If your local Councillor is not inclined to champion your proposal, a Councillor sitting or chairing a committee that relates to environment, parks, planning or sustainability may be a good additional contact and potential ally.



Specific steps and level of support will vary from place to place but there should always be guidelines available to you for submitting a proposal for creating or changing a policy. When meeting with your Councillor or their staff to discuss the steps you will need to follow you don't need to be ready to pitch your proposal but it is good to have a general idea of the goals you are working toward so you can offer an initial introduction of the benefits of organic land care if the opportunity presents itself.

Do expect to have to follow a prescribed process and to have to work with overworked staff and people who don't consider this project to be as important as you do. There are lots of pressures, interests and ideas that municipalities have to sort through and evaluate so they need a process for managing them. Being willing to work through the steps will make them more inclined to work with you. Having a process to follow can also help keep you on track and organized.

If you have a Conservation Authority in your area it can also be worthwhile speaking with them to collect information about existing programs and any guidelines they have for maintaining healthy, ecologically appropriate landscapes. They may also have their own, local, guidelines for organic lawn and garden care available, even if your municipality isn't currently applying organic practices on public lands.



# Engage with Municipal Staff

Never underestimate the value of engaging with municipal staff. Many decisions and recommendations regarding products and processes come from staff before being approved by council. Staff are also likely to be the source of objections if change is being forced on them from above without proper consultation.

If feasible, try contacting the department responsible for grounds maintenance, possibly with the assistance of your Counselor's office.

Once you arrange a meeting, present your ideas and listen to their concerns, recognize that they have a job to do and often face public backlash if there is a perception that they are not caring for public spaces properly. If specific objections are raised and you don't yet have the information that you need to offer an accurate, thoughtful response, ask if you can get back to them and then do some more research or reach out the SOUL community with the questions or objections. Someone likely has some specific information on the same or a similar issue.

In several provinces pesticides have been banned for cosmetic use in residential situations. While a good first step toward organic care, if alternate practices aren't implemented, the results are often not well received by the public. Asking to have synthetic fertilizers removed from the toolkit of municipal grounds crews may very well result in push back. It is essentially taking away what is a core tool in widely accepted horticultural industry turf care practices.

If you are taking away a tool, you also need to present a good idea of how maintenance programs can be adapted to the new standards in a way that will have good results without significantly increasing costs.



***Municipal staff can be your greatest allies or your fiercest opponents, take the time to listen to their advice and concerns early on in your planning.***

## **What goes into transitioning from conventional maintenance to organic land care?**

- Training for core staff - an understanding of the soil food web and how it alters soil structure, nutrient and water availability is core to identifying problems and opportunities.
- Re-introduction of soil biology, either from compost or commercially available biological inoculants.
- Finding a source of material that can be used to produce biologically active composts for annual or bi-annual applications. - This can be leaves and grass clippings, properly ground and composted residential yard waste or any other source of bulk organic matter, the more varied the better.
- There may need to be an investment in topdressing equipment for spreading thin applications of compost on turf areas.
- Revising garden bed maintenance plans to minimize soil disturbance to allow soil biology to fully develop.



## Build a Team

Depending on the current practices and opinions that you are working with it can take a lot of time and energy to create change. Take the time at the start to gather some like-minded people to your team, either in person or through a social network. Multiple voices will also help you be heard when speaking to Councils or committees.

Try to find out if there is already a group in your community that is working toward similar or complementary goals. The connections you will make as you assemble resources are a great place to start. Ask people you encounter if they are interested in becoming directly involved or would like to be kept updated about your progress.

Social media, bulletin boards and event listings are all good places to look for existing groups or to post about your efforts.

Citizen science projects that invite members of the public to collect information about the spaces that are important to them can also be a great way to engage people. Host a biodiversity count in a park or other public green space. Recording conditions and documenting changes over time, whether an increase or decrease in biodiversity, is both valuable scientific information and a way to encourage people to slow down and reconnect with the nature where they live. There are groups hosting bio-blitzes to record everything from bird and insect species counts to when trees blossom from year to year.

Linking fluctuations of biodiversity in natural areas to upstream land care practices can also be a good way to engage people working to save natural areas in your work on urban spaces.

You can find links to several bioblitz and citizen science projects on the SOUL website.

## Staying Motivated

Changing policy is usually a marathon or a relay race, rather than a sprint. It requires sustained effort over time, sometimes years. It doesn't need to be a full time job but it can be a significant commitment and having even a small team can make a big difference when it comes to staying engaged and motivated.

Build a support team of individuals who share your interests and values, recognize and celebrate milestones along the way.

Engage small groups. Encourage teams to adopt sites, parks, gardens and pilot projects, monitoring and, if appropriate, adopting or maintaining them. Ask them to invite their local Councillor, the Mayor or other people who can influence policy to events in their spaces and to send them updates on successes or needed changes and improvements.

Make a list of your reasons for taking this on at the start. Going back to that list when you encounter speed bumps, delays, opposition or apathy can help remind you why this endeavor is important to you. Add to and update that list if your reasons change or expand.

Record your accomplishments. Sometimes change can be slow and it feels like progress just isn't happening. Take the time to notice and acknowledge forward movement and celebrate your successes.



## About SOUL

The Canadian Society for Organic Urban Land Care (SOUL) is a non-profit Canadian organization. It was formed in response to the growing need for ecologically responsible land care practices.

Our mission is to cultivate knowledge of Organic Land Care and support its practice.

### Our Goals

- To foster and promote the practice of organic land care
- To provide opportunities for education in all aspects of organic land care.
- To establish and promote guidelines, standards and specifications for all aspects of organic land care.
- To establish procedures for certification of organic land care practitioners
- To establish and develop a means for the exchange of information and ideas between the public and the organic land care industry



### The Organic Land Care Standard

First introduced by SOUL in 2003 this document was developed to address the need for a tool to support a successful transition toward sustainable land care practices by individuals, community, industry and government. Now in its 7th edition, the Standard is a reference document that defines practices appropriate for use in organic urban landscapes and includes an extensive list of allowed and prohibited substances and materials.

It is a document intended for use in the design, specification and bidding stages of a project and can be a useful reference for anyone working on developing service contracts for organically maintained landscapes.

It is also the Code of Conduct adopted by Organic Land Care professionals certified by SOUL.

This Standard was developed in consultation with many landscape professionals across the world. Like all standards it is a living document, and subject to change in the light of further experience with Organic Land Care.

The most current edition of the Standard can be found on the SOUL website at:

[www.organiclandcare.ca](http://www.organiclandcare.ca)

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The Canadian Society for Organic Urban Land Care