

Landscapers benefit from organic land care extension program

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Land care practitioners visit organic turf sites in New Jersey as part of the Rutgers Organic Land Care Certificate Program. Participants reported that the program helped them become more effective at organic practices. Credit: Michele Bakacs.

A new study shows the impact of an organic lawn care training program designed for landscapers, including insights into landscapers' attitudes, lessons learned, and challenges. The results also suggest ways in which extension professionals can bring value to organic land management programs. The article, which appeared in the February 2016 issue of *HortTechnology*, assessed the impact of Rutgers University's Organic Land Care Certificate Program and includes recommendations for similar programs.

The one-week certificate course is taught by more than 20 extension and industry professionals; since 2013, 63 people have attended and 48 have fulfilled all the program requirements. "A major objective of the program is for land care professionals to learn to treat their landscapes holistically and to restore and enhance biological cycles involving [soil microorganisms](#), plants, and animals," the authors said. Rutgers researchers Michele Bakacs, Amy Rowe, William Hlubik, and Jan Zientek administered a needs assessment survey and conducted discussions with landscape professionals prior to the program's implementation. Following 2 years of the program, the team created and delivered a program evaluation and follow-up survey.

Survey respondents reported a significant change in types of fertilizers used, with the median percent synthetic fertilizer decreasing from 45% to 0% and median percent organic fertilizer increasing from 12.5% to 35% from before to after the course. They also reported reducing synthetic pesticide usage by a median of 40% since taking the course. "Respondents reported since attending the program they were more effective at a number of practices, including removing invasives and installing native plants, installing rain gardens, reducing stormwater runoff, and reducing irrigation," the researchers noted.

The authors recommended that similar programs focus on science, patience in transitioning, and understanding there are no "one size fits

all" organic programs. "Switching to an organic land management system regimen does not yield overnight results and patience must be emphasized with the landscapers, their clients, and the general public. Any extension program on this emerging sector will have to be flexible to address the needs of practitioners while assessing applied data generated by researchers."

"Our results indicate that extension can play a lead role in conducting applied research and providing relevant, effective educational programming for landscapers in the organic land care field," the authors added.

More information: *HortTechnology*, horttech.ashspublications.org/...ent/26/1/89.abstract

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