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The Soil Report: Market-based reasons for going "organic"

By Debra Prinzing

Hendrikus Schraven believes in the integration of intuition and science. In fact, he says, the two are inextricably linked. The science of soil will tell us the exact nutritional composition of the earth in which we plant a tree or shrub. The intuition of soil requires a different kind of analysis: time-tested experience working closely with the living medium.

Schraven's belief that healthy soil is the single most critical element in a successful landscape is widely known. He draws on childhood experiences assisting his father on the family's farm in Holland, kneeling down to smell and touch the soil before planting a crop. "I learned to know whether the soil would be good or whether it was lacking something," Schraven recalls.

He uses that same sensory evaluation in addressing "problem" landscapes today, with the added commitment of offering Hendrikus Schraven Landscape, Construction and Design Inc.'s clients scientifically supported solutions.

Schraven has spoken frequently to WALP members and other allied industry groups about the environmental and organic design approaches he's practiced for decades. In a recent conversation, I asked him to share some philosophical basics about soil.

He started by sharing this quote, borrowed from Albert Einstein: "The significant problems we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them." Perhaps Einstein was talking about the atomic bomb when he spoke these words. But for Schraven, this powerful statement points to the dilemma facing landscape professionals who wish to improve their soil practices. *Change the way you think about and work with soil, . . . work with, not against this essential element.*

Thankfully, the miracle days of "chemical solutions" are quickly fading away. Regulatory

and legislative limitations, as well as sheer market forces are driving the consumer's heightened demand for healthy soil products and practices.

The bottom line for commercial and residential landscape firms is this, Schraven says: "When you use organic methods, you reduce disease, reduce problems with your soil, enhance percolation and water retention rates and give your clients an environment where plants are healthy and vibrant."

Easier said than done, right?

No, Schraven insists. Discard the instant-gratification, fast-food mindset. Come along side your clients and begin to educate them for long-term success. "The organics are here, the soils are here, the knowledge is here. You just have to use them," he says. "All we have to do is change the standard, change specifications on jobs to require organic fertilizers . . . and eventually this entire industry will fall under one rule."

Here are some practices to adopt, if you haven't begun to already. If your firm is currently using organic methods, Schraven applauds you - and the WALP Soils report wants to hear about it.

- Evaluate the existing "soil" to determine your baseline. Can you even call it soil, or is it a combination of impervious clay, stones and construction debris? Unless all debris or compacted soil is removed, new soil is brought in and organic matter is significantly reincorporated into the remaining layer, issues of drainage and poor root development can haunt the landscape.
- Insist on a deeper application of organic material versus a scant three inches of topsoil (for lawns as well as ornamental beds). Schraven points out that the top foot of living soil abounds with organisms that eat

and are eaten, digest, excrete, multiply and die. All plants - grass, trees, shrubs, agricultural crops - thrive or suffer depending on the health of this dynamic network of living organisms. When you use a rich composition of living soil, you are offering clients a landscape built on strength, permeability, fertility, convenience and bio-remediation properties.

- Introduce your clients to the use of compost tea as an ongoing treatment to the landscape. Chemical-based pesticides, fumigants, herbicides and some fertilizers kill many of the beneficial microorganisms in the soil and on plant surfaces, however, compost tea counter this ongoing damage. This organic application helps control foliar diseases and restores/enhances the soil microflora. With time and continued use, you'll improve the nutritional quality of the landscape.

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Landscape Focus

- Practice "right plant, right place" - design for success by choosing plants for appropriate microclimates in the landscape.

HSLCD Inc. provides its clients with a wide array of educational materials advocating organic and chemical-free landscaping methods. In "The Organic Approach to Soil Health," the firm walks its customers through the many benefits and methods of achieving good healthy soil (you can view this and other resources at www.hendrikus.com).

Through a new division, Soil Dynamics, Schraven has introduced his patent-pending line of organic topsoil blends called Essential Soil™ for landscape, nursery, erosion, structural and turf applications, for sale to both his clients and the trade. His organic Essential Soil™ erosion mix has been formally tested by microbiologists, geotechnical engineers and erosion research laboratories with impressive results (see www.soildynamics.com).

Through the firm's newest division, Hendrikus Schraven Organics, he has introduced a wholesale line of organic fertilizers and soil amendments, also making these available to the landscape and nursery trades. Schraven will launch the retail product line through garden supply outlets and nurseries in spring 2002. These are the same time-tested, highly successful organic blends and amendments that he has used on HSLCD landscapes for years. Through careful blending of ingredients Hendrikus Schraven Organics makes its materials user-friendly and its applications simple. For example, there is a specific product blend for acid loving plants, such as azaleas and rhododendrons, called Organobloom 5-2-4. The company promises outstanding results without the laborious

method of multiple applications of various individual organic amendments. The new website, www.hendrikusorganics.com, is in the making and will be online soon.

As radical as he once sounded, given today's diminishing environmental resources, the practicality of Schraven's approach resonates as truth. He sums up the bottom line reasoning in this statement, excerpted from a Soil Dynamics' brochure:

"As our natural systems decline, environmental awareness has become more prevalent. Fewer people are willing to accept the imbalance and degradation that our development on this planet has created. . . . By working with nature instead of fighting against it, we increase multiple tangible and intangible long-term benefits."

Debra Prinzing is a Seattle-based garden and design writer. She is the garden editor for Seattle Homes & Lifestyles magazine and a regular home and garden writer for The Herald newspaper in Everett. She can be reached at dkprinzing@aol.com.