

GREEN GARDEN



Judith Redmond, co-owner of Full Belly Farm, said she's spent up to \$2,000 on fertilizer that she's no longer permitted to use. "The products that were used are actually really detrimental," she said.

Organic growers call for more fertilizer oversight

LOS ANGELES—Organic grower Phil McGrath plays by the rules to keep his Ventura County, Calif., strawberry and vegetable farm certified organic.

So suspicions that at least two fertilizer companies — one of which was recently raided by federal agents — have been peddling synthetic fertilizer as the natural stuff makes him fear they may cheapen the "organic" label he grows under.

"It brings the term and the industry down a couple notches," he said.

The state's major organic certifier, the California Certified Organic Farmers, said it wouldn't penalize farmers or revoke their endorsements because it recognized none had knowingly used the spiked fertilizer. But the situation has resulted in a blow to the integrity of the organic market, prompting new industrywide efforts to test and verify fertilizers that will be the focus of hearings Tuesday by the state Senate Food and Agriculture Committee.

As the organic produce market expands from a cadre of small conscientious growers to a massive industry, some farmers are turning to low-cost and highly potent organic fertilizers to make up for shrinking profit margins. That demand has resulted in accusations of products being marketed that are too good to be truly organic. Their use threatens a market based on consumers' willingness to pay a premium for products seen as better for their health and the environment. —AP

ECO SIMPLE with Robin Tierney



Rain gardens slow the flow of stormwater to prevent flooding, nourish individual yards and help the environment.

Catch the runoff: Rain gardens can benefit individual, nation's waterways

Landscape architects, urban planners and eco-conscious homeowners are talking a green streak about rain gardens.

What are they? Shallow depressions in the soil landscaped with hardy shrubs and plants. Why the growing interest? Rain gardens slow the flow of stormwater to prevent flooding, nourish individual yards and help the environment. A two-year study by University of Connecticut researchers found that rain gardens trap up to 99 percent of pollutants such as nitrates, ammonia and phosphorus, keeping them from reaching rivers and streams.

Ed Murtagh, chairman of the Friends of Sligo Creek Stormwater Committee in Maryland explained that undeveloped land naturally manages rainfall, slowly absorbing it like a sponge, filtering it and gradually releasing it into aquifers. In contrast, areas largely covered with roadways, parking lots and large-footprint buildings don't absorb the rainfall. So stormwater is channeled at sufficient speeds and volumes to carry massed waste, chemicals and sediment to waterways and erode them, increasing erosion and flooding in the process, Murtagh said.

"Our creeks and streams are drying up due to ground water starvation," Murtagh added. "Last summer and fall, for example, much of Sligo Creek [a watershed spanning Maryland's Montgomery and Prince George's counties] went dry because the base flow was so impaired. With all the hard surfaces, runoff rushes into Sligo all at once and causes flooding, instead of soaking into the ground and entering the creek slowly as cool, clean baseflow."

Homeowners, Murtagh said, can use rain gardens to keep more of the rainwater in their yards to water trees, increase the diversity of plants, and attract birds, bees and butterflies. Meanwhile, ponding problems and soil erosion are reduced.

The Maryland Department of the Environment's December 2008 "Enviromatters" report suggests rain gardens as one way homeowners can reduce stormwater runoff. Other steps:

» Use permeable surfaces, such as wood decks, bricks

Create a rain garden

Follow these tips from Ed Murtagh and Kit Gage of the Friends of Sligo Creek Stormwater Committee:

- » Pick a fairly level site, away from the house and trees.
- » Before digging, check with your local utilities to make sure there are no gas or water lines under the site.
- » Dig a "perc" hole to determine how deep the rain garden should be. The quicker water empties out of the hole, the shallower the rain garden need be. Depending on the area, this could be eight inches to 3 feet deep.
- » Obtain sufficient quantities of soil and sand. Dig the hole.
- » Remove the dirt, using some to make a berm around the downhill edge. Move the rest elsewhere.
- » Replace mostly clay soil with the sandy soil. Let it sit for several weeks. It should form a bit of a swale a few inches below the surface of the surrounding soil.
- » Plant the garden with native plants suited to your site's sun/shade conditions, and that can tolerate both wet and dry root conditions (lists available online).
- » Water a bit when first establishing, and weed from time to time.

For more detailed design, building and maintenance guidance, visit lowimpactdevelopment.org or urbanharvest.org

and concrete lattice.

- » Connect downspouts to barrels.
- » Direct runoff from impervious surfaces into vegetated areas.
- » Allow vegetation or "buffer strips" to grow along waterways.
- » Plant trees, shrubs and ground cover.
- » Minimize use of fertilizers and pesticides.

Yard by yard, individuals can improve the quality of our country's bays, rivers and streams.

Share green ideas with Robin at robin.tierney@gmail.com.

GREEN NEWS

Homeless woman earns recycling award

HUNTSVILLE, ALA. — A homeless Huntsville woman got a surprise when city officials and volunteer leaders paid her a visit at her camp beneath the Interstate 565 bridges.

The visitors were there to present Missy "Lynn" Morvant with an award for recycling.

They also took her a backpack full of food, condiments and lotions. Morvant has lived in homeless camps in Huntsville and around the country for 25 years.

She used to just recycle cans, which have a high cash value. But Morvant said she now recycles everything because her camp "looked so trashy everywhere" and it got on her nerves. —AP



Trees near Keystone, Colo., in late 2008 show damage done by pine beetles. Millions of acres of trees have been killed by the insects.

Tea herb may help beetle-plagued trees

GRANTS PASS, ORE. — Would a dose of herbal tea slow the march of beetles killing millions of acres of pine trees across the West? Sort of.

But instead of brewing up a cup, U.S. Forest Service scientists found that sprinkling tiny flakes containing the pheromone verbenone over lodgepole pine forests cut the number of trees attacked by bark beetles by two-thirds.

Verbenone is found in rosemary and walnut husks and is approved for use in herbal teas. It also resembles a pheromone the beetles give off to tell one another that their tree is getting crowded and that it would be better to pick another one.

Forest Service entomologist Nancy Gillette, lead author on the study, said scientists have known for a decade that when bark beetles smell verbenone they tend to disperse. —AP

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