

Going Organic in Hopkinton, Massachusetts



Scott Currin Excavates with Soils in Mind

By Kathy Litchfield
Hopkinton, MA –

Orchestrating the buzzing and swirling dance of a busy construction site is no easy feat under regular circumstances. When striving to disturb the soils as little as possible, separate types of soils for optimal usage later, and direct water flow with an eye towards appropriate stormwater management, neighborliness and erosion control, the job becomes that more challenging.

NOFA Accredited Organic Land Care Professional Scott Currin is up to the task. Since the mid-1980s, he has worked in excavation for high-end residential homeowners as well as commercial clients. Early on he noticed the difficulty in avoiding compacting the soil as the construction process goes on – what with building contractors and subs hauling in tons of materials and heavy equipment, timing things so that everyone can get their work done in the most time- and cost-efficient manner and watching the weather to ensure control of water flow through the site from beginning to end.

“I’m the first one in and the last one out (on a job site) so I have a lot of say as to how things progress. It’s really a huge dance. You have all the trades coming in with blinders on, trying to get their piece of it done. Most of them don’t fully understand the impact they have on the site; they drive materials over everything without thinking about compaction (for instance). So I have to try to control that a little bit,” said Currin, owner of Hopkinton Homesite Designs, LLC, founded in 1999. He started with high-end residential properties and also works on commercial sites, believing that “no job is too small” for his one-man operation.

Within the last three years, Currin said he “really got on board with the do no harm, organic ideas.”

“The more I’m educating myself, the more I want to educate others. I found Dr. Elaine Ingham on the internet. I’ve been digging in the dirt for 30 plus years - like a big boy in the sandbox - and I’ve never really understood how everything works in terms of soil microbiology until I met her. She led me to NOFA and I really got into soils. I’ve always been environmentally sensitive to what’s going on anyways, and now I have the knowledge behind me to back it all up. This all makes sense,” he said, praising Todd Harrington of Harrington’s Organics and Paul Wagner of the Soil Food Web as being wonderful resources.

When Currin arrives at a new site, he tries to envision the whole job in his mind – what will go where, who needs to be where, when, for how long, how large the site is in terms of having places to move different soils to for safekeeping until later in the job process, and how to control the water on the site for months at a time.

“All sites are different so you have to really see it all happening before it does, in order to make good decisions,” he said. “Water is the first thing I look for.”

Currin assesses how he’ll control water flow throughout the construction process, ensuring it won’t negatively affect neighbors or cause erosion, and have the best drainage possible. Then he looks at the soils.

“We try to see what we’re going to disturb and try to disturb it as little as possible, thinking of how you’ll move your materials through the site during construction,” he said, always considering how he’ll keep types of soils such as topsoil, organic matter, subsoils and structural soils, separate – perhaps by stockpiling them in a back corner of the site, or removing them to another site if the site is too small (such as in a city or suburb environment) to house soils for the project’s projected time span.

He also keeps in mind the future use of the site, thinking about where lawn, gardens, planting beds and driveways will be, so he can replace the right soils to the right places.

“Be sure the soil you’re excavating is suitable for what you’ll use it for. All soils are very different in terms of how they respond to use. You want to limit the number of times you handle it both for cost and environmental concerns,” he said.



Currin often builds terracing and retention channels where water will drain quickly into the ground, especially for sites with high water tables. He watches the weather because when there is a two- to three-inch rainfall within a 24-hour period, that's a lot of water to control on a building site.

“You have to manage the site, for every weather event, every rain event, access issues . . . keeping all this in mind, as to how little impact you're trying to have on the site. . . . It's great to have unlimited funds to do everything you want but that's rarely the case, especially when working with builders and budgets. You have to convince them sometimes that it'll be worth it in the long run, to sell the organic aspect,” he said.

Currin uses a large 320 excavator, backhoe and multi-terrain track loader, the latter of which he praised for its non-compaction properties. He makes his own compost tea and sources soils from the best companies he can find to ensure top quality for sites where that is appropriate. He praised Weston Nurseries for their high-quality loam and topsoil and stressed the importance of sourcing soils that are not contaminated.

On the side, Currin loves adopting “rescue plants” from sites where they are unwanted, and often “marries them together” in his Hopkinton backyard by putting their dead sides back to back in close proximity. In spring, he said it's “like a slow motion fireworks display of flowering” as plants bloom in succession blasting out form, color and fragrance. Among his favorites are rhododendrons, azaleas and umbrella pines all growing in close quarters, along with a 15-20-foot tall blue spruce that is married to an Alberta spruce and rhododendron. “They seem to enjoy each other and are growing like crazy,” he said.

“The reason I got into pushing the organic end of it is to try and build on this (way of thinking) to become second nature. You've got to add some passion to your life after all. I really enjoy helping people understand that this is so, the way it needs to be, to be sustainable,” he said. “If I can convince people not to dump toxic chemicals on site, take care of the soils, and just notice the woods. It takes care of itself. If a tree gets sick, it dies but it provides food for everyone else. Let nature decide how it's supposed to be. Let it be!”

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