

Unlocking healthy soil with non-toxic weed control

Buerger takes holistic approach at weed control

By Katie Klingsporn

When John Buerger surveys a field invaded by thistles, cheatgrass or other weeds, he

compaction," he said. "There are lots of different angles that you can turn negative into positive."

Buerger owns Alpha Natural, a chemical-free weed and pest control company based in Castle Rock. His work takes him everywhere

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—JOHN BUERGER

searches beneath the mat of vegetation to find a solution.

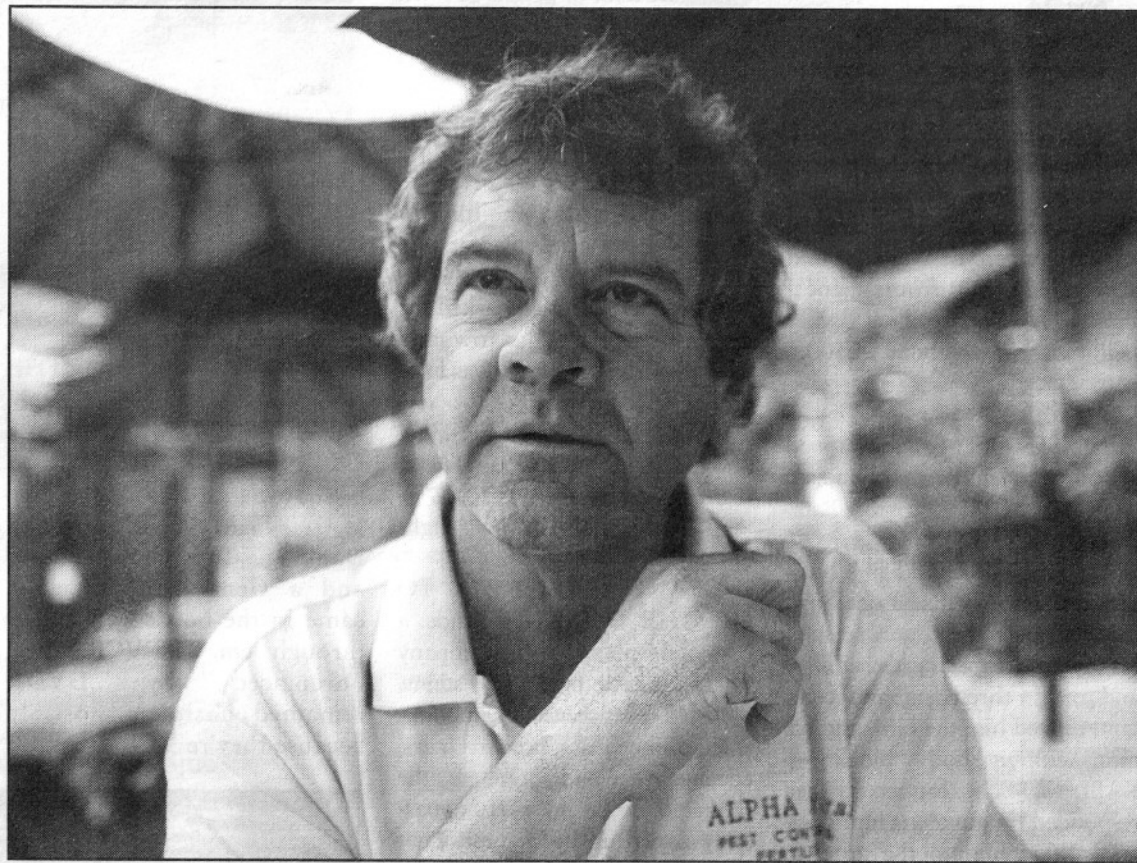
He goes down to the dirt, the gritty interface of rocks, minerals and organic matter from which green life springs, to rid the land of weeds, pests and pollution.

Buerger specializes in non-chemical, non-toxic weed control. He does fertilizer blends, weed and pest control and cleanup of soils sullied with petroleum or pollution. And he does it all by harnessing naturally existing organisms, like fungi and microbes, to mend the problem at its most basic level: the soil.

"It mostly comes down to unlocking the ground via microbial activity, introducing oxygen and breaking down

from big ranches to riparian areas on golf courses, land trusts, conservation easements, reclamation projects and companion gardens.

His work is concentrated in the Aspen, Snowmass and Vail areas, but early this summer he met with Sustainability Coordinator Kris Holstrom and representatives from local governments to educate them on the advantages of non-toxic pest control. As a result of those meetings, he began doing applications to a handful of test plots in the region. Since his processes are slow, results are pending. But he and Sally Field, a local realtor who initiated the meetings, hope the idea catches on in the San Juans.



John Buerger

"The reason he was invited was because I felt we had a need for non-toxic weed control," said Field. "I was concerned about our water, our weeds and our soil."

Holstrom said it fits nicely within the mission of the New Community Coalition, formed in January to work on sustainability goals like relocalization, waste reduction and alternative energy in the coun-

ty.

"I'm just really hopeful that the test plots pan out and it's something we can incorporate and embrace in the region," she said.

Buerger hopes so, too. Since he has a full roster of clients near Castle Rock, he also wants to train interns who could carry out this type of work across a broader region.

Buerger grew up on farms

resources.

According to Buerger, the benefits are fourfold. Healthier soil enables the land to retain water better, stabilize the process of heating and cooling, discourage the spread of rhizome weeds and reduce maintenance costs.

He explained an example of how his applications work: Buerger will use oyster mushrooms in a liquid compost. He

and ranches and studied agriscience and soils at Mesa Junior College. He has been involved in weed control for 40 years. He started out doing traditional chemical methods, but after applying herbicides to a farm he owned in Costa Rica with poor results, he knew there had to be a better way. It wasn't until the '90s, however, that he really embarked on his exploration of non-toxic weed control through soil amendments. He started Alpha Natural in 1996.

Chemicals, he said, provide a quick fix but in the long run leave the soil sick and provide an opening for a different type of weed to take root. And as long as the soil is unhealthy, weeds will thrive, he contends.

The key is to use nature, he said, instead of fighting it.

Buerger concocts liquid applications consisting of ingredients like microbial organisms or native fungus as well as vitamins, minerals, enzymes and kelp juices. He uses these to nourish the soil and revive its naturally occurring abilities to fight off disease and pollution.

The ingredients depend on the condition of the soil he's dealing with, but the applications can not only digest things like pollution and weeds, but also bring balance to mineral content and release beneficial

will apply the oyster mushroom mixture in the spring or winter, when weeds lay dormant. And the mushrooms will digest the woody fiber that exists in many of Colorado's rhizomes, effectively rotting out the dormant weeds. At the same time, he said, they will supply nutritional needs to the infinite array of microbial and fungi that live in the soil, which revives the soil's natural capabilities.

Another example of what he does, he said, is use applications to sweeten up pasture weeds like thistles, which he says are a good source of nutrition, but are avoided because of their bitterness. But if they are sweetened, it gives them grazing value, he said.

He works with trees, riparian areas, pastures and private home lots.

But he stressed that his work won't provide an overnight fix. He explained it's more like a slow healing of the land.

"It's basically a soil condition, rather than something you're going to fix in a couple minutes with a can of chemicals," Buerger said.

Buerger encouraged anyone interested in interning to contact Field at 728-5915.

"It works better, it's clean and people could start on a shoestring and make a really good living," he said.