

Is Your Lawn Care Stormwater-Friendly?

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Green Gardening

Achieving a lush green lawn, beautiful spring flowers, and hearty summer crops are understandable gardening goals, and applying pesticides and fertilizers is a common practice for many gardeners. Unfortunately, those lawn care chemicals often wind up washing right into local waters. The excess nutrients from fertilizers can cause drinking water contamination, massive algal blooms, and fish kills. The contaminants from pesticides can result in waters that are not fishable or drinkable.

Here are a few gardening tips that will help minimize the effect that fertilizers and pesticides have on water resources:

- Fertilize sparingly. If you must fertilize, September is the best month. And be sure to use slow-release fertilizer. The label should read: slow release or time release fertilizer with water-insoluble, slowly-available, or slowly-available soluble nitrogen.
- If you want to fertilize more than once, don't fertilize in the spring until you have mowed the lawn three times.
- More is not always better! Skip the "step programs" offered by many lawn care companies, and be sure to apply fertilizers and pesticides only as directed, no more than one to two pounds of nitrogen per 1000 square feet. Using less will save you money, too! If you do use a lawn care company, ask them about their environmental options and certifications.
- Mow high and leave grass clippings on the lawn. It helps improve the lawn's health and quality, and you're less likely to need fertilizer.
- Avoid using fertilizers or pesticides near wellheads or within 75 feet of waterways.
- Check the weather forecast before applications, and don't apply fertilizers or pesticides when there is rain predicted.
- Avoid using combination fertilizer/pesticide products. Hand pick weeds when possible, and if you must treat weeds or insects with pesticides, spot treat them rather than dousing the entire lawn.

Sweep Up!

Anything that's lying on pavement is more easily washed by stormwater down storm drains:

- If any lawn chemicals or yard debris get on the sidewalk or driveway, sweep them back onto the lawn to prevent them from washing into storm drains. Even grass clippings and excess leaves don't belong in our streams and rivers.
- Sweep, don't hose, the driveway.

Think Native and Natural

A few small changes in your lawn care practices can mean a healthier garden and less pollutants for our waters:

- Consider using organic fertilizers such as bone meal, blood meal, compost, or organic blends. No matter what product you use, though, be sure to follow the manufacturer's directions for application rate and timing.
- Spread a thick layer of mulch in gardens (except for heat-loving veggies like tomatoes), around shrubs and under trees to reduce water evaporation from the soil. It also keeps the ground cooler, keeps plants happier, and inhibits weeds.
- Consider letting your lawn go dormant, if there's a drought. It will come back in the fall.
- Consider planting more native plants; these are plants that have adapted to the local geography, hydrology and climate of the area. As a result, they tend to need less care, require little or no irrigation or fertilizer, are resistant to local pests and disease, and provide habitat for native wildlife species. The University of Rhode Island Cooperative Extension has published a Sustainable Plant List. You also could visit the Rhode Island Wild Plant Society about natives.



Watering Without Waste

Conserving water when you're working outdoors can reduce the potential for contaminants to wind up in local waters. Here are a few ways to water without waste:

- Established lawns are happy with one inch of water per week, including rainfall. And if you must water, water just once a week for a deep soaking.
- Adjust sprinklers so that they don't water paved surfaces. In the event that it's unavoidable, direct the flow of water toward your lawn or garden.
- Check the weather forecast, if you have automatic sprinklers and be sure they aren't programmed to come on in the rain.
- Don't water in the heat of the day. Watering early in the morning or in the evening minimizes the water lost to evaporation.
- Consider using slow-watering techniques such as drip irrigation or soaker hoses. They are considerably more effective than sprinklers at getting the water where it's supposed to be.

