

Steps for Maintaining Healthy Lawns and Quality Waters

Spring is finally here, and with spring comes yard work! Did you know that many common yard care activities can affect the quality of the water in our local ponds and streams? Lawn care, over a widespread area, can have a significant impact on nearby ponds and streams. For those who value the traditional green lawn but want to help protect water quality, here are a few tips:

Soil Tests

Before buying fertilizer, have your soil tested. Test results will tell you exactly what nutrients are needed in what amounts for a healthy lawn. Recently, 15 lakeside lawns in four lake watersheds in Northwestern Wisconsin were randomly tested. Every lawn contained adequate soil phosphorus, yet almost all commercial lawn fertilizers contain phosphorus. That's important to know, because phosphorus is the main cause of excess weed and algae growth in ponds and streams.

Zero Phosphorus Fertilizer

Consider using a nonphosphorus fertilizer this year. Why buy something you don't need? Some local merchants carry fertilizer with little or no phosphorus. Every bag or bottle of fertilizer has three numbers (such as 20-3-10) displayed on the label. The numbers refer to the percentage, by weight, of nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P) and potassium (K). The middle number always refers to phosphorus, so look for a zero in the middle (such as 20-0-10) or the lowest available number for phosphorus.

Establish a Buffer Strip

Do you need to mow the lawn to the water's edge? One way to establish a water quality buffer strip is to simply quit cutting the grass near the water's edge. A strip of longer grass 20-30 feet wide will serve as an effective filter and help trap soil, fertilizer, grass clippings and other possible pollutants before they wash into the lake. If you add some native grasses, flowers and shrubs to the mix, you will help preserve the natural appearance of the shoreline and attract butterflies, birds and other wildlife.

Natural Landscaping

Replacing the lawn, or even part of the lawn, with natural vegetation can be hard work in the beginning but will minimize yard work in the long run. Replacing large lawns with areas of natural landscaping can reduce the need for fertilizer and herbicides, and increase infiltration of storm water into the ground. Natural landscaping along a lakeshore provides other benefits as well:

- Enhances the beauty of the shoreline
- Creates habitat for birds and other wildlife
- Provides cover for fish along the shore
- Increases the privacy of your home and yard

(Source – University of Wisconsin Extension)