

Tips for Sustainable Lawn Care

How to spend less on fertilizer, pesticides and water, and save energy and time on lawn maintenance.

- **Water early in the morning.** Much of the water from daytime watering is lost to evaporation. Avoid overwatering - it's more damaging than underwatering.
- **Leave clippings on the lawn.** Sometimes referred to as "grass-cycling", this provides nutrients equivalent to one application of fertilizer. Clippings do not cause thatch. Mulching mowers are also available which help the clippings hide in the grass. If you mow the lawn before it gets too tall, the clippings left on the lawn will quickly disappear from view. Of course this technique also saves hauling yard waste to the landfill - some states have banned yard waste from landfills.
- **Observe the weeds.** Dandelions thrive at a pH level of about 7.5, and are a sign to add gardeners sulfur to lower the pH. Clover and medic are sign that your lawn may be nitrogen poor, and needs compost or a nitrogen-weighted fertilizer.
- **Fertilize once or twice a year.** This is sufficient for an attractive lawn. Cool season grasses are semi-dormant in the summer; fertilizing during summer will be ineffective. Fertilizing in early fall promotes vigorous lawn growth the next spring.
- **Use a fertilizer with time-released, water insoluble nitrogen.** These fertilizers are less likely to burn your lawn with excess nitrogen, and slow-release allows the roots to absorb the nutrients as needed. In most instances, choose fertilizers containing at least 35% - 50% of their nitrogen supply in the "slow-release" form, such as sulfur-coated urea, methylene urea or various natural organic products. With fast-acting fertilizers, some nutrients are washed away with watering or rain, and the wasted fertilizer pollutes ground water supplies.
- **Control lawn weeds with corn gluten.** A nontoxic byproduct of corn processing, corn gluten kills weed seedlings within days of application. It also adds nitrogen to your soil. Just one application, before weeds emerge, reduced weed survival by 60%, according to research at Iowa State University. After several years, this method provides as much as 90% weed control.
- **Keep pesticide/herbicide use to a minimum.** Pesticides kill the soil organisms which contribute to a healthy lawn. The sooner you remove harsh chemicals, the faster your soil will recover. Repeated past use of toxic chemicals may have destroyed the microbiotic life that exists in healthy soil; it will take time, at least a season, for the soil to begin to recover. If lawn chemicals are used, clean out pesticide and fertilizer applicators and empty containers on the lawn, where the residue will be utilized. Do not clean out on sidewalks or driveways, or residue will go directly into water supplies.
- **'Spot-treat' weeds with vinegar to minimize herbicide use.** Where only a few scattered broadleaf weeds such as dandelions or plantain are present, consider spot-treating individual weeds with household vinegar rather than applying a broadcast treatment of an herbicide over the entire lawn. (Vinegar can burn grass and garden plants, so be sure to spot treat weeds only.) Physically pulling or cutting weeds is also effective; remove as much of the root system as possible to reduce the chance of regrowth.
- **Hand raking.** If the clippings are too long and must be raked, try hand raking. This light aerobic exercise will save you a trip to the gym. If you have fallen leaves to rake, don't burn them - they make excellent mulch for flower or garden beds, or can be added to your compost pile where they'll be converted to rich, organic humus for the garden.