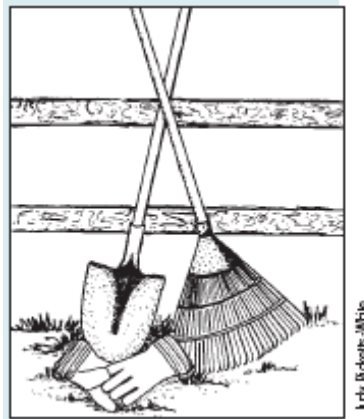


# *The Four Seasons of Water Quality Protection*



A yard provides a very personal place to observe the four seasons. The first blooming bulbs of spring, tomatoes or corn of summer in the garden, fiery colors of autumn or the first winter snowfall are all important, annual events. Each season also has its own landscape maintenance needs.

Home landscape management activities have impacts far beyond the individual property lines, neighborhoods, and town boundaries because of the way landscapes are linked together by water moving through the environment. By recognizing how each home landscape is connected to the environment as a whole and managing the landscape with this connection in mind, everyone can make a contribution to protecting and restoring all natural resources, especially local water quality.

Where does one start in creating an environmentally friendly home landscape? It can seem like an overwhelming project, but it doesn't have to be. Very small changes in everyday landscape management activities in every season of the year can add up to very big changes in water quality protection.

## ***Spring***

- Recycle winter debris. Lawns and gardens need to be raked out to remove the leaves, twigs and branches deposited during winter storms. Use this material as the base for a new compost pile OR chop it up (with a lawn mower or shredder) and use it to re-mulch around foundations, under shrubs and trees and in groundcover beds rather than going out and buying bags of bark mulch. Don't dump brush and leaves into streams or wetland areas. They add excess nutrients to the system and may cause flooding by blocking water flow.
- Sweep up leftover sand from the road or driveway to keep it out of storm drains and local water courses. This sand will contain salt and other pollutants, so don't use it in vegetable gardens or sand boxes, or dump it in a pile "out back". Sift it and store it in buckets for next winter.

- Rethink the early dose of lawn fertilizer. Avoid “weed and feed” type products that mix pesticides and fertilizers. Why pay for chemicals that you don’t need or that force you to start mowing earlier and more often? Put off the first dose of fertilizer until mid-May or apply a thin layer of compost to add organic material to the soil while providing a more balanced dose of nutrients for healthy lawn growth.
- Cover bare soil. If lawn areas are bare or plantings have died over the winter, don’t leave exposed soil. Re-seed or mulch to prevent soil erosion. Consider dead plants an opportunity to add native species with multiple season interest to the landscape.
- Start a landscaping log. Spending a few minutes a week writing down what plants are growing well or having problems, what got eaten, and what yard chores take too much time will help when you are making plans for next year.

### ***Summer***

- Avoid wasting water. Invest in a rain gauge and keep track of weekly rainfall. Most plants and the lawn are happy with one inch of water a week, so keep the hose coiled up when the rain has been coming down.
- A thick (at least two inches) layer of mulch in gardens, around shrubs and under trees prevents evaporation of water from the soil, keeping the ground cooler and plants happier. Thick mulch layers also inhibit weed seed germination. Just don’t mulch heat-loving vegetables like tomatoes and squash until the soil temperature is high enough or they won’t thrive. Organic mulches provide some nutrients as they decompose, reducing the need for fertilizers.
- Avoid lawn stress. Keep the lawn mower blade sharp, mow often enough that no more than one-third of the grass blade is cut off at a time, and try to mow when the grass is completely dry. A mulching mower blade recycles grass clippings while mowing, returning moisture and nutrients to the soil and reducing the need for fertilizer.
- Cut down on chemicals. Cut down on or eliminate fertilizer use. Upgrade your soils by adding composted organic matter rather than chemicals that may damage the natural microbial communities in the soil and promote pest problems. Use “Integrated Pest Management” or IPM strategies to reduce the need for toxic pesticides.

### ***Autumn***

- Gardens need bedcovers. When cleaning out vegetable and flower gardens, don’t leave the soil bare for the winter. Use chopped leaves as mulch or plant a “green mulch” to add nutrients and organic matter to the soil.
- Plant things! Early autumn is the best time to transplant shrubs and other perennials and to reseed lawns. Choose grass seed mixes that match your site. Consider adding a little clover seed for a free source of nitrogen fixation. Early autumn is the best time for a single dose of fertilizer for good grass root growth and a healthy lawn next spring. Slow-release or organic fertilizers stay where plants can use them and out of the local waters

and wells. Keep watering all new plantings until the ground is frozen to give the roots plenty of opportunity to grow.

- Save the leaves. Leaves have lots of landscaping uses. Make a compost pile, chop them and mulch the landscaping and garden beds, or create new beds under the trees from which they fell. If your property is just too small and the town has community composting, use it, but go back for your leaf mulch next spring.

### ***Winter***

- Rethink snow control. Sand and salt from snow removal are two major sources of water pollution they aren't exactly good for the lawn or other plants either. Use them sparingly, if you must. Consider sweeping up sand between storms to re-use, cutting down on the total amount used over the winter.
- Dream and plan. Winter is the time to plan for next spring. If one doesn't exist, create a master yard and map out what areas are doing well and what needs improvement or replacement (a new play better foundation plantings?). Read magazines and booklets, visit garden centers or call extension centers to research interesting native plants that meet your needs and are suited to your specific site characteristics. Identify any invasive landscaping plant species that are taking over the natural ecosystem around your property and learn how to control them. A little planning in the quiet of winter can prevent wasted money and stressed out plants and people the heat and hurry of summer.

Each idea here is a tiny twist on "gardening as usual". Protecting water quality and the environment just requires a little thought and a little care from individuals and provides big benefits for everyone.

(Source: Clean Water Fact Sheet, produced by Non-Point Education for Municipal Officials (NEMO) and Sea Grant Connecticut)