

Step in the Right Direction with Proper Lawn Fertilizing

Fertilizers: Too much of a good thing?

The adage “more-is-better” doesn’t apply for pesticides and fertilizers. Read the label carefully before using these products.

Applying too much, or at the wrong time, threatens pond and lakequality and wastes your money. It only takes a moderate rain to wash improperly applied pesticides and fertilizers into roadside ditches and storm sewers that drain directly to streams, ponds and lakes.

For fertilizers, early October or late May are good times to treat your lawn. Early spring applications promote more top (blade) growth than root growth and shallow roots can’t sustain lawns through dry spells or harsh winters. The best times for pesticide use vary, depending on the pest. Again, make sure you read the label first.

Leaving the grass clippings on the lawn after mowing is the best kind of fertilizer. Research shows that recycling clippings in place reduces the need for supplemental fertilizer applications by 50 to 100 per cent!

Intended vs. unintended fertilizing

Some village residents are fertilizing in an unintended way via their pets. For example, pet waste left on lawns and on the grass parkway between sidewalks and streets is a fertilizer. Many times pet waste is washed right into lakes and streams from storm sewers before it has a chance to decompose. Pet waste can also carry bacteria harmful to both aquatic life and humans who swim in the water.

Chemical fertilizers are obviously intentionally applied to lawns, whether by the residents or by lawn care companies. Most people don’t go around buying things they don’t need, yet that’s what happens with many lawn fertilizer purchases. Many pre-mixed (bagged) fertilizers contain phosphorus, a nutrient that lawns often

have in adequate supply. Ask for fertilizers without phosphorous in them (the middle number on the bag – such as 20-0-10).

Intended vs. unintended consequences

Obviously, people fertilizing the grass are intending to do something beneficial – promote a thick, healthy, green lawn. In fact, such lawns are ultimately better for water quality than those which might be thin and eroding.

But improper fertilizer mixtures (those with too much phosphorus, for example) can lead to polluted stormwater runoff. Phosphorus is an ideal food for most aquatic plants, and is the nutrient most responsible for excess weed and algae growth in surface waters. While your lawn may not need phosphorous, nuisance water weeds are craving it for a summer growth “explosion”.

Have the soil tested

The same principles apply for sound fertilizer use, whether urban or rural:

- **Know what you’re putting on (the fertilizer composition).**
- **Know what you’re putting it onto (the soil condition).**
- **Know what you want to grow (bluegrass, rye grass, gardens, etc.)**

The starting point for achieving these goals is a soil test. This can be accomplished inexpensively with the help of the County UI-Extension Office. Then, comes the commitment from you to be a good environmental citizen.

There is no deadline for taking these steps other than the fact that inaction means continuing poor water quality. Why wait?