

GREEN LAWNS - IT ISN'T JUST ABOUT THE GRASS

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There has been a trend across this country to 'go green' – to consider the environment at the grocery store, the hardware store, and even with your cell phone charger. But in some situations, you can be too green to be 'green.' Most people associate a deep green color with a healthy lawn – and largely they are right. A well-established lawn is an important part of controlling soil erosion and absorbing stormwater. However, the quest for that green lawn can have negative effects on clean water and aquatic animals and plants, as well as people and our pets.

Every spring and fall, advertisements tell us to fertilize our lawns. So we head to our nearest home improvement store, get a few bags of something, and spread it on the lawn, often without really knowing what our lawn needs and what is in the fertilizer we are applying. This costs the homeowner money, and can actually damage the lawn and pollute stormwater runoff.

There are several questions you should ask yourself about lawn fertilization. Do I need to fertilize? What do I need to fertilize with? When do I fertilize? How much fertilizer do I use? How do I safely handle fertilizer products? One thing to keep in mind is the best (and cheapest) fertilizer option is to leave your grass clippings on the lawn – Research has shown it won't promote thatch, and will return the water and nutrients to your soil.

You can begin to answer these questions by first completing a soil test. These are available most places that sell lawn and garden supplies, including Lake County Soil and Water Conservation District. The soil test tells you what nutrients are lacking in your soil and in some cases exactly how much fertilizer you should add. They will give you three numbers: N-P-K or nitrogen, phosphorous and potassium. These correspond to the numbers on the bag of fertilizer. For instance a 10-5-5 fertilizer will be 10% nitrogen, 5% phosphorous and 5% potassium. The results of your soil test will tell you the proper ratio of fertilizer for *your* soil.

Once you have your soil test results, you'll know if you need to fertilize and the amount and ratio of nutrients you need to use. Next you need to know when. Research has shown that the most effective time to fertilize the lawn is in the fall (August through November). In fact, over-application of fertilizer in the spring can set you up for lawn problems all summer long. No matter what time of year you are fertilizing, don't fertilize while it is raining! This just speeds up the rate at which the nutrients reach the stormwater system and fertilize the algae instead of your lawn. It is recommended that you use a fertilizer with 50% insoluble nitrogen, which will also help avoid water pollution.

Handling fertilizer safely is common sense. Try not to fertilize impervious surfaces, such as sidewalks or driveways. If you do get fertilizer on these surfaces, sweep it back into the lawn instead of hosing it off into the storm drain. Clean up spills, even in the lawn. This will keep you from 'burning' the lawn as well as preventing water pollution.

Why does it matter? Fertilizers in our surface waters encourage algae to grow. The algae can rob the water of oxygen, killing fish and aquatic insects, and decreasing water quality. It also makes swimming unattractive and fishing difficult. In a few cases, algae-filled water can be a human health concern as well.

For more information on using fertilizers, or to order a soil test kit, contact Lake SWCD at 440-350-2730 or via e-mail at soil @ lakecountyohio.gov. You can also go online to <http://ohioline.osu.edu/hyg-fact/4000/4006.html> for a fact sheet from OSU Extension.

