

Simple Ways to Improve Your Lawn and Water Quality at the Same Time

By: Regina (Suzy) Lucas, WV Dept. of Environmental Protection, DWWM Nonpoint Intern

When you think of spring and summer, what comes to mind? The first image that many may picture is the abundance of life; when the barren, frigid land awakens and we are surrounded by virtually every hue of green. Sounds lovely, doesn't it? But, this beauty does not come without cost or inconvenience; it's time to fill up the gas cans, start up the lawn mower, and start mowing that lawn! Or, is it?

The traditional lawn (Figure 1) is cut short, kept tidy and mowed from corner to corner. If it's so "traditional", then there shouldn't be anything wrong with this method, right? Well, the answer to this question depends on your perspective. From an environmental and economic standpoint, there are many ways to modify the "traditional lawn".



Figure 1

Part 1 of 2: Lawn Size Reduction

The more often a lawn is mowed, the more compacted the soil becomes. Compaction compromises the soil structure and its ability to absorb and filter runoff. The more compacted our lawns are, the more likely rain and snow melt from our roofs, and herbicides and fertilizers applied to our lawns will run straight into the street, down the storm drain and into the river. This non-point pollution wreaks havoc on aquatic organisms. Simply mowing less often (or not at all) and aerating your lawn can reduce compaction and increase water infiltration. This will enable the soil and organic matter to catch the pollutants and render them inert.

One way to increase the infiltration capacity of your lawn AND save time and money in yard maintenance is to reduce the size of it. There are a number of ways to do this, including planting native tree and shrub groupings in your yard. You can also buy a cheap bag of meadow-seed mix and create a flower garden that will attract butterflies and hummingbirds.



Figure 2

Planting a rain garden is an excellent way to not only reduce the amount of grass that requires mowing, but also creates a natural way to filter runoff before it reaches the storm drain. A rain garden (Figure 2) is a shallow depression near runoff sources such as a downspout or driveway that is planted with deep-rooted native plants and grasses.

A final suggestion for reducing the size of your lawn is leaving a grass buffer (Figure 3) around the edges of your yard bordering your driveway, the street, and any water-source. You may be surprised at what wild flowers may grow if you just let it go!



Figure 3

These are but a few of many ways to enhance the beauty, wildlife habitat and pollution reducing capabilities of your yard. If done properly, all of the preceding can be attractive as well as efficient ways to manage runoff from your lawn. You don't have to settle for any one of these alternatives, you can gradually reduce the size of your lawn every year by incorporating several of these practices into your lawn management practices.