

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

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Part 2 of 2: Better Mowing Practices

Keep in mind that in one hour, a lawnmower pollutes as much as driving an automobile 350 miles. Consider switching to old fashioned push mowers and hand tools to manage your lawn. Switching over to manual methods not only offers health benefits, but saves money spent on gas and machine maintenance. Manual tools also reduce the amount of chemicals used that could possibly escape into the air or run into the river.

Keeping grass fairly long (at least three inches for most species) retains grass density and helps shade out annual weeds. This shade also prevents evaporation of water from the soil, keeping your lawn greener longer. A common misconception is that if you cut it shorter, you won't have to mow it as often. To put it simply, when you cut off the majority of the shoot, it wants to rapidly regenerate what it has lost, so it pulls nutrient reserves from the root in order to grow back faster. This decreases root length, thus reducing the health and quality of your lawn. It has also been found that root growth is often directly proportional to top growth. Leaving your grass taller will likely result in a more deeply rooted lawn, further increasing infiltration.

Now to address chemical applications to your lawn: If you are worried about weeds, keep in mind that the naked eye generally will not be able to distinguish between a weed-free lawn and a lawn containing up to 15% weeds. If herbicides are used, applying spot treatments directly on the weeds you wish to eradicate will reduce the chemicals running off of your lawn, while saving some of the species that you don't want to kill. It will also save you money on herbicides.

If you are worried about the vigor of your lawn and are concerned with fertilizing, an easy and free way to retain nutrients is to allow clippings to remain on the lawn. Grass clippings are full of nutrients and readily break down. This will reduce the need for fertilizer. If you are going to use fertilizer, be sure to get your soil tested first to determine what needs to be applied and take the time to measure the area that you will be applying it to. The most common reason the people over-fertilize is many people do not bother to physically measure their yard, and overestimate its size. Fertilizing carefully and wisely will reduce excess nutrients running off of your lawn or garden.

Nutrient pollution, namely that from phosphorous and nitrogen, not only comes from agricultural runoff, but is largely contributed by urban runoff from our backyards. Excess amounts of these nutrients is one of the main causes of degradation in the Chesapeake Bay and many other watersheds.

Now that you've been given the tool of knowledge, don't you feel better about maintaining your lawn this summer? You'll save money, time and your watershed.

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- <http://www.chesapeakestormwater.net/all-things-stormwater/category/residents>
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