Medical and Environmental Management Division

Environmental Bulletin

National Aeronautics and Space Administration

March 2015

Spring Cleaning for Stormwater!

Spring has sprung, and with it, the need to clean your rain barrels, streams, and yards before the April showers come. Here is a spring cleaning to do list to maintain good stormwater health!

Tidy your rain barrels

Rain barrels are an excellent way to divert rain water from storm drains and streams. The collected rain water can also provide homeowners with a free supply of water, while lessening the amount of polluted rain water runoff. Here's a list of steps you can follow while cleaning your rain barrel:

1. Drain your rain barrel and disconnect from the downspout (if it hasn't been done already).
2. Check the gutter canal and interior of the downspout for any debris or material that could be blocking it or end up in your rain barrel. Rinse with a garden hose to make sure that it's draining properly.
3. Place a new ½ inch mesh screen at the top of the gutter downspout to filter out larger debris. Clean or replace the smaller mesh screen on your rain barrel that filters smaller debris and insects from entering your rain barrel.
4. Lay your rain barrel on its side and spray the interior with a hose to remove loose debris.
5. Use a long handled brush with a vinegar/water solution to scrub the interior of your barrel if there is evidence of algae growth. Rinse again and let dry. Be sure to keep the vinegar rinse solution away from your plants.
6. Reconnect your barrel and enjoy your free water after the next good rain!

See links at the bottom of this bulletin for instructions on how to construct your own rain barrel.

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Clean a stream!

Get involved with local organizations to clean up nearby streams and rivers! Grab a few friends and family members to pick up trash, debris, and recyclable materials that wash into waterways after rain events. It may not be the largest problem that faces the Chesapeake Bay watershed, but it's one of the easiest ones to fix. See the link at the bottom of the bulletin for more information on stream clean ups near you.

Toss your lawn fertilizers

Fertilizers may help your lawns look lush and green, but they are a major source of nutrients that pollute our waterways. Lawn fertilizers contain nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium, which contribute to eutrophication in the Chesapeake Bay. Eutrophication is a process in which algal blooms, fed by excess nutrients, change the chemistry of water bodies. Algal blooms prevent sunlight from reaching aquatic plants. The lack of sunlight causes plant death and decomposition, a process which further consumes oxygen. The lack of oxygen leads to death of other aquatic life, and on it goes! The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency states that between 40-60% of the nitrogen found in lawn fertilizer is transported to surface and groundwater. This spring, avoid using fertilizers on your lawns to help stop the cycle of eutrophication. Encourage your neighbors to do the same! Refer to the article linked at the bottom of the page for a more environmentally-beneficial approach to maintaining your lawn.

Pick up the pet waste

Now that the snow has melted, it's time to attend to the pet waste that has accumulated over the winter months in our backyards. If not properly disposed, pet waste can be picked up by free flowing rain water and washed into storm drains and nearby streams. The nutrients and bacteria found in pet waste contribute to excess nutrients in waterways just like lawn fertilizers. We know it's a dirty job, but you'll be doing your part to keep water ways healthy and clean!

Visit the websites below for more information:

http://fullserviceaquatics.com/rainwater-harvesting/your-rain-barrel-how-to-clean-and-maintain-it/
http://www.epa.gov/region3/p2/make-rainbarrel.pdf
http://www.epa.gov/reg3esd1/garden/
http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/energy-environment/wp/2015/03/11/forget-what-your-neighbors-think-stop-dousing-your-lawn-with-so-much-fertilizer/
http://cleanstream.allianceforthebay.org/