

Fall Yard Preparation and the State of the Bay

Each year around the end of September, many home owners begin their fall yard preparation. This may include reseeded, raking, dethatching, and fertilizing the lawn. The way we prepare our lawns can affect the water quality of local waterways and the Chesapeake Bay. It's possible to have a beautiful lawn and protect the Bay.

The Chesapeake Bay blue crab is a well-known symbol of the region. Unfortunately, after a couple of years of growth, its population has begun to decline again. The 2017 Blue Crab Advisory Report by the Chesapeake Bay Foundation advised jurisdictions to scale back the fall fishery season from last year's more liberal regulations. In response to this report, the commercial blue crab harvest will be cut by 10 days for the 2017 season.

There are many reasons why the crab population decreases some years. Factors include excess nutrients (particularly nitrogen and phosphorous), sediment, and trash from stormwater runoff, and temperature fluctuations in the Bay. Some of these factors are the direct result of fall yard preparation.

As homeowners in the Bay watershed, changing how we manage our lawns is perhaps the single biggest (and easiest) action we can take to improve the Bay's water quality and help the blue crabs rebound. An estimated 6.1 million homeowners in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed manage and maintain their own lawns. Following the steps below will help protect local streams and rivers, and save costs to the homeowners.





Set mower height to 3 inches or higher: The taller grass slows the rate of runoff and will produce a deeper and denser root system. Denser roots will absorb more water, reduce lawn runoff, and prevent erosion. Deeper roots have access to more water stored in the ground and can reduce irrigation need during droughts. Denser roots can also suppress weeds from growing up around them.



Retain grass clippings and chopped leaves on-site: A mulch-mower is ideal for retaining and spreading clippings on your lawn. The clippings decompose quickly, provide important nutrients for your lawn, and settle to create an organic layer on the soil that encourages stormwater infiltration. This technique can reduce or eliminate the need and cost of nitrogen fertilizers.



Skip the spring. Fertilize in fall (if at all): Lawn fertilizers contain nutrients that are good for your lawn (in moderation), but not good for water quality. Rainwater runoff from fertilized lawns gets into local waterways where it promotes algae growth. Algae blocks sunlight from reaching underwater grasses, which are a critical habitat for blue crabs and other aquatic life. Check your lawn's soil chemistry to see if it really needs fertilizer, and apply only the minimal amount needed.

Leave the leaves and grow a garden: Instead of bagging leaves in the fall, rake them into your gardens where they will decompose and enrich the soil. If you're tired of mowing the lawn, leave the leaves all winter to smother the grass. In the spring you'll have a nice new patch to plant a garden filled with native plants.

A healthy lawn can be a great place for recreation and be part of an environmentally-friendly landscape. So set up your picnic table and prepare to host your next crab feast while you enjoy the crisp, cool air of fall!

For more information on this and similar topics visit these sites:

[GSFC Environmental Bulletins](#)
[Maryland Lawn Fertilizer Law](#)
[2017 Chesapeake Bay Blue Crab Advisory Report](#)
[Lawn and Garden Care](#)