

Fall Lawn Care and Local Water Quality

Maintain Your Lawn without Contributing to Pollution of the Bay

The onset of fall in Maryland brings football, crab feasts, crisp air and seasonal lawn care, such as reseeding, raking, dethatching, and fertilizing. It's important to note that the way we care for our lawns can impact the water quality of local waterways, which includes the Chesapeake Bay.

The quantity of various lawn fertilizers applied by homeowners on nearly 1,300,000 acres of residential lawns, in conjunction with the amount that is used to maintain the estimated 1,500,000 acres of planted cropland, constitutes a major source of nutrient pollution in the Bay. Lawn fertilizer accounts for approximately 44% of all fertilizer sold in Maryland!



The Maryland Lawn Fertilizer Law established in 2013, regulates how, when, and where fertilizer can be applied in efforts to protect the Chesapeake Bay from excess nutrients introduced by non-agricultural sources, such as golf courses, parks, recreation areas, athletic fields, businesses, and residential lawns. The following application restrictions are enforced by the Maryland Lawn Fertilizer Law:

- Fertilizer cannot be applied within 15 feet of waterways or within 10 feet of waterways if a drop spreader, rotary spreader, or targeted spray liquid is used for application.
- Homeowners and professionals are not to apply fertilizers between November 15 and March 1.
- Fertilizer cannot be applied when heavy rain is predicted.
- Fertilizer may not be used to de-ice walkways and driveways.
- Phosphorus may only be applied to lawns when a soil test indicates that it is necessary or when a lawn is being established, patched, or renovated.

Homeowners in the Chesapeake Bay watershed must remain vigilant in proper lawn maintenance, as it is perhaps the most impactful action we as members of the community can take to improve the health of the Bay. Following the recommendations below will help protect local waterways, and cut costs to YOU, the homeowner!



Set mower height to 3 inches or higher: Taller grass slows the rate of runoff and results in a more deep and dense root system. Dense roots absorb more water, reduce irrigation needs, reduce lawn runoff, prevent erosion, and suppress weeds.



Retain and Reuse lawn clippings: Lawn clippings decompose quickly, providing important nutrients for your lawn, and settle to create an organic layer on the soil that encourages stormwater infiltration. Retaining lawn clippings can drastically reduce the need for nitrogen fertilizers, saving you money and decreasing pollution potential to local waterways. Win-win!



Skip the spring. Fertilize in fall (if at all): Check your lawn's soil chemistry via a soil test to ensure fertilizer is needed. If it is, apply the minimal amount necessary. Lawn fertilizers contain nutrients that are beneficial to your lawn (in moderation), but are not beneficial for water quality. Rainwater runoff from fertilized lawns can make its way into local waterways. The excess nutrients introduced by contaminated runoff promote algae growth. Algae, in turn, blocks sunlight from reaching underwater grasses, which are a critical part of the Bay's ecosystem.

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.

Visit the following websites for more information on lawn care and the MD's Lawn Fertilizer Law:

https://mda.maryland.gov/resource_conservation/Documents/fertilizerwebpage.pdf

<http://www.stormwater.allianceforthebay.org/take-action/habits-to-help/lawn-and-garden-care>

Check out some of our past environmental bulletins on similar topics here:

<https://code200-external.gsfc.nasa.gov/250/environmental/environmental-bulletins#general-env>

