A Homeowner's Guide to Lawn Care

Fertilizing Your Lawn

Over fertilization of lawns is detrimental to fish, wildlife, recreational activities, and drinking water supplies. However, the environmental impacts can be minimized through smarter application of fertilizer to meet your lawn's needs.

Stormwater Runoff and Algae

The link between lawns and water quality is stormwater runoff during precipitation events. Stormwater runs from its source over the ground directly into surface waters untreated. On its way, it captures pollutants, including excess amounts of fertilizer, and deposits these directly into surface waters. Because the most intense precipitation events occur in the spring and summer months, the excess nutrients wash into rivers and streams wasting the applied fertilizer and creating algal blooms. The increase in algae blocks out sunlight and depletes the oxygen supply in the water, creating anoxic zones, which are detrimental to fish and wildlife.

How can you help?

Choosing the appropriate time of year to fertilize your lawn is important to lessening the amount of fertilizer in runoff. According to the University of Maryland's Home and Garden Information Center, it is not necessary to fertilize your lawn in the spring or summer. This over fertilization leads to overly succulent, drought intolerant plants, while also encouraging sucking insects, aphids, etc. Overly succulent plants tend to have poor, shallow root systems. To avoid this, the best time to fertilize is in the fall. Fall fertilizing helps lawns recover from the stresses of summer foot traffic and mowing. In addition, it directs growth to the root systems, allowing them to grow deeper and ultimately more drought resistant in the summer months. This deeper root growth allows the lawn to store food through the winter and use it again in the coming spring.

Grasscycling

Another way to help curb fertilizer runoff is by allowing your lawn to recycle itself. Grasscycling involves cutting your grass and leaving the clippings on your lawn. According to the Maryland Department of the Environment, the grass particles break down at the soil surface and release nutrients. Grasscycling alone cuts the need to fertilize by up to 25%.

Soil Testing

By getting your soil tested, you can be sure to add only the nutrients your lawn needs. You can pick up a soil test kit at your local nursery and test the soil yourself for moisture, pH, nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium. Or, contact the University of Maryland Cooperative Extension (301-590-9638) to request that a soil kit be mailed to you. Take the necessary soil samples and mail those, and a fee of about $10, to the address on the form that was sent to you. The wait time to receive your results is up to two weeks. Once you have the results, you will know what nutrients your lawn needs, and you can eliminate excess fertilizer.

For more information please visit the following sites:
http://www.dnr.state.md.us/bay/tribstrat/
http:/www./hgic.umd.edu
http://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/content/dep/greenman/autumnleaves.pdf
http://www.hgic.umd.edu/documents/SelectingSoilTestLabandSoilTestChart.pdf

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