



Lawn Care Strategies Good For The Environment - And Your Pocketbook

Whether you are a do-it-yourself gardener or employ a lawn or gardening service to maintain your lawn, there are a number of tips you can follow to keep your yard healthy while protecting the environment and saving some money.

The “Take it from Maryland Farmers: Backyard Actions for a Cleaner Chesapeake Bay” campaign started by the Maryland Department of Agriculture (MDA) and the University of Maryland Cooperative Extension’s Home and Garden Information Center, provides valuable farming information that homeowners can use in caring for their lawns and gardens. By following the campaign’s best-management practices for applying nutrients, homeowners will have healthier lawns and gardens, prevent unused nutrients from running off into local waterways and the Bay, and save some money in the process.

The first step for homeowners is to have their soil tested. For about \$10, Maryland residents can send a sample of their soil to a testing lab (listed on the Maryland Cooperative Extension’s website at <http://hgic.umd.edu>). The results of the soil test will show exactly what nutrients the lawn or garden needs and what nutrients it doesn’t need. Phosphorus, for example, is a common ingredient in home fertilizers. It is, however, a nutrient that is not needed by most Maryland lawns and is a major source of pollution in the Bay. If you apply only those nutrients indicated by the soil test, you pay for only those nutrients, not for those that will run off your lawn and ultimately pollute the Bay.

Lawn care companies are required by MDA to take soil samples before applying nutrients. So, if you hire a lawn company, ask to see the results of the soil test before allowing the company to “treat” your lawn, and only agree to the application of nutrients that your lawn needs. In addition, while some fertilizer producers and lawn care companies start advertising fertilization products and services in the spring, homeowners should also wait until fall to fertilize when plants actually need the nutrients.

Homeowners can also improve their lawns by letting the grass grow to 2½ to 3½ inches and cutting frequently enough to remove only the top third of the blade. By doing this, the clippings will be short enough to leave on the lawn where they will break down and restore the soil, decreasing the need for adding nutrients.

Finally, Maryland homeowners should consider alternative plants for areas that aren’t conducive for growing grass. Other groundcovers may be better suited for holding the soil in place and that require less maintenance. For more information, consumers can contact the Home and Garden Information Center toll-free at 1-800-342-2507.

To obtain this factsheet in an alternative format, please contact the Office of Consumer Affairs at 410-313-6420(voice/relay) or email us at consumer@howardcountymd.gov.