

Fertilizer and Best Practices for Lawn Maintenance

What about fertilizing my lawn?

- Understand that lawn fertilization has a negative impact on our local waterways and the Chesapeake Bay. If you choose to fertilize, use the minimum necessary to achieve a healthy lawn.
- The best way to determine if your lawn needs fertilizer is to test the soil. One thing soil tests don't reveal is the levels of nitrogen present, because the levels are so dynamic. However, the results will come with a recommendation on nitrogen application.
- The best type of nitrogen to use is the insoluble or "slow-release" type.
- Established lawns generally don't need much phosphorous (again, a soil test can help with this).
- If making the lawn greener in color is a primary goal, iron may possibly substitute for nitrogen.
- Apply fertilizer during your lawn's growing season: fall for cool season, late spring for warm season.
- Don't apply fertilizer when your lawn is dormant in an attempt to "green it up". Dormant grass won't be able to uptake those nutrients and they will just get washed away, polluting waterways.
- Don't apply fertilizer to hardscapes - that is, roads, sidewalks or driveways. If some spills, use a sweeper or blower to push it well inside the turf area.
- Apply half the fertilizer in one direction, and then apply the rest moving in a perpendicular direction. This will help insure uniform distribution.
- Using aeration, also known as core cultivation, when applying fertilizer or lime will improve results.
- If you employ a professional, consider one with training by the state's Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR). Visit the [DCR's website](#) and click on the right hand link to "Lawn Care Providers with DCR Water Quality Agreements".

Changing fertilizer needs over time

- Lawns made with a combination of different species can be expected to require different maintenance as time passes. An example is the popular 90/10 mix of tall fescue and Kentucky bluegrass, also a common composition of a sodded lawn. The bluegrass is better at spreading and will eventually dominate the lawn. Bluegrass has a higher fertilizer requirement than tall fescue and is not as drought tolerant. Something to consider when planning and maintaining your lawn.



Protect the Bay and Fertilize Responsibly

Nutrient enrichment is a serious impediment to healthy waterways and is a cause of dead zones in the Chesapeake Bay. A significant source of this type of pollution is homeowners. The hundreds of thousands of residents that enthusiastically, but carelessly, apply fertilizer to their lawns every year in the Bay's watershed do impact it. Don't be part of the problem!

If you're going to use fertilizer:

1. Use only the minimum recommended amount for the grass species in your lawn
2. Apply only at the times of the year that it will actually benefit your lawn
3. Do not apply all the way to the edge of your lawn. This is especially true if your yard is bounded by a street / sidewalk or waterway. One good rain will wash that fertilizer right into our local streams.

Best Practices for Lawn Maintenance

Mowing

- A sharp mower blade is essential. Sharpen your blade more than once per season (if you have cool-season grasses, then the summer dormancy period is a great time to get in an additional sharpening).
- Follow recommended mowing heights; for cool season varieties, keep heights at the high end of the range during spring and summer and cut lower in the fall. For warm season grasses, do the reverse, keeping it at the low end of the range in spring and summer, and raise it in the fall.
- Never remove more than 1/3 of the length of the grass at any one mowing.
- *If* you mow regularly, allowing the clippings to stay on the lawn will benefit your lawn and will not create thatch. In fact, clippings can provide 30% of your lawn's nutritional requirements.
- Following these effective mowing practices will increase the density of your turf and reduce the chance of turf diseases!

Irrigation

- If you choose to irrigate, think deep and infrequent waterings.
- Early morning is the best time for irrigation. Irrigating in the evening is fine for water conservation, but makes the grass vulnerable to disease because the blades stay wet for so much longer.
- Your goal is to soak the roots of your grass to a depth of 4-6" underground.

- Water running off the surface is not helping your lawn (or our water supply). If runoff occurs before you've achieved the 4-6" soil moisture depth, turn it off, wait 20 minutes, and restart. If you allow your irrigation to create runoff, you are wasting our community's supply.

Soil Health

- At least once a year, apply compost on your lawn to a depth of 1/4"; follow up with aeration
 - You can rent an aerator from local equipment rental companies. Check the phone book or Google "charlottesville aerator rental".
 - Join in with some neighbors and rent it together to aerate multiple lawns in one weekend.
 - The best time to aerate depends on the type of grass you have. For cool season, aim for early fall. Late spring or early summer is the most effective time for warm season species. If you're trying to build up the soil base of an existing lawn, do this step twice per year.
- Every 3-4 years, retest your soil for the pH level, potassium and phosphorous. Follow up on the lab results by using the recommended soil and lawn amendments.



What's the benefit of adding compost?

Compost adds organic matter to the soil, which reduces compaction and increases the ability to retain water and nutrients. This makes your lawn better able to withstand drought and resist disease. Compost is also "fertilizer lite". Adding it to your soil reduces the need for synthetic fertilizer.

Compost can also be used as a mulch.

Click [here](#) to for a primer by the Extension Office on what compost is - and isn't.