

## Yard Care Tips for Water Quality

When you are thinking about spring and summer projects, consider some tips to enhance water quality and manage stormwater.

### Cleanup:

Collect and properly dispose any stray trash winter winds may have left behind. Mulch or compost fallen leaves and garden cuttings you missed in the fall so they don't get washed away during a spring storm and end up in a stream or lake where they can lower oxygen levels.

### Patch Grass:

Inspect for bare spots in your lawn and landscape beds, especially if they are located on a hillside. A thick lawn produces less runoff than a thin lawn with exposed soil. Reseed grass in mid-spring, when the threat of hard frost is past but it's still too early for most weeds to grow. Add a layer of mulch to bare planting beds anytime and consider planting them permanently with native meadow plants or groundcover before summer heat arrives.

### Test Soil:

Collect a soil sample from your lawn and have it tested so you know how much fertilizer to buy. Excess fertilizer won't improve grass growth and could pollute local waterways, including groundwater. You can have your soil tested at the USU Extension for \$30-\$45. Learn more at: <http://www.usual.usu.edu/home-soil/index>  
Soil test kits, with instructions, are also available from some commercial lawn care firms, garden centers.

### Fertilize Carefully (and only if needed):

Nitrogen is commonly the most important nutrient for good grass growth. Unfortunately, it's not easy to measure with a soil test. Instead, careful experimentation is the best way to determine how much nitrogen your lawn needs. For established lawns, applying around 2 pounds of Nitrogen per 1000 square feet of lawn, per growing season, is a starting rate that balances typical grass needs against water pollution concerns. Look for a slow-release nitrogen fertilizer because these are less likely to harm water quality. Several small fertilizer applications spread over the growing season are better than one single spring application. Apply 1/3 in mid-spring, 1/3 in late summer, and 1/3 in late fall. If your grass grows well at this level, try reducing the application rate next year.

### Mulch Clippings:

Grass clippings are a free source of nitrogen fertilizer, so let them decompose into your lawn or in your compost pile.

### Mow Sharp and High:

A sharp mower blade cut grass cleanly which improves turf health and promotes denser growth. Setting the mower deck high, 2 ½ inches or more, helps lawn grass shade-out weeds and survive dry spells reducing the need for weed control and irrigation.

### Sweep Away Clippings and Fertilizer:

Use a leaf blower or a broom to push stray grass clippings and fertilizer granules off sidewalks and driveways onto your lawn where they can do some good. Otherwise, they turn into runoff pollution when they wash into storm drains, ditches, and streams.

### Plant Trees and Shrubs:

Spring is a good time to plant native trees and shrubs which provide important water quality benefits. They reduce stormwater when their leaves intercept rainfall, increase infiltration when their roots penetrate the soil, and filter pollutants in the rich leaf litter that gradually develops beneath their canopy. If you plant them along the edges of your lawn, they also gradually shrink the total area you need to mow!

### Aerate Turf:

Grass does best, and traps more stormwater, when it grows in loose soils. Surprisingly, many home lawn soils are just the opposite. They're often compacted from years of heavy use including outdoor parties, riding mowers, small tractors, and even parked cars. If your grass struggles despite proper fertilization and watering, compaction may be the problem.

Core aeration is a process that removes finger sized soil plugs from the top layer of a lawn so air and rainwater can support better root growth. Most yard care companies offer core aeration as a service and many garden centers rent the equipment for ambitious DIY's.

**Go Big:**

Is this your year to install a major water quality practice on your yard? Possibilities include replacing turf with native meadow plants; protecting a stream or drainage swale with native trees and shrubs; capturing the discharge from your downspouts in a rain garden, or rain barrel; or redirecting any downspouts that currently spill onto sidewalks or a driveway into your lawn or planting beds so the stormwater soaks into the ground instead of running off. Finishing these projects in the spring means you get to watch them provide water quality benefits before winter returns.

Information from: Andy Yench, Penn State Extension