



Nature Notes

Tips for a Greener Community, One Yard at a Time

Spring 2010: Putting the "Green" Back in Lawn Care

Did you know that American homeowners apply 10 times more fertilizer, herbicides, and pesticides to their grass than farmers do to their crops? This results in chemically dependent lawns that negatively affect the health of people, pets, plants, and wildlife beyond the sidewalk's edge. But by adopting a common sense, environmentally savvy approach to caring for our backyards, it's easy to create a beautiful lawn that's healthier for everyone—and save money in the process!

1. **Get to Know Your Soil:** Stop dumping fertilizer and other chemicals on your lawn without first understanding what your soil really needs. For about \$10 you can purchase a soil test kit from the county's Cooperative Extension Office. Once you send it back, Penn State's Agricultural Services Lab will test your sample and mail your results. (For more information, visit www.aasl.psu.edu or call 814-863-0841.)
2. **Timing is Everything:** If you do apply fertilizer, apply it between the last lawn mowing and Thanksgiving when it will feed the grass's roots and not the leaves. Spring fertilizing encourages leaf growth and feeds weed species.
3. **Cut it Out:** Sharp mower blades slice through grass rather than pulling it by the roots, so be sure to sharpen them annually. Cutting with a sharp blade will also extend the life of your mower

because the engine will not have to work as hard. While you are at it, set the blades for a mowing height that will remove only the top one-third of the grass (about 3 inches). This higher setting will allow the grass to compete with lower growing weeds. Taller grass also shades the ground from the sun, reducing the need to water.

4. Clip and Save: Grass clippings decompose rapidly and are best left on the lawn where they can contribute nitrogen and other nutrients to the soil, thus reducing fertilizer requirements. And don't worry about the large clumps of grass that might remain after mowing. Mow a second time around, or use them to mulch around trees or in the garden. Better yet, they can be recycled into your compost pile.

5. Develop a Wilder Aesthetic: Weeds can offer unexpected benefits to your lawn's ecosystem. For example, white clover and dandelion attract aphid-hungry ladybugs and beneficial pollinators such as native bees. Additionally, chemical lawn treatment can kill between 60 and 90 percent of earthworms, which are essential to soil health. Someone once said "wildflowers are weeds with press agents" so consider accepting a little lawn imperfection for Nature's sake.

About the Center for Conservation Landowners:

Natural Lands Trust established the Center for Conservation Landowners (CCL) to share our broad-based experience in land stewardship with landowners throughout eastern Pennsylvania and southern New Jersey.

The CCL offers educational opportunities as well as a suite of consulting services to landowners and land managers interested in restoring and cultivating the rich and complex habitats native to this region.

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