



Fertilizing the **LAWN**

Test Your Soil

To help ensure you'll have a healthy lawn, test your soil before seeding or applying fertilizers. Call your Cooperative Extension Service for assistance. The results of the soil test will tell you how much fertilizer and lime your soil actually requires. These tests can also suggest additional corrective measures that will help you avoid future problems. Compost, if mixed into the soil, can provide some of the organic matter and nutrients your soil needs.

Healthy Lawns

Most people want a dense, healthy lawn. A healthy lawn not only makes your home more attractive and valuable, but it also has important environmental benefits. When coupled with trees, shrubs and groundcover, your lawn can help prevent erosion, moderate summer heat and act as a filter for rainwater from roofs, downspouts and driveways. A healthy lawn also benefits the soil by adding organic matter to improve soil structure and infiltration.

There are an estimated 20 million acres of lawn in the United States. If well-managed and planted with shrubs and groundcover, these acres can be part of a healthy environment; if fertilizers and pesticides are used indiscriminately, lawns can be a source of pollution. The basic premise of environmentally sound turfgrass management is that a vigorous stand of grass will outcompete most weeds and be able to withstand damage from fungus and insects.

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The nutrients in fertilizers can contribute to pollution problems. That's why it's important to apply fertilizer according to instructions, at the proper time and rate, to prevent other water quality problems. Avoid getting fertilizer on sidewalks and driveways, where it can easily be washed into storm drains and, eventually, into waterways.

Soil tests will show how much lime, phosphorous and potassium your fertilizer should contain. Nitrogen, a vital nutrient, should be applied at the right time and in the right amounts. The recommended nitrogen rates for your area are available from your Cooperative Extension Service.

The numbers written on the bag of fertilizer refer to the percentage (%) of plant nutrients, nitrogen, phosphates and potash. In a 100-pound bag of a 5-10-10 mixture, for instance, there are 5% (5 pounds) nitrogen, 10% (10 pounds) phosphate and 10% (10 pounds) potash. These are the active ingredients.

The wrong amount of fertilizer applied at the wrong time can cause disease and weed problems, poor root growth or excessive top growth. Incorrect fertilization can reduce your lawn's ability to withstand extremes of temperature and moisture. Use fertilizer specifically formulated for lawns. Garden fertilizers will generally not be suitable for your lawn.

Fertilizers are commonly overused products that can cause plants and algae to grow or "bloom" in waterways. That may sound nice, but fish need oxygen to live. When these algae die and decompose, oxygen is consumed, leaving little or no oxygen for aquatic habitat. This results in area fish kills. So let's not over-apply fertilizers, and never apply fertilizers before a heavy rainfall.

Lawn Pests

Study your lawn before applying any herbicides or insecticides. If you suspect a problem, ask your Cooperative Extension Service agent to help you identify the problem and determine whether special treatment is necessary. The preferred long-term strategy for a healthy lawn includes using sound management techniques, especially mowing and fertilization.

Occasionally, certain insect activity may reach a level where the use of an insecticide is considered. Careful spot application of insecticides may be necessary when high populations are discovered, if other control methods are not effective. Choose an insecticide that is least harmful to other creatures.

A Word About Lawn Services

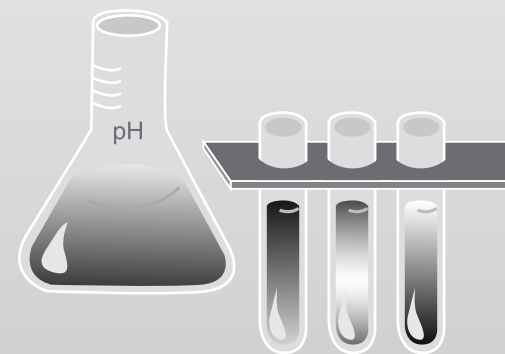
Lawn services are an increasingly popular alternative for lawn maintenance. You should know that some companies operate on a mass-production basis, with a fixed number of treatments a year in which customers are given a standard mixture of fertilizer and pesticides to deal with problems that might occur. You want a lawn company that will customize its service to your lawn's needs. Many of the lawn companies follow programs that have been prescribed by turfgrass specialists and use products you can buy and apply yourself. Misuse of these chemicals can pose health risks to people, pets and wildlife around your home. Herbicide misuse can damage susceptible plants.

You need to be sure the company you choose does a soil test before applying any fertilizer or pesticides. Some people are very concerned about the pesticides used on lawns and shrubs. Before signing a lawn care contract, make sure the company is reputable, tailors its chemical use to specific lawn needs, notifies you about the pesticides it is using, gives you a copy of the label and has adequately trained personnel.

What You Can Do

Lawns benefit the environment and add to the value and beauty of your home. Keep these things in mind when planning and maintaining your yard:

- Test your soil once a year.
- Use the right fertilizer at the right time.
- Try Integrated Pest Management to control weeds and insects (see pesticide fact sheet).
- Consider groundcover plants as well as grass.
- Don't overwater your lawn.
- Mow to the proper height. This is critical to the health of your lawn.



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