

10 Easy Steps Toward a More Sustainable Yard and Cleaner Lakes and Rivers

One of the best things you can do for your own health, the health of children and pets, and for clean streams and lakes is to reduce your use of pesticides and fertilizers and to adopt a couple of easy practices.

1. **Relax!** Learn to appreciate a little diversity in your lawn. Two or three dandelions doesn't mean you are destined for a golden carpet. Many landscapers encourage some diversity of ground cover, including clover and wood violets, because they add nitrogen, color and can provide better ground cover in areas where it's tough to grow grass.
2. **Fertilize after Memorial Day.** Most people apply more fertilizer than they need, and they tend to fertilize their lawns earlier than needed. Resolve this year to have a soil fertility test done to see what nutrients your lawn really needs. The test results will tell you the proper amounts of phosphorus, nitrogen and potassium to use. Every UW-Extension County Office has bags and instructions for testing your soil. Some will send in your samples, while others have you send it in yourself. The cost is typically \$15 per sample for lawns and gardens.

Many people fertilize earlier than necessary in the spring. If you wait until around the end of May, beginning of June, your fertilizer will be more effective for your plants and less likely to runoff. It's too late for this year, but the very best time to fertilize to get good root growth and a stronger lawn is in late fall (after Halloween when the air temperature is below 50 degrees). If you feel your lawn needs another application, the third best time is in late August.

3. **Use a no-phosphorus fertilizer.** If you didn't do a soil test, then look for low or no-phosphorus fertilizer. Phosphorus in stormwater runoff is the cause of too much weed growth and algae in our rivers and lakes. Most of the soils in the Rock River Basin are naturally high in phosphorus. You only need 20 ppm phosphorus in your soil for lawn growth, with anything over 50 ppm being excessively high. Many lawns test out at over 200ppm!

4. **Spot treat.** Stressed areas and bare patches invite weeds. If you have a few problem areas use a spray just the problem area with the appropriate herbicide. Then concentrate on aerating and reseeding them for an overall healthier lawn. There's a whole world of cool lawn tools to assist you in removing weeds by hand.

5. **Read the label.** Some products contain both chemical fertilizers and herbicides. Be sure you know what you are applying by reading the label. Don't apply herbicides or insecticides unless absolutely necessary. Also read grass seed labels – is it the right seed type for your soil and sun conditions?

6. **Mow high & water deep.** Set your mower to 3 inches. Long grass blades stay much stronger, prevent weeds from sprouting, shade the roots and prevent drying of soil, and encourage longer, healthier roots. Mow regularly and keep cutting blades sharp. To insure a sharp cut, prevent clumps and lessen the chance of disease, don't mow wet grass.

7. **Grass-cycle.** Leave clippings on the lawn as mulch. This reduces the need for nitrogen by 30 percent allowing you to reduce your fertilizer spreading by one application a year. In wet periods, or when grass is very long, compost the clippings or use as mulch instead. If pesticides were used on the lawn during the growing season, do not use the clippings to mulch vegetable gardens.

8. **Ask your landscaper about IPM.** Many forward-looking lawn care companies are offering low-chemical alternatives, like IPM (Integrated Pest Management), which is a well-known approach for working with nature to reduce the impacts of insects and weeds. However IPM means you need to accept a few weeds and a few pests, only using poisons (herbicides and pesticides) when the pest becomes a problem. Talk to your landscaper and ask them what they do to reduce pesticide use.

9. **Wash your car on the lawn or at a car wash.** When you wash your car on the driveway, all that soap, dirt, and automobile chemicals wash down into the street, into a storm drain and directly into a river or lake. By washing it on your yard the nutrients can be used by plants and the chemicals are bound up by the soil. If this isn't practical, support a local

business that is connected to the city sanitary sewer system, then your dirty water will be treated properly. Do not wash your car on the lawn if you have very sandy soil where the pollutants could leach down into the groundwater.

10. Move your down spout to the lawn.

One of the City of Beloit's goals is to infiltrate as much rain water as possible instead of letting it runoff into streams and rivers. For every square foot of roof about 15 gallons of water runs off each year. You can help improve local flooding and storm water quality by routing your downspouts to your yard. Just think of it, a simple 2,000 square foot ranch could infiltrate up to 30,000 gallons each year. Of course some of it may still runoff, so consider installing a rain barrel to capture and use some of the water or build a rain garden for each downspout to capture it all.

If you `d like to know more about things you can do around your yard and home go to the Rock River Stormwater Group page at <http://www.rockrivercoalition.org/RRB/RRSG.asp>.

Brought to you by the City of Beloit, the Rock River Stormwater Group and the University of Wisconsin-Extension Basin Program.