

How to Make Your Lawn Greener



Photo by David W. Marshall, UF-IFAS Leon County Extension: Manage your lawn prudently to make it “greener”.

Elizabeth Schmidt is a Master Gardener Volunteer with the University of Florida IFAS Extension in Leon County, <http://leon.ifas.ufl.edu>

Thursday, February 26, 2009
Tallahassee Democrat

Lawns, when properly managed, have many redeeming qualities. They absorb water, thereby helping us with stormwater problems. They have a cooling effect, moderating summer’s heat. They remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and give off oxygen, which we humans breathe. Lawns trap dust and dirt and prevent erosion, preventing sediment and attached pollutants from washing into our stormwater systems. Also, they filter rainwater contaminants and promote healthful insects and organisms.

However, we sometimes hear that lawn care has adverse effects on the environment. According to the National Wildlife Federation seventy million pounds of pesticides and three million tons of fertilizer are used annually to maintain residential lawns and gardens in the United States. According to Paul Tukey with <http://safelawns.org> the amount of natural gas used to make two hundred bags of fertilizer would heat an American home for a year. Thirty percent of water consumed on the east coast and sixty percent consumed on the west coast are used to water lawns. Daniel Potter, Entomologist with the University of Kentucky, has found that some pesticides kill sixty to ninety percent of earthworms in a lawn. Some pesticides also kill other beneficial insects and organisms, leaving lawns more susceptible to harmful insects, diseases and fungi. Pesticides are also implicated in colony collapse disorder (CCD), which has caused the disappearance of a great number of beehives. Some sources say that as many as seven million wild birds are killed each year by pesticides used by homeowners.

So, though lawns can be beneficial to our urban environments, we must be care for them in a manner that will not negate their beneficial qualities. It is extremely important that we select the best grass for the site in order to minimize problems. We should also have our soil tested periodically so that we don’t apply more fertilizer than is necessary. Soil test kits may be picked up at the University of Florida IFAS Leon County Extension Center at 615 Paul Russell Road in Tallahassee.

Don't mow your lawn too short. Mowers can be adjusted to cut the lawn at the ideal height for any given type of grass. Water deeply when you water, but don't water more often than needed. Deep watering encourages deeper roots so grass fares better in times of drought. Always water early in the morning to minimize evaporation. Avoiding excessive fertilization and irrigation, and mowing to the proper height, minimize the buildup of thatch in the lawn.

Some of you may prefer to manage your lawn organically, limiting the use of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides. According to Laurie Trenholm, Extension Turfgrass Specialist with University of Florida IFAS, benefits from using natural organics are that they become slowly available to plants over time due to breakdown by soil microorganisms. Due to the slow-release properties of these materials, natural organics are less apt than are water-soluble fertilizers to leach from the soil, to burn turfgrass, or to cause rapid growth spurts. This may reduce the ground- or surface-water contamination sometimes seen with synthetic fertilizers. For more on organic lawn care, you may find Trenholm's complete publication at <http://pinellas.ifas.ufl.edu/sustainability/pdf/ENH883.pdf>

There are a few simple guidelines to follow when managing a lawn organically. First, leave the clippings on the lawn when mowing. This decreases the amount of fertilizer needed and keeps clippings out of the landfill where they would produce methane gas. Clippings provide nutrients to the lawn and do not cause thatch.

Fertilize only once or twice a year with an organic product which contains at least half of the nitrogen in slow release form. Overuse of fertilizer, even organic fertilizer, can contribute to contamination of groundwater supplies. As an alternative to fertilizer, consider using worm tea, mushroom tea or compost tea.

Minimize use of pesticides that may kill beneficial soil organisms and insects. Corn gluten, a byproduct of corn processing, can be used to kill some weeds. Also, it adds nitrogen to the soil. You may try spot-treating some weeds using household vinegar. Milky spore may be used as a pesticide for grubs. It is not harmful to beneficial insects, birds, bees, pets or humans.

Consider purchasing an electric or battery powered lawn mower to minimize air pollution. For a very small yard, and no pollution, a manual mower is a great option.

If going organic sounds like a daunting task, just make the changes gradually. Or, even if you don't go organic, you can still be prudent in your use of fertilizer, pesticides, and water. Focus on having a healthy lawn and reduce your carbon footprint while you're at it.

###