

Becoming Better Earth Care Stewards in Montgomery, MD: Reconsidering Lawn Care

Nearly every church in our presbytery and for that matter the whole country, confronts the same balancing act that homeowners face: How can we create an attractive landscape and also be responsible stewards of our environment? In this piece the NCP Earth Care Network would like to offer a couple of recommendations – reduce the size of our lawns and reduce the amount of herbicides, fertilizers, and pesticides that we apply to them.

Reduce our lawns

Dan Zak of *The Washington Post* summarized the issue:

“We are still, largely, lawn people. The biggest irrigated crop, by area, in the United States? Not corn, or soybean, but lawn. Unproductive, ornamental lawn: around 40 million acres of it, or 2 percent of the land area of the Lower 48, according to multiple estimates cited by Garik Gutman, program manager for NASA’s Land-Cover/Land-Use Change Program.

Forty million acres: The entire state of Georgia couldn’t contain America’s total lawnage. And we pour 9 billion gallons of water on landscaping every day, according to the Environmental Protection Agency. Meanwhile the Southwest United States is enduring a [megadrought](#); the past two decades constitute its driest period since the year 800. California Gov. Gavin Newsom declared a drought state of emergency in October. In a world thirsty for water, lawns are a sneaky siphon.”

Dan Zak, “There’s a Water Crisis, so why do we still have lawns?” *The Washington Post*, 8/24/2022 (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2022/08/24/lawns-and-replacement/>)

We can reduce the size of our lawns and still have attractive grounds by opting for native plants. This will support native insects, birds, and other animals. So, what native plants might you consider? See this brochure from Fairfax County.

<https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/soil-water-conservation/native-plants>

Reducing the amount of lawn chemicals

The Maryland Lawn Fertilizer Law limits the amount of nutrients that can be applied to lawns or turf and restricts phosphorus content in lawn fertilizer. The goal is to help homeowners and lawn care professionals maintain healthy lawns without applying unnecessary amounts of nitrogen and phosphorus. Homeowners and do-it-yourselfers are required to obey fertilizer application restrictions, use best management practices when applying fertilizer, observe fertilizer blackout dates and follow University of Maryland recommendations when fertilizing lawns. [Click here](#) for more information.

- A single fertilizer application may not exceed 0.9-pound total N per 1,000 sq ft which can include no more than 0.7 pound of soluble N per 1,000 sq ft
- Phosphorus may only be applied when a soil test indicates that it is needed or when a lawn is being established, patched or renovated
- Don't use fertilizer to de-ice walkways and driveways
- Clean up fertilizer spills
- Keep fertilizer 10 to 15 feet from waterways
- Do not fertilize lawns if heavy rain is predicted or the ground is frozen
- Do not apply lawn fertilizer between November 16 and March 1
- Enhanced efficiency controlled release products may be applied at no more than 2.5 pounds per year, with a maximum monthly release rate of 0.7 pound of N per 1,000 sq ft
- When hiring lawn care professionals, hire only certified professionals to fertilize lawns

This law helps protect the Chesapeake Bay from excess nutrients entering its waters from urban sources, including golf courses, parks, recreation areas, businesses and thousands of lawns. Nutrients, primarily nitrogen and phosphorus, are key ingredients in lawn fertilizer. When it rains, unused nutrients can wash into nearby storm drains and streams that empty into the Chesapeake Bay. Once in our waterways, these nutrients contribute to the growth of algae blooms that block sunlight from reaching Bay grasses, rob the water of oxygen and threaten underwater life. [Turfgrass Nutrient Management Program \(maryland.gov\)](https://www.maryland.gov/ourdivisions/departmentoftheenvironment/programs/turfgrass-nutrient-management-program/)

The Pesticide Law in Montgomery County restricts the use of certain pesticides on private lawns, playgrounds, mulched recreation areas, and childcare facilities. Most synthetic pesticides are not allowed to treat pests in lawns. Only organic or minimum-risk pesticides are allowed. <https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/lawns/law/>

It is recommended to prevent weeds and pests by practicing organic lawn care, which should not require the use of any chemicals.

TIPS FOR MANAGING LAWNS ORGANICALLY

- Mow grass high (keep at least 3" tall)
- Leave grass clippings on the lawn to recycle nutrients
- Only water during dry spells
- Add materials, such as compost, to support healthy soil biology
- Replace some lawn with native plants
- Overseed every fall for a dense lawn, and aerate compact soils
- Get help from an experienced organic lawn care provider
- Keep mower blades sharp.
- Use an electric or manual mower for reduced emissions and noise, and for energy efficiency.
- Use a mulching mower.
- Mulch leaves that fall on the lawn, rather than removing them.
- Do not use Weed & Feed products. These contain both a fertilizer and a pesticide and are NOT allowed for use under County law on lawns.
- Use only the following organic pesticides (Go to MontgomeryCountyMD.gov/Lawns to check for allowed products):

- Products with an EPA label only if it is also labeled for organic use by the USDA
- Organic pesticides labeled by OMRI
- Organic pesticides labeled “Exempt from EPA labeling under FIFRA 25(b)” are designated a “minimum risk” pesticide by the EPA and have no EPA label or numbers
- USDA certified organic products labeled “For Organic Gardening”