

Keeping a Healthy Lawn

In the pursuit of maintaining green, weed-free lawns, some homeowners may over-apply fertilizer to encourage vigorous growth and pesticides to control weeds, insects, and diseases. According to the Maryland Department of Agriculture, there are over 685,000 acres of residential lawns statewide. Of that, 675,000 acres surround single-family homes and the remaining 10,000 acres are townhouse yards. If everyone over-fertilizes their lawn by just one pound, a huge amount of excess nutrients ends up in groundwater, streams, rivers, reservoirs and the Chesapeake Bay. Excessive nutrients cause serious water quality problems.

Soil fertility should be tested before seeding a new lawn and every 3 years for an established lawn to determine the amount of fertilizer and lime needed. Do-It-Yourself kits can be used, or for more accurate results contact a local soil testing laboratory.

Before establishing a lawn, consider whether turf grass is suitable. Heavily shaded or severely sloped areas may not provide the conditions needed for turf, leading to erosion, pest, and nutritional problems. Cecil County is located in planting zone 7. Fescue and zoysia are drought resistant grasses that are recommended for Cecil County. Warm-season grasses turn brown when temperatures get cold and will turn green again when temperatures reach 70 degrees. Cool-season grasses tend to turn brown in drought conditions, but turn green again when water is available.



Fertilizer-free and pesticide-free lawns are the best choice for the environment. Both time and money can be saved by reducing the frequency of fertilizing and applying pesticides. When fertilizers and pesticides are needed, experts recommend application for cool season lawns in early fall. Slow release fertilizers and low or no phosphorus fertilizers are optimal to promote a healthy environment. New lawns may require large amounts of phosphorus, but once established, require much less. Be sure not to over fertilize the lawn.

Lawn Care Tips

- Ground covers or planting islands (areas with groupings of trees, shrubs and flowers) may be better suited for problem areas than turf.
- It is better to spread two or three smaller applications of fertilizers spaced a month apart (early September, October, and November), than one larger application.
- Do not apply fertilizer to frozen ground or dormant turf (especially when cool season grasses turn brown during summer droughts).
- Apply only the recommended amounts of fertilizer. Use no more than one pound of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet of lawn per application. Keep fertilizer off of paved areas by sweeping it back onto the grass.
- Mow at an appropriate height to maintain a healthy lawn. Mowing too short may reduce root and stem development and encourage weed problems. The proper mowing height helps to reduce weeds by as much as 50-80%. Maintaining the grass height at 2 ½ inches, or taller, helps keep the soil cool and provides drought protection.
- Using a mulching blade on the lawn mower will keep the grass clippings on the lawn, which helps naturally fertilize the lawn.
- If you must water your lawn, water slowly in order to wet the soil to a depth of 4"-6". Prevent runoff from leaving your property. Early morning is the best time for watering. Light, frequent watering or watering in the evening can actually damage your lawn.

Where To Get Help for lawn care information

- Maryland Cooperative Extension Lawn and Landscaping;
http://extension.umd.edu/sites/default/files/_docs/programs/bay-wise/FS702-LawnsAndChesapeakeBay.pdf
- Use Fertilizers Wisely; http://www.mda.maryland.gov/resource_conservation/Documents/Tip2.pdf
- Maryland Cooperative Extension Cecil County Office; 410-996-5280;
<https://extension.umd.edu/cecil-county>
- USDA Planting Zones for Maryland;
<http://www.usna.usda.gov/Hardzone/hzm-ne1.html>
- Chesapeake Bay Foundation: Bay Friendly Lawn Care;
<http://chesapeakestormwater.net/be-bay-friendly/bay-friendly-lawn-care/>
- Choosing a Lawn Care Service That's Right for You and the Chesapeake Bay; http://www.mda.maryland.gov/resource_conservation/Documents/LawnCareService.pdf