Marion County SWCD's Considering Conservation Series

What to do about...

Lawn Care

Lawns are one of our most expensive and time consuming home items. Between the mowing and the fertilizing and the weed preventatives, there goes a lot of time and money. But that's not the whole story. Not often considered is the cost to the environment. Fertilizers and herbicides can be detrimental to the ecology and water quality of the county with their associated hidden costs. For most of us, we also pay the extra cost of cleaning these chemicals out of our drinking water.

Changing our lawn care habits can make improvements to the environment and our wallets. Many homeowners apply chemicals to their lawns 6 or more times during the growing season. Applications are made habitually, uniformly across the entire lawn and without knowledge of the actual needs of the grass. Improving our understanding of the needs of our soil and grass can help us make better decisions.

Basic lawn care usually involves fertilization – adding nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P) and potassium (K). Nitrogen is important to plant growth. It is water soluble and additional amounts are usually needed each year, especially since most neighborhood lawns have been planted in poor subsoil. Phosphorus is critical for new seedlings but their levels are stable in the soil and most soils have an adequate amount. Potassium levels in soil are relatively stable and it is not considered a major water quality concern.

The most important improvement you can make to your lawn care regiment is to take soil samples each year to determine the amount and type of fertilizer needed. Consider using slow release forms of nitrogen. Shady areas will need less nitrogen and if you use return lawn clipping to your yard you can generally lower the amount of N needed by 1 pound per 1,000 sq. feet. Also adjusting the timing of adding nitrogen to late fall and delaying the spring application will be better for your grass without elevating the risk to water quality.

Phosphorus is a major water quality concern. It binds to soil particles and when it enters surface water causes excessive algae growth. If your soil test finds your soil has an adequate amount of P, use a phosphorus free fertilizer (zero is the middle number).

Be sure to sweep any fertilizer spills off of sidewalks and driveways back onto the yard. Create buffer areas along pond and stream edges where you will not fertilize at all. These areas are especially beneficial when planted with deep rooted native plants. Mowing lawns at a higher level allows grass to thrive, crowding out much of the weeds and reducing the amount of herbicides needed to just spot treatments.

Much good information on lawn care for water quality is now available. Contact the SWCD for more information. Soil testing hints and a list of labs can be found on our website.

For more information contact the Marion County Soil & Water Conservation District

(317) 786-1776 **www.marionswcd.org**