



Rethinking Yard Care

Guide No. 8



Why be concerned?



The amount of space taken up by lawns in the U.S. is about the size of Pennsylvania. Mowed, manicured and irrigated lawns, unlike native prairies, are not natural. This is why it takes so much energy to keep them alive.

Yard care may be a very rewarding pastime for some, but an unwanted chore for others. In addition to the time commitment, many homeowners frequently rely on chemical products to maintain their lawns and grounds. These products can work well if applied correctly, but too much can be unsafe for children, animals, and fish.

Reducing lawn size, using lawn care products carefully, and conserving water will help maintain the look, while promoting a safe and healthy environment.

The Natural Processes

Ever since the lawnmower was invented, lawns have become the ‘accepted look’ that says a neighborhood is safe, tidy and cared for. However, there are many important reasons to have as small a mowed lawn as possible.

An estimated 70 percent of pesticide use in the United States occurs on our nation’s lawns. Lawns provide little wildlife benefit, are a source of water pollution (erosion and chemicals), and can be visually bland.

Manicured, irrigated, and vitamin enriched lawns do not take advantage of the natural processes that we associate with the great outdoors. In nature, soil organisms decompose leaves and vegetation; plants then recycle these nutrients to produce new growth. Over time, leaf litter builds up in the top layer of soil. This organic matter moderates temperature, retains water and nutrients more efficiently, and reduces polluted runoff.

We cannot expect these processes to be duplicated everywhere, but if you enjoy working outdoors, there are many ways to reintroduce nature’s magic into to your landscape.

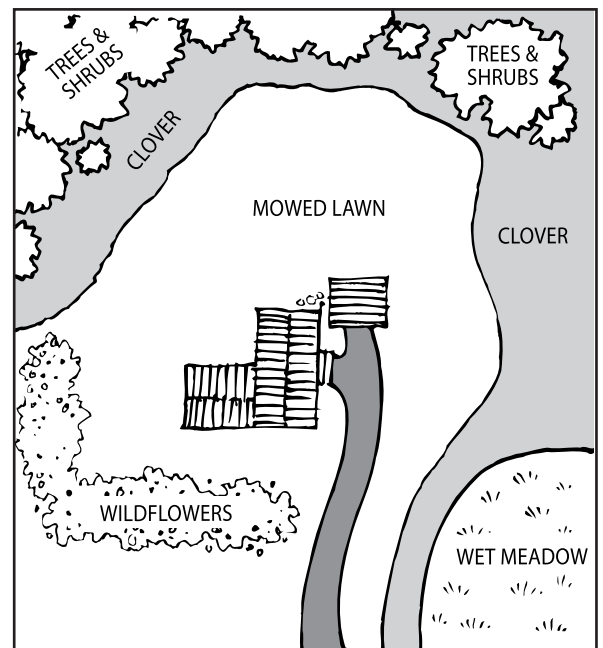
Does your lawn have an area that often seems wet? Often these spots can be restored to a wet meadow or wildlife pond. Throughout the yard, landscaping that includes shrubs, wildflowers, and prairie grasses can add beauty and improve water quality. This is especially important for waterfront property.

If you have ‘wild’ areas on your property, consider maintaining this natural state instead of converting them to lawn. Natural landscapes often require less time and money than formal landscapes.

How much lawn you need depends on the size, shape, and uses of your property. If you need space for playing ball or exercising a dog, a long rectangular area may suffice. However, if the only activity on portions of your lawn is mowing, consider converting those areas to wildflowers, or locally occurring plants, which are better rooted in the natural world.

(Continued on other side)

Incorporating Natural Areas in Your Yard



(Continued from other side)

Beware of the "Dangerous Diet"!

Use of yard care chemicals has become so routine that a "healthy respect" for their proper application has diminished. Even well-intentioned use of fertilizer and pesticides can do more harm than good.

When confronted by lengthy directions and warnings in fine print, it's tempting to skip the instructions on chemical labels and just "get the job done." Remember the suffix "icide" means "to kill." While more target-specific and improved products are continually developed, the fact remains that pesticides sometimes kill things other than their targets.

When using pesticides, a careful diagnosis of the problem and conservative application procedures are critical. Diagnose the problem, follow application directions and resist the urge for a quick chemical solution. The key is an understanding of the targeted pests and the chemicals you plan to use. If you need help, there are several sources of information in the "Getting Help" section. Also, consider the use of more natural alternatives. Informed homeowners can select safe and reliable chemical treatments for specific yard care problems.



TIPS FOR A SAFER LAWN

1. Test Soil Compaction - Compacted soils are unhealthy for plants and can generate as much runoff as pavement. Try sinking a screwdriver into the ground. If it doesn't penetrate easily, consider aerating your lawn.

2. Leave Grass Clippings on the Lawn - Clippings left on the lawn provide important moisture and nutrients. Up to half the nitrogen needed by your lawn can actually be provided by these clippings. If your lawn grows quickly, consider collecting some of the clippings to use as mulch or in compost.

3. Compost Yard Waste - Composting keeps yard waste and other decomposable materials out of landfills. Composting also creates a rich material that can be used in flowerbeds or on the lawn to aid in growth.

4. Fertilizers and Pesticides

- Before applying any fertilizer to your lawn, have your soil tested by Washtenaw County MSU Extension or your landscape contractor. Based on the results, you will know the exact type and amount of fertilizer your soil needs.
- Knowing the size of your lawn will help in correctly applying the recommended amount of fertilizer.
- One Fall application of low phosphorus fertilizer is adequate to promote a green flush next spring.
- Slow release fertilizers will last longer and reduce polluted runoff. Look for Water Insoluble Nitrates (WIN) in the list of ingredients.
- Buy only what you need. Time and freezing garage temperatures can render stored products less effective without reducing their hazardous qualities. As yard care chemicals pile up, proper storage and disposal can be difficult. Curious children and pets may also be at risk.
- Chemicals spilled on pavement during mixing and loading will wash off into local waterways with the next rainstorm. Mixing and loading away from pavement greatly reduces this risk.
- Many of the rates recommended on labels are generous and designed so that products remain effective under less optimal conditions. Do not exceed recommended application rates.
- Under-application of yard care chemicals can also create problems. Remember that pest populations subjected to non-lethal doses may begin to develop resistance to the chemicals designed to kill them.
- Do not apply chemicals within the last few feet of grass along a driveway, sidewalk or swale. The next rainfall will wash a good portion of these pellets into the nearest creek.