



# Lawns and Landscapes in Your Watershed

Have you ever wondered if the fertilizers, pesticides, and extra water you use for your yard are harmful to your family or your environment? Would you like an attractive yard without spending so much time and money? This guide offers tips and resources to help you design and care for your landscape, while protecting the health of your family and protecting water resources in your watershed.

## How Does Lawncare Affect You and Your Environment?

Your property is part of a **watershed**, an area of land from which all the surface water and groundwater flows from higher elevations downhill to a common body of water. No matter how far you live from a body of water, your property is part of a watershed. Therefore, how you care for your yard can affect both water quality and water supply.

It's hard to imagine that a green, flourishing lawn could pose a threat to the environment. However, the fertilizers and pesticides you apply to your lawn are potential pollutants. If you improperly or excessively apply these chemicals, they can wash off your property and end up in ponds, bays, reservoirs, and other waters. Excess nitrogen and phosphorous, two key ingredients in fertilizer, may cause these waters to become overgrown with unsightly and foul-smelling algae and weeds. This overgrowth may result in fish kills, the pollution of shellfish beds and swimming beaches, and the lowering of waterfront property value. In addition, pesticides and nitrogen, which can dissolve in water, have the potential to contaminate groundwater – a source of drinking water.

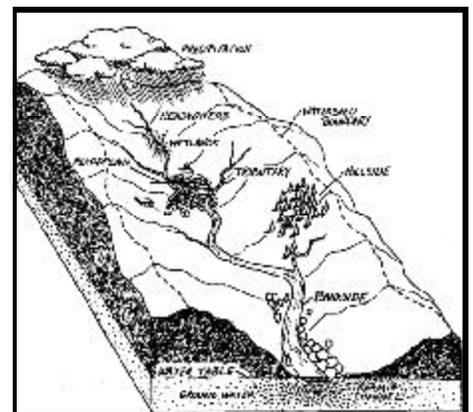
### Nonpoint Source Pollution

You may have heard of these water quality problems – they are the result of **nonpoint source pollution**. Nonpoint source pollution comes from our use of the land and is the leading cause of water quality problems in Massachusetts. This pollution occurs when rainwater, snowmelt, or irrigation runs over or filters into the land, picking up pollutants and depositing them into rivers, lakes, coastal waters, or groundwater. Pesticides and fertilizers that you apply to your lawn and soil washing off your lawn are all potential nonpoint source pollutants. These pollutants don't observe property lines; they go wherever the water takes them.

Fertilizers and pesticides are not the only problems with typical lawncare. Watering your lawn helps move pollutants downslope to water bodies and unnecessarily drains your drinking water supply and rivers and ponds during the drier summer months. These water impacts affect you and your environment. The summer is a critical period for fish; stream flow and lake levels are at their lowest and water temperatures are at their highest. Drought impacts are often intensified by the watering of lawns. During the 1995 drought, parts of the Ipswich River, which serves as a public water source among other uses, went

completely dry, killing many fish. In recent years, many communities, such as Holliston and Braintree, have imposed outdoor water bans due to water shortages. Watering lawns unnecessarily contributes to this annual water supply problem.

It is possible to have a healthy, safe – and attractive – yard and to protect water quality and supply at the same time. Follow this guide for natural landscape care and you can help keep your property, family, and watershed healthy.



**Watershed:** an area of land from which all the surface water and groundwater flows from higher elevations downhill to a common body of water.

*A publication of the MA Department of Environmental Protection, One Winter Street, Boston, MA 02108*



# Designing Your Landscape

## Understanding the Natural Conditions of Your Property

By first determining the natural conditions of your property, you can choose plantings that are adapted to your soil, moisture levels, and amount of sunlight. This planning can reduce or eliminate the need for lime, fertilizers, and irrigation.

 Have your soil tested for nutrient content and phosphorus (pH) at the University of Massachusetts Soil Testing Laboratory for under \$10. Call 413/545-2311 for more information and find out what your yard actually needs.

 Determine which areas of your property tend to be dry or wet and which areas are sunny or shady. You may want to draw a simple map that describes the conditions on your property to help you plan your landscape and choose appropriate plantings.

## Choosing Grasses and Other Plants

 Select plants according to your property's natural conditions and group plants with similar needs to minimize unnecessary watering and fertilization.

 Select a grass variety that is best suited to the conditions on your property and in New England. In most areas of Massachusetts, tall fescue is the most suitable grass. It is drought tolerant, resistant to disease and pests, and can often survive New England winters.

 For shady and less fertile areas, fine fescues such as red fescue are a good choice.

 Use a blend of grass seeds to make your lawn more tolerant of pests and resistant to disease.

## Using Alternatives to Grass

Using alternatives to grass, such as ground cover and flowering plants, can reduce mowing time, save money, and make your property attractive and unique. Most of these suggested plants can be found at local lawn and garden stores.

 On steep slopes or in inaccessible areas, plant ground cover such as Foam Flower, Goldenstar, or Wild Ginger. All these plants are suited to the Massachusetts climate and need little or no added water. Trees and shrubbery with mulch underneath can provide shade, prevent evaporation, and control weeds.

*See page 4*

## Planting Natural Pollution Barriers

Vegetative strips planted in areas where water drains from your property, no matter how far from a body of water, can effectively intercept and filter many of the pollutants in runoff. If you live on the banks of a river or the shoreline of a lake or bay, a vegetative buffer is particularly important to prevent runoff from going directly into these waters. Protecting water bodies with vegetative buffer zones will help maintain water quality, recreational resources, wildlife habitat, and property value.

 Plant a combination of trees, shrubs, and ground cover in areas where water drains from your property. These plants will intercept and filter excess fertilizers or pesticides and eroded soil before they wash into the pond, lake, or bay. Recommended trees are Cottonwood, Black Willow, Silver Maple, and Red Maple. Recommended shrubs include Silky Dogwood, Winter Berry, Elder Berry, and High Bush Blueberry.

 Make your buffer zone as wide as possible. Don't be afraid of overdoing it. The recommended width for an effective vegetative buffer zone is 100 feet.

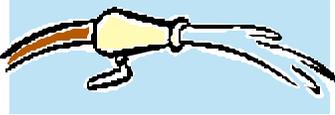




# Caring for Your Landscape

## Watering Your Landscape

Most people do not realize that if they choose suitable grasses and other plants, watering in the Northeast is usually unnecessary. It is natural for your grass to turn yellowish during hot, dry spells. This is a normal state called dormancy, which a healthy lawn can withstand. Your grass will regain its vibrancy with the next rainfall. If you choose to water your lawn:

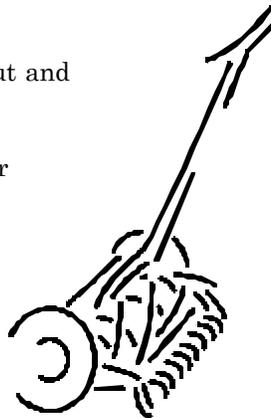


- ✎ Observe local outdoor water bans.
- ✎ Place sprinklers in areas where you won't be wastefully watering your sidewalk or driveway.
- ✎ Water in the early morning to prevent the growth of fungi and minimize evaporation.
- ✎ Water deeply and infrequently. Deeper watering encourages the roots of grass to grow long and healthy, allowing your lawn to survive drier periods and saving money on your water bill.
- ✎ Most lawns need less than one inch of water to saturate grass roots 4-6 inches in length. Place an empty coffee can in the watering area and measure the amount of water in the can to determine when you have watered enough.

## Mowing Your Lawn

Proper mowing is one of the most important ways to maintain a healthy lawn.

- ✎ Mow only when the grass is dry to get a clean cut and minimize the spread of disease.
- ✎ Mow fescues to a height of 2-3 inches. The longer the grass, the more water is retained and the longer the roots of your lawn will be, making it stronger and more tolerant. Keeping your grass longer also may allow it to outcompete weeds, reducing the need for herbicides.
- ✎ Mow frequently, cutting no more than a third of the height of the grass at a time. Cutting more grass than this at one time and mowing infrequently can damage your grass.



*See page 4*

## Fertilizing Your Landscape

Grass clippings contain high amounts of nitrogen, a key ingredient in fertilizer. Use your grass clippings by leaving them on your lawn. It may be all the fertilizer you need, and it will save you time and money. Clippings are approximately 85 percent water, so they usually decompose within a week and will not smother your lawn. The easiest and most common way to spread clippings is called mulching; mulching mowers cut the grass into smaller pieces and then blow them back onto your lawn.

If your soil test and the plants you have chosen demand that you apply fertilizer in addition to your clippings:

- ✎ Use organic or slow-release fertilizers; these types are less likely to wash off your lawn than inorganic or fast-release fertilizers.
- ✎ Fertilize in the fall, but beware of weather patterns. Although some rainfall is helpful in distributing fertilizer, a heavy downpour will wash the fertilizer off your lawn and into nearby waters.
- ✎ Be careful not to apply more than the recommended amount of fertilizer. Too much fertilizer can burn the grass, damage the soil, and attract pests.



# Caring for Your Landscape

## Protecting Your Lawn and Landscape from Pests

Although pesticides appear to be a good solution for lawn and garden pests, there are drawbacks to pesticide use for you, your landscape, and the environment. Pesticides, by definition, are toxic substances which may pose risks to people, pets, and wildlife. Some chemicals in pesticides remain potent and rain may transport them from your lawn to areas where they may have harmful effects.

The best defense against pests is maintaining a healthy lawn naturally, using Integrated Pest Management (IPM). IPM promotes a variety of non-chemical (biological and mechanical) techniques for pest control and uses chemical controls selectively, only when necessary. There are many alternatives to pesticide use, such as beneficial insects like ladybugs and spiders, beneficial parasites like nematodes, and certain beneficial bacteria.

Grubs are the most common and difficult pest in Massachusetts. These beetle larvae feed on grass roots, killing large areas of turf in short periods of time and attracting animals such as skunks and moles

that feed on grubs. One option in dealing with grubs is to plant a ground cover other than grass that will not perpetuate a grub problem. The most effective biological alternatives to pesticide use for grubs are two beneficial nematodes - *Heterorhabditis bacteriophora* and *Steinernema glaseri*. The use of these microscopic worm-like organisms is becoming more widespread and they can be found in many lawncare stores.

To specifically control Japanese beetle grubs (white grubs), introduce a disease that kills these pests, called milky spore disease. Milky spore disease (commercially named Doom, Grub Attack, or Grub Killer) spreads slowly through the soil,

possibly taking a season to bring the grub level down to one that the turf can handle, but the disease will continue to kill grubs for years.

To find out more about alternatives to pesticides, call the Massachusetts Department of Food and Agriculture at 617/727-3020, refer to the Department's booklet, *A Homeowner's Guide to Environmentally Sound Lawncare: Maintaining a Healthy Lawn the IPM Way (1997)*, or contact the agencies and organizations listed on page 5.

If you decide to use a pesticide, choose one that is selective for a specific pest. Many pesticides are non-selective and may kill desirable insects and plants. Whether you choose chemical pesticides or biological alternatives, carefully follow the product instructions.

*Massachusetts' most common lawn pest, the white grub*



*Graphic courtesy of MA Dept. of Food and Agriculture*

## Mowing Your Lawn

*Continued from page 3*

 Sharpen your mower blade to avoid damaging grass blades. Mower blades should be sharpened once a year and touched up after every 10 hours of mowing.

 Do not dispose of grass clippings in nearby waters. The clippings will break down and encourage the growth of algae which depletes the oxygen in water and impacts fish and other aquatic species. If you choose not to leave your clippings on your lawn, compost them.

## Using Alternatives to Grass

*Continued from page 2*

 Trees such as Sugar Maples, Oaks, and Basswoods are well adapted to New England. Some examples of shrubbery that need little or no added water are Shad Bush and Sweet Pepper Bush.

 Using native flowering plants in a meadow-like design is a good alternative in areas where shrubs or ground cover are not suitable. Some examples of drought resistant flowers are Asters, Butterfly Weeds, and False Indigos.



# Additional Resources

The following agencies and organizations can provide information on a variety of topics related to effective and environmentally responsible lawn and landscape care:

## **Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection, Division of Watershed Management**

One Winter Street  
Boston, MA 02108  
617/292-5500

Contact person: Laura Kursman  
[www.state.ma.us/dep](http://www.state.ma.us/dep)

## **Massachusetts Department of Food and Agriculture**

Pesticide Bureau  
100 Cambridge Street  
Boston, MA 02202  
617/727-3020  
[www.massgrown.org/index.html](http://www.massgrown.org/index.html)

## **Soil Testing Laboratory**

West Experiment Station  
University of Massachusetts  
Amherst, MA 01003-2082  
413/545-2311  
[www.umass.edu/umext/programs/agro](http://www.umass.edu/umext/programs/agro)

## **National Pesticide Telecommunications Network**

800/858-7378  
EPA-sponsored hotline  
[www.epa.gov](http://www.epa.gov)

## **Massachusetts Audubon Society**

Natural History Helpline:  
781/259-9506, ext. 7416  
[www.massaudubon.org](http://www.massaudubon.org)

## **Massachusetts Horticultural Society**

Garden line: 781/235-2116  
Monday, Wednesday, Friday:  
10am - 2pm  
[www.masshort.org](http://www.masshort.org)

## **Master Gardener Association of Western Massachusetts**

*Berkshire Botanic Garden, Lenox*  
413/298-5355

Tuesday only: 9am-1pm, May 1-October 1

*Smith Greenhouse, Amherst*  
413/585-2748

Saturday only: 9am-1pm, May 1-October 1

## **New England Wild Flower Society**

180 Hemenway Road  
Framingham, MA 01701-2699  
508/877-7630  
[www.ultranet.com/~newfs/newfs.html](http://www.ultranet.com/~newfs/newfs.html)

## **Tower Hill Botanic Garden, Worcester County Horticultural Society**

11 French Drive, POB 598  
Boylston, MA 01505-0598  
508/869-6111, ext. 10  
Wednesday only: 2-4pm  
[www.towerhillbg.org](http://www.towerhillbg.org)

## **Massachusetts Watershed Coalition**

POB 577  
Leominster, MA 01453  
508/534-0379

## **Congress of Lakes and Ponds**

135 Washington Street  
Holliston, MA 01746  
508/429-5085

## **Committee for Alternatives to Pesticides GreenCAP**

Green Decade Coalition/Newton  
474 Centre Street  
Newton, Massachusetts 02158  
617/965-1995  
(a community organization)

## Recommended Publications

The following documents contain additional information about lawn and landscape care in your watershed:



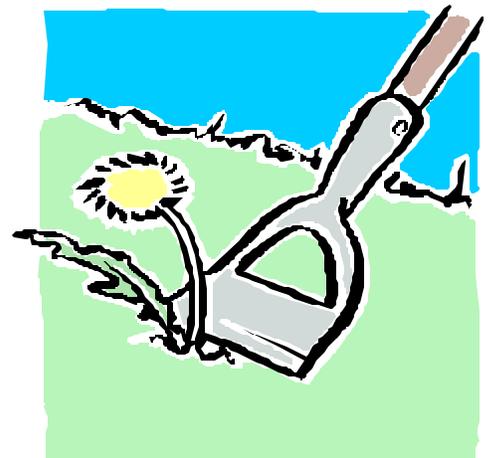
“Fact Sheet #8: Functions of Riparian Areas for Pollution Prevention,” MA Dept. of Fisheries, Wildlife, and Environmental Law Enforcement, Riverways Program, 1992. To obtain, call 617/727-9800.



“Don’t Trash Grass,” MA Dept. of Environmental Protection, Division of Solid Waste Management, 1993. Available on the DEP web site: [www.state.ma.us/dep](http://www.state.ma.us/dep).



“A Homeowner’s Guide to Environmentally Sound Lawncare: Maintaining a Healthy Lawn the IPM Way,” MA Dept. of Food and Agriculture, Pesticide Bureau, 1997. To obtain, call 617/727-3020.





# Lawns and Landscapes in Your Watershed

How to improve water quality, preserve water supply, and save time and money on your yard

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**The Commonwealth of Massachusetts**  
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**Executive Office of Environmental Affairs**  
Trudy Coxe, Secretary

**Department of Environmental Protection**  
David B. Struhs, Commissioner

**Bureau of Resource Protection**  
Arleen O'Donnell, Assistant Commissioner

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