

10 Tips for a Healthy, Pesticide-free Lawn

Beautiful, green, manicured lawns are the envy of the neighborhood, they show off your house, and are pleasing to play on - unless the beauty is only skin deep. The chemicals often used to keep lawns green can actually weaken your lawn and harm the environment. Some have been associated with cancer or reproductive effects in children and pets.

Follow these 10 Tips for a healthy, pesticide-free lawn:

1. Check your soil.

Take a shovel and dig down. If you have 6" or more of topsoil, you're in great shape. If you have less than 4", consider beginning a routine of adding ½" compost annually. It's hard to have a nice lawn without enough soil. Get a soil test. Send a sample of your soil to the UMass Amherst Soil Testing Lab, <http://soiltest.umass.edu/ordering-information>. Follow their recommendations for soil amendments such as lime, organic matter, and fertilizer.



2. Just say no to pesticides.

Caring for your lawn without synthetic chemicals is easy and doesn't have to be costly. You'll be pleased with the results, especially if you aren't in a big hurry to achieve that "golf course" look, or if you enjoy the pleasant naturalized color and texture variation that comes with a healthy mixture of plants.

3. Read the label.

Before you purchase a lawn product, read the whole label. The label contains ingredient lists, safety and handling information, and instructions for use and disposal. If the product says it is a hazard to humans or the environment, it is best to avoid it.

4. Mow high.

Set your mower to 2"-3". This step alone is as effective as herbicides in eliminating most unwanted weed plants. Save time, money, and landfill space by leaving the clippings on the lawn as fertilizer.



5. Water infrequently but deeply.

You may not need to water at all. If you do, water 1" (in a rain gauge), no more than once per week. Water in the early morning only. This encourages deep grass roots, and discourages fungus and weed germination. Cut back further in August when drinking water may be in short supply and your turf grass can go dormant.

6. Feed your lawn only lightly.

Use organic compost or organic fertilizer. Do this only in spring or early fall, otherwise you'll be feeding your annual weeds.

7. Save money by working on only problem areas.

For bare spots, top dress with ½" of compost, then overseed in early spring. Overseed thin areas again in the fall. Use a mix of grasses, including fescue. Aerate compacted areas.

8. Eliminate grubs with nematodes.

Grub problems are rare in organic lawns, possibly due to high biological activity and plant diversity in the soil. However, if you do have an outbreak with damage (more than 10 grubs per square foot), you can kill grubs with beneficial nematodes. Follow directions carefully as these microscopic worms need to be kept cool and moist. The bacterium Milky Spore is an effective control of Japanese beetle grubs. Ask your local garden center for organic options.

9. Know what feeds your weeds.

Every weed tells a story about your soil. Crabgrass likes compact soil. Cinquefoil likes poor dry soil. Dandelions like high pH. Use your soil test as a guide to make conditions favorable to turf and unfavorable to weeds. Many plants you might consider weeds are beneficial to your lawn and useful to humans. For example, clover helps make nitrogen available in the soil, and plantain can be applied to the skin to soothe insect bites. And a diversity of species leads to lawns that are more hardy.

10. If you use a lawn service, ask for organic.

A list of Northeast Organic Farming Association accredited organic landscapers is available at Organic Land Care, www.organiclandcare.net. As always, follow good business practices and check references before hiring any service professional. If your landscaper is not confident caring for your lawn organically, suggest they take a course for professionals.



QUICK FACTS

- If the product has an EPA registration number, then it contains a pesticide or herbicide. Because people use pesticides to kill, prevent, repel, or in some way adversely affect some living organism (the pest), pesticides by their nature are toxic to some degree. Also according to the EPA, many 'inert' ingredients are also toxic.
- Pesticides are mixed with fertilizer in products called weed and feed.
- State law prohibits the use of carcinogenic pesticides at Massachusetts schools.



- All pesticides persist in lawns and soil longer than the posted 24-72 hours, some as long as two years.
- Many garden centers now carry some organic products- just ask. The more demand from you, the better the selection will be.
- You can make your own compost with kitchen scraps and leaves.