South Carolina Gardening & Recycling Organics Wisely

GROW

Natural Lawn Care

Going Natural

Healthy lawns are easy on the environment.
Going natural may mean you need to accept a lighter green color, a few weeds, and mowing a little higher than you're used to doing. But you'll have a healthy, good-looking lawn that's easier on the environment.

Why make a change?
Your lawn can be a great place to hang out, but depending on how you care for it, your lawn also can be part of big environmental problems.

Lawn and garden watering make up more than 40 percent of our summer water use.
That's when supplies are lowest and when wildlife and people need it most. It's also when rates are highest. Much of this water is wasted through over-watering — a practice that invites lawn disease.

Rainwater can wash pesticides from our lawns into streams or lakes.
Rain also can wash fertilizers from lawns into local waters. The fertilizers feed algae that smother fish and other water dwellers.

Pesticides may not be so great for you and your kids either.
Studies have found an increased cancer risk related to pesticide use. And safe disposal of pesticides costs you big bucks.

Grass clippings are overloading our compost facilities, when they could supply at least 1/4 of your lawn's fertilizer needs.

It's called "grasscycling" — just leave the clippings on the lawn. This saves you time and money and helps prevent the growing problem of overloaded compost facilities. And if you use less fertilizer, there's less chance of it washing into our streams.

Natural lawn care works!

Fortunately, the natural lawn care practices outlined in this section make it easy to reduce the use of hazardous products while saving time, water, money and helping to preserve our environment.

Six Steps to Natural Lawn Care

Healthy lawns grow on healthy soil.
Using proper soil preparation and lawn maintenance practices will help build healthy soil and vigorous, deep-rooted lawns. These lawns are more resistant to disease, tolerate some insect and drought damage, and will out-compete many weeds. The practices recommended here can help make lawns healthier for our families, protect beneficial soil organisms, and protect our environment, too.

Step 1. Grasscycle: Mow high, mow often and leave the clippings.

Set mowing height to remove only one-third of the grass length at each mowing. Try to mow weekly in spring. Cutting too much at once stresses the grass. Mowing height varies by type of grass, but mowing high helps develop deeper roots and crowds out weeds.

Leave the clippings on the lawn. "Grasscycling" provides free fertilizer (at least 1/4 of your lawn's needs), helps lawns grow greener and denser, and doesn't cause thatch buildup.

You can grasscycle with your existing mower. For best results, keep the blade sharp, mow when the grass is dry, and mow a little more often in the spring. Clippings left scattered on the surface will break down quickly. If there are clumps, mow again to break them up. Push mowers work great for grasscycling.

Mulch mowers
For clean mowing that leaves no visible clippings, consider buying a "mulching" mower. This mower will chop clippings finely and blow them down into the lawn so they disappear and won't be tracked into your house. Check the spring issues of *Consumer Reports* for current ratings of mulching mowers. The rechargeable electric mulching mowers are quiet, clean and grasscycle very well.

Step 2. Fertilize moderately in late spring and before the end of August with a “natural organic” or “slow-release” fertilizer.

Before applying any fertilizer to your lawn, have your soil tested.

Fertilizer: How much is enough? Clemson Extension recommends that home lawns receive one to four pounds (depending on the type of grass) of nitrogen (in a balanced fertilizer) per 1,000 square feet of lawn each year. Grasscycling can supply at least one-quarter of that. Split the rest into two or three applications before the end of August. Avoid fertilizing in the early spring because it makes lawns grow too fast (unless your lawn needs help recovering from disease or insect damage) wait until June.

Slow-release fertilizers feed nutrients to the lawn slowly, and less is wasted through leaching or runoff to streams. “Quick-release” fertilizers are 100 percent water soluble and wash into streams easily. Instead, look for the words “natural organic” or “slow-release” on the bag.

Healthy lawns are a medium green color, depending on the variety of grass. The darkest green turf, which many people strive for, is not in fact the healthiest turf. Over-fertilized lawns are more prone to disease, thatch buildup and drought damage.

With slow-release or organics fertilizers, you can fertilize just twice a year, in mid- to late May and again in late August. If you choose to fertilize only once, the fall application is the most important.

Remember, grasscycling returns valuable nutrients to the soil every time you mow!

Step 3. Water deeply to moisten the root zone, but infrequently.

Grasses do better when the whole root zone is wet and then partially dries out between waterings. Avoid frequent shallow watering; that causes shallow rooting. Overwatering can promote lawn disease, leach nutrients from the soil and waste water.

Aerate the lawn if water won't penetrate because of soil compaction or thatch buildup. Dethatching also will help if there is heavy thatch buildup.

Water about one inch per week during warm seasons, let the weather be your guide. Water slowly, or start and stop, so the water penetrates rather than puddling or running off. Sandy soils will need lighter, more frequent watering because they can't hold much water. Water early (4 a.m. to 10 a.m.), not in the heat of the day.

Newly-planted lawns may need daily watering if planted in the late spring or summer.

Step 4. Improve poor lawns with aeration and overseeding. Or consider fixing the soil and replanting.

Aerate compacted soil in the spring or fall to improve root development.
Use a rented power aerator for best results, or hire a professional. (For small areas you can purchase a sod-coring tool). The soil should be moist. Make two or more passes to get better results. Rake or mow to break up the cores. The soil left will help to decompose excess thatch layers in the lawn. If your soil is deeply compacted (more than two inches — dig a hole to find out) find a landscape professional who has equipment that penetrates six to eight inches to aerate for you.

Overseed thin areas to thicken the lawn and help crowd out weeds.
Overseeding with rye grass should be done when the days are warm enough for the seed to grow and the nights are cool enough to reduce the incidence of disease. Thirty days before the first frost, when daytime highs are near 70°F and nighttime lows are usually above 50°F, is generally a good time to overseed. This usually corresponds to mid-September in the Upstate and late September in the Midlands and Coastal regions (from the Clemson Extension Home & Garden Information Center fact sheet #1206, available at http://hgic.clemson.edu/).

Overseeding the right way can be accomplished with special equipment. Just casting seed onto the existing lawn will not give you the quality that you expect.

Poor soil: What to do?
If your soil is very poor and compacted, it may be best to improve the soil and replant.

- Till up old lawn. If very weedy, remove the sod with a rented sod stripper, or you might spray glyphosate (Roundup) on it to kill weeds.
- Get a soil test to find out what's missing and spread the amendments (like lime) suggested in the test results.
- Spread two inches of quality compost and till it in to a depth of six to eight inches. Sandy or gravelly soils may need other amendments, too — consult a certified landscaper or your local Clemson Cooperative Extension for help with these soils.
- Rake the soil level, roll with a landscape roller, water to settle for a day and rake again.
- Seed with an appropriate grass mix and water daily if the weather is hot and dry until the lawn is well established.

Step 5. Think twice before using “weed and feed” or other pesticides.

These products may damage soil and lawn health and pollute our waterways. Some studies also suggest that using pesticides may harm our health.

Crowd out weeds and reduce pest damage by promoting a healthy, vigorous lawn through proper fertilization, irrigation and mowing. Improve thin areas with aeration and overseeding. A healthy turf will need far fewer pesticides.

Accept a few “weeds” in your lawn. Some, like clover, may look fine. Target the problem weeds, leave the others.

Remove problem weeds by hand in the spring and fall. Don’t cover your entire lawn with weed and feed just to kill a few dandelions. Pincer-type long handled weed pullers are available at many garden stores. They work well in moist soil, with no stooping. Pull dandelions when they’re young (for best results, get as much of the root as possible).

Spot-spray problem weeds with the proper herbicide at the right time of year. Identify the weed to make sure you are using the correct product.

Read the label carefully before using any pesticide. Be sure to follow all label warnings, wear proper protective clothing and keep children and pets off the lawn for at least as long as the label specifies. Only buy as much as you need and completely use the contents before disposing of the container.

Step 6. Consider alternatives to lawns for steep slopes, shady areas and near streams and lakes

Leave a buffer of natural vegetation along streams and lakes to filter pollutants and protect fish and wildlife. These buffers should include shrubs and trees to shade the stream, and groundcovers of native plants or low-maintenance grasses that are left unmowed and wild. Avoid use of pesticides or soluble fertilizers near streams, ditches, wetlands and shorelines.

Grass grows best on well-drained soil in full sun or partial shade. Steep slopes are hard to mow and water. Call your local conservation district office for information on alternative plants or grasses that do well in shady, steep or wet sites.

This section was adapted with permission from the Natural Lawn Care guide developed and produced by Seattle Public Utilities, King County Water and Land Resources Division, and the Local Hazardous Waste Management Program in King County.