

## **Watershed Friendly Lawn Care Tips for Spring** **Betsy Washington and George McLennan, March 2012**

The Lake Barcroft Environmental Committee and WID have teamed up to sponsor a new Lake Barcroft Watershed-Friendly Garden program, aptly named, "Watershed Protection Begins in Your Backyard". Lawns in urban areas like ours, contribute a disproportionate amount of fertilizers and nutrients to our watersheds and contribute to eutrophication. In fact, the amount of fertilizer spread on suburban lawns is far more than actually needed and is a large contributor to degraded stream quality and algal blooms in our lake.

Last summer WID provided free soil testing for 38 residential properties in Lake Barcroft. Most of those by far did not need fertilizer or major nutrients. About a third of our properties have very acidic soil. So instead of adding fertilizer, owners were asked to apply several applications of lime to raise the pH to appropriate levels for lawn grass.

We beg you to drastically reduce or eliminate chemical fertilizers which can harm healthy soil, killing the very organisms that make nutrients available to plants and protect them from diseases. Instead help the soil web feed your plants by using compost or organic amendments such as humic acid, kelp, or alfalfa meal.

Lawn care that focuses on feeding the soil web, creates lawns with dramatically deeper root systems and less top growth so that they need to be mowed less frequently, and need 30 - 50 % less watering. You will have fewer disease and insect problems and greatly improved soil structure.

The following Watershed Friendly tips from the Environmental Committee and WID, will help you have a healthy lawn *and* lake, and eliminate or greatly reduce the need for fertilizers, and reduce pest or disease problems at the same time.

**Use Compost.** Feed your soil to feed your lawn. Compost and organic mulches enhance the soil web so that it will provide the nutrients your garden needs and eliminate the threat of excess nutrient runoff. A healthy soil reduces or even eliminates the need for external fertilizer. Apply 1/2 to 1" or more of compost to your lawn and gardens each year. You can easily apply compost to large areas with a spreader. WID provides composted leaf mulch across from Beach 2 for community use. Call the LBA office (703-941-1927) for gate open hours.

**Leave Lawn Clippings.** on the lawn. Consider using a reel or mulching mower. You can reduce your lawn's need for fertilizer by more than 30%, just by leaving grass clippings to decompose in place!

**Mow High.** Set your lawn mower at 2-1/2 - 3" and keep your blades sharp. Taller grass crowds out weeds, and encourages deep roots, resulting in a healthier lawn that needs less water.

**Water Properly.** Cool season lawns naturally go dormant during the hot summer weeks, and will green up again naturally when rains return. If you must water, water deeply and infrequently to promote vigorous root growth that helps your lawn resist drought.

**Treat Lawn Problems Safely** by identifying your weeds and hand pulling or spot treating pests or weeds. **Reseed** any bare patches in your lawn in early spring, as a dense lawn is the best

defense against weeds and erosion. Natural products like corn gluten or vinegar can help eliminate weeds without toxic side effects.

Watershed protection really does begin in your own yard, so this spring, join us in protecting the lake. Following these easy steps will save you time and money and may well provide all of the care and nutrients that your lawn needs to thrive.

If you decide to leave lawn care to a lawn company, follow these watershed-friendly tips, excerpted from *Conservation Currents*, Northern Virginia Soil and Water Conservation District. <http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/nvswcd/newsletter/falllawncare.htm>

**Choosing a Lawn Care Company.** Carefully research a company's methods of operation. Does the company offer a variety of pest management approaches from which you may choose? Does it apply pesticides (*or fertilizer*) on a regular schedule regardless of need or does it limit pesticide use to only when needed? Does it evaluate and treat your lawn as a single entity, or does every lawn get the same treatment? Does the company routinely combine fertilizer and pesticides in each application? Above all, only allow the company to apply fertilizer in the fall.

**Soil Matters.** Before you fertilize, **test your soil** to learn what, if anything, it needs. For \$10.00, Virginia Cooperative Extension will analyze your soil sample and return the results to you. Pick up a soil test kit at any Fairfax County Public Library or at the Virginia Cooperative Extension office at the Government Center (Pennino Building—10th floor).

**Just Lime?** If your lawn needs anything, it is likely to be lime. Most soils in northern Virginia are acidic; lime helps to neutralize the acidity. A balanced pH will improve the availability of nutrients, encourage thatch decomposition, and benefit soil microorganisms, all of which are essential to the soil's health and fertility.

**Lime Tips.** Lime can be applied to your lawn area any time of the year. However, because it takes several months to be fully incorporated into the soil, it is best to apply it in the fall. For turf, pelletized limestone is preferable to pulverized limestone. The pellets spread more evenly with less dust. The soil test results will reveal the amount of lime required to bring your soil to optimal levels.

Lastly, if you must fertilize, fertilize in the Fall. Timing is everything when you apply fertilizer. First, adopt this mantra: Fertilize in Fall, Fertilize in Fall, Fertilize in Fall. Fall is when the roots that will sustain the plants through the following summer are actively growing.

Never Fertilize in the Spring. Spring fertilizing encourages leaf growth at the expense of root development. It also feeds weed species and can lead to disease and insect problems later in the season. In addition, you will have to mow the lawn more frequently.

Never Fertilize in the Summer. Most lawn grasses in our area are cool season species, which die back during the heat of the summer.