

Grow a Healthy, No-Waste Lawn & Garden

How you care for all the green and growing things in your yard can have a big impact on and how much waste your household creates, and on Minnesota's air and water quality. From grass trimmings and leaves to pesticides and water, the eco-impact of your lawn and garden can be significant.

Your Lawn and Garden's Effect on the Environment

Your lawn and garden can add a lot to what your household needs to discard and recycle. Yard waste and food waste make up 13 percent of what's thrown into the garbage in Minnesota.

Healthy lawns and gardens can be maintained in ways that produce less waste, and you can easily manage what's left by composting at home. A healthy lawn and garden can naturally resist weeds and pests. You don't need a lot of chemicals to keep your yard looking green. Learn to read the signs and find out what's really wrong with your plants. Solve your lawn and garden problems by applying some brainpower before you use pesticides and herbicides.

Mow, Fertilize, and Rake Less

You don't have to spend so much time maintaining your lawn. Sound incredible? Mowing, watering, fertilizing and raking it less and using no pesticides may be your way to a healthy, environmentally friendly yard.

Mow your grass to a height of 2 ½ to 3 inches. This is the single most important thing you can do to improve the health of your lawn. By keeping your grass a little longer, the roots grow deeper and can reach more water during dry periods. Longer grass also helps shade the soil surface, making it harder for weeds to get established.

Use a sharp mower blade when cutting your lawn to make it less susceptible to disease.

Leave your grass clippings on the lawn. Grass clippings can provide the equivalent of about one application of fertilizer per year. Sweep your sidewalk, driveway, or street so clippings don't pollute nearby lakes or streams.

Wait before you water. In Minnesota, most grass can survive without watering, although it may enter a dormant "brown" stage during the summer. Water only when it hasn't rained for at least seven days. You don't need to water on a routine basis. To get the most water to the plant and reduce evaporation:

- Water early in the morning. Grass blades need to dry out to minimize disease.
- Water close to the ground.
- Water slowly, deeply, and less frequently. Root growth is influenced by water depth and time of the year. Frequent shallow watering that keeps surface soils wet encourages shallow root growth, greater proneness to certain diseases, and reduced stress tolerance.
- Only water grass. Make sure water is not lost by landing on or running off the grass into hard, impervious surfaces.

Aerate your lawn if soil is compacted or there is significant thatch build-up. You can do this by using a lawn aerator available from most rental stores. Use the type that removes small cores of soil from the ground and places them on the lawn surface. Leave the cores to decompose naturally, contributing to a decrease in thatch, while the holes poked into the ground help improve soil aeration for healthier root systems.

What are your weeds telling you? Weeds can tell you something about what's wrong with your lawn. Take time to identify your weeds and treat them appropriately to strengthen and improve your lawn. A weed-free lawn is not necessarily a healthy one.

Plant a Garden for Rain and Wildlife

Spend less time mowing, and more time enjoying your garden. Replacing parts of your yard with native perennials lessens the need for mowing, watering, and chemicals. It also provides habitat and food for birds and butterflies. Planting trees in your yard can reduce heating and cooling costs.

Get to know your garden site. For example, how long is it exposed to sunlight? What is the soil type? Does the soil hold moisture well? What will you keep and what will you take out? How will your plants influence wild native plants, or be influenced by nearby weedy exotics? Answering these questions will help you better plan your garden and landscaping to fit your needs and budget.

- Learn how to design a native garden from Blue Thumb.
- Plant for wildlife using native plants, visit the Minnesota Department of Natural Resource for ideas.
- Learn what you can do to capture rainwater and prevent runoff.
- Before you dig, contact Gopher State One Call at 800-252-1166 or 651-454-0002.

The Right Time to Apply

- **Control weeds.** September is the best time of the year to treat dandelions, plantain, creeping Charlie, and other perennial broadleaf weeds. Controlling weeds may be as simple as adjusting your other lawn care practices. Weeds such as dandelions can be removed easily by digging them up with a fishtail weeder when the soil is damp. For those who would rather stay off their knees, there are upright pullers.
- **Seed.** The best time to reseed bare spots is either early spring or around the middle of August. If deicing salt from sidewalks or roads has caused dead areas, consider reseeding with a more salt-tolerant variety. Always plant grass varieties that are adapted to our area and are appropriate for the way you use your lawn.
- **Fertilize in the fall.** Mid- to late-October is a very good time to fertilize your lawn. At this time of the year, fertilizer nutrients, including nitrogen, are taken up and stored in the plant where they help provide for healthy spring growth. Most fertilizers require water after application; follow the instructions on the label to ensure best results.
- **Ask the experts.** Ask at your garden store for less toxic alternatives to chemical pesticides.
- **Top dressing your lawn with a compost/soil mix** will reduce your lawn's water needs and make it more resistant to drought and disease. You will need to fertilize less often, and when you do, you can use less fertilizer.