

Easy green tips for a healthy lawn and landscape

Longer days and warmer temps mean that spring is en route to Hampton Roads. Before digging in to your normal lawn and garden routines, askHRgreen.org challenges you to transform your landscape into an eco-avenger by putting every flower, tree, shrub and blade of grass to work.

"Your yard is not only an expression of you and your family, it's also one of the greatest ways to protect the health of our environment by filtering out stormwater pollution before it enters our local waterways," said Julia B. Hillegass public information and community affairs administrator for the Hampton Roads Planning District Commission, which oversees askHRgreen.org. "Implementing just one green-friendly change in your yard can have big implications for our environment."

Put Your Soil to the Test

One change that's easy to make is to conduct a soil test before adding fertilizer to your lawn and flower beds to see what nutrients may be lacking. Over-fertilizing is harmful to the environment. The excess fertilizer does not get absorbed into the lawn, resulting in runoff into local waterways via the storm drain. When it reaches the Chesapeake Bay, the polluted runoff (which contains nitrogen and phosphorus) fuels the growth of algae blooms, which are harmful to fish, crabs, oysters and other species.

Soil tests, available at local Virginia Cooperative Extension offices and garden centers, are easy to use. Using a shovel or spade, unearth soil samples from 10 random areas, avoiding border areas such as those near roads, compost or bush piles or under eaves. Place the samples in a clean pail or container and mix them thoroughly, then submit the combined soil for testing. Test results will provide a recommendation of nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P) and potassium (K), and it will also reveal the acidity (pH) of the soil.

Know Your Grass

Equally important for a healthy lawn is to choose grass that is well-suited for your landscape. For areas that get full sun, use warm season grass, such as zoysia, centipede or bermuda, and seed and fertilize (if needed) in early spring. For areas that get light shade, use cool season grass, such as tall fescue, fine fescue or rye, and seed in the late summer and fertilize (if needed) in the fall.

In addition to making sure you are using the right amount of fertilizer and growing grass that's optimal for your landscape, there are plenty of green gardening alternatives that are easy and cost-effective to implement.

More Green Lawn and Garden Tips

- **Mow at the proper height.** The rule of thumb is that only one-third of a blade should be removed in one mowing and to always mow with a sharp blade.
- **Leave clippings on the lawn.** They return nitrogen to the soil, naturally.
- **Don't rake leaves or yard debris into the street.** Bag it instead, so it doesn't end up entering the storm drain and polluting our waterways.
- **Water at the right time of day.** Water when the sun is low, winds are calm and temperatures are cooler to minimize evaporation by as much as 30 percent. The typical lawn only needs 1½ " of water a week.
- **Consider a grass-free landscape.** Instead, use native plants, rockscapes and borders to create an alternative look.
- **Use natural weed management techniques.** Pulling weeds by hand or spraying with a vinegar solution is an inexpensive and safe way to manage most weeds.
- **Select plants that will repel insects.** Mint will repel ants, aphids, imported cabbage worm and flea beetle. Marigolds will ward off squash bug, thrips, tomato hornworm and whitefly.
- **Choose energy efficient and low-emission lawn care equipment.** Lawn mowing contributes to the nation's petroleum consumption and pollutant emissions. Choose self-propelled tools and equipment that is appropriately sized for your lawn and garden.
- **Install a rain barrel.** Use the rainwater to water your lawn and plants.
- **Plant more plants!** Trees, shrubs and perennial beds help to filter excess fertilizer and pesticide and slow the flow of stormwater before it reaches storm drains and local creeks. Plant native species when possible and plan the layout of your garden so each plant is located for optimal growth.
- **Mulch.** Use mulch to control erosion, retain moisture, stabilize soil temperature, and reduce weeds.
- **Take a natural approach.** Base every land care decision on the principle of protecting and enhancing the natural elements that exist on the site.

For even more lawn and garden info, visit www.askHRgreen.org.