

## *HCP NATURAL LAWN CARE TIPS*

### *BE PART OF THE SOLUTION*

Every year, millions of tons of toxic lawn pesticides and synthetic (petroleum-based) fertilizers pollute the environment, poison wildlife, and endanger public health – all for the sake of a perfect lawn. Our goal at Healthy Communities Project is to provide the information you need to create and maintain a lawn that is beautiful, safe for your family and pets, and environmentally sustainable. The following tips and our seasonal [natural lawn care calendar](#) will help get you started.

### *FOCUS ON THE GRASS, NOT THE WEEDS!*

Natural lawn care focuses on building and maintaining nutrient-rich, biologically active soil and using maintenance practices that minimize stress so your lawn can stay healthy, out-compete weeds, and fight off disease and infestation.

### *KNOW WHAT YOUR SOIL NEEDS AND DOESN'T NEED*

Have your soil tested every few years. A basic test will measure soil pH (ideally between 6.0 and 7.0 for turf), phosphorus (P) and potassium (K) needs. Although soil tests do not measure for nitrogen (N) because of its volatility in the soil, the average Wisconsin lawn requires about four pounds of nitrogen/1,000 sq ft per year. Leaving on grass clippings provides up to a pound of organic nitrogen per season, so plan to add about three more pounds/1,000 sq ft per year. Without knowing your soil's nutrient needs, you risk over-fertilizing and contributing to polluted runoff or not adding the right nutrients to keep your lawn healthy. County extension services usually offer a soil testing service. In Milwaukee County, call UWEX at 414-290-2400. If your soil test recommends adding any nutrients, choose a natural, organic-based fertilizer that most closely delivers the ratio you need. Check out our website at [www.healthycommunitiesproject.org](http://www.healthycommunitiesproject.org) for a list of natural fertilizer products and suppliers.

### *WHY CHOOSE NATURAL FERTILIZERS?*

Unlike quick-release synthetic fertilizers, natural fertilizers release nutrients gradually and add organic matter to the soil. They are also better absorbed and less likely to become polluted runoff. Naturally fertilized grass grows more slowly, which means less mowing and less time and energy spent maintaining your lawn.

### *BUILDING HEALTHY SOIL*

Adding compost and core aeration are two great ways to boost soil health and structure. Compost is a HUGE bang for your lawn care buck. It improves soil structure and texture, corrects drainage issues, and adds organic material and microbes which are essential for plant nutritional uptake. HCP's seasonal lawn care calendar provides application details. Aeration pulls plugs of soil from your lawn to reduce compaction and thatch build-up, and also improves drainage and air circulation. A good rule of thumb is to aerate every few years. However, if you have a very heavily used lawn, you may want to aerate every season. Consider renting a core aerator machine from your local hardware store or Home Depot and splitting the cost with your neighbors.

Annual over-seeding and patch seeding keep turf thick enough to crowd out weeds. Invest in top quality grass seed blends that are appropriate for your various light and usage conditions. Also, ask yourself how much turf you really need for recreation, and consider some alternatives such as expanding flower beds, adding a rain garden, or adding ground covers where grass has difficulty growing, such as under large shade trees.

### ***MOW PROPERLY***

Proper mowing practices are essential to maintaining a naturally healthy lawn for several reasons: 1) A lawn's height is directly proportionate to the depth of its root system, so keep your lawn at least *three inches high!* Mowing high produces deeper roots, shades out most weeds, and *greatly* increases your lawn's ability to photosynthesize and produce the nutrients it needs to stay healthy; 2) *Keep your mower blades sharp* and mow only when grass is dry to avoid plant damage. Dull mower blades tear grass, leaving it stressed and susceptible to disease and infestation; 3) *Leave the clippings on your lawn.* They provide up to one pound of organic nitrogen throughout the growing season; 4) *Follow the one-third rule.* Never cut more than one-third the length of your grass at a time. If it gets away from you, take down its height in stages to avoid stressing the plant.

*Consider a reel mower,* especially if you have a small lawn. Their cutting action is less stressful to your lawn than traditional gas powered mowers, they're pollution-free, and you burn a few extra calories!

### ***TO WATER OR NOT TO WATER***

With water becoming an increasingly precious and expensive commodity, you may wish to forego watering your lawn. As a protective mechanism against heat and drought, an established lawn will go semi-dormant during the hottest part of the summer. Yes, it will become browner, but it will green up again when temperatures cool down. That said, even the healthiest grass can become stressed in extreme heat or drought, so you may follow our watering guidelines if you choose to water your lawn.

### ***WATER WISELY***

The average Wisconsin lawn requires about one inch of water per week, including rainfall, to remain green during the growing season. Keep track of rainfall by keeping a rain gauge or an empty straight-edged can in your garden. If you've had a full inch of rain in one week, there is no need to water. In fact, over-watering is a common mistake and can stress your lawn, making it more susceptible to fungal diseases and infestations.

### ***WATER DEEPLY***

If there has been little rain or no rain, apply the entire one inch of water in one application. Watering deeply encourages deeper root growth, which allows your grass to weather the dry spells better and get down to additional soil nutrients. If you're not sure how long to run your sprinkler to apply one inch of water, put out your rain gauge before you start.

Make a note of when you started your sprinkler and how far you've turned your faucet handle, and run it until you have one inch of water in your container. After keeping track a few times, you'll have a good idea of how long to run your sprinkler to apply the correct amount of water.

### **WATER SLOWLY**

Watering slowly allows for better absorption and reduces the amount of water wasted as runoff. If you have heavy clay soil, maximize absorption by applying one inch of water in two cycles; apply half an inch of water, wait about half an hour, then apply the other half inch.

### **MANAGE WEEDS NATURALLY**

The negative effects of lawn chemicals on soil health take time to reverse so try to be patient and learn to tolerate a little diversity. If you wish to knock down weed counts quickly, use a combined approach of both pre-emergent ([corn gluten meal](#)) and post-emergent (a fancy name for pulling weeds) weed control. Removing weeds before they go to seed prevents them from dropping new seeds, thereby interrupting their natural propagation cycle. Maximize your efforts by waiting until after a good rainfall or watering - the moisture helps loosen the soil. Remember that the best way to keep out the weeds is to create thick, healthy turf!

Courtesy of Healthy Communities Project: [www.healthycommunitiesproject.org](http://www.healthycommunitiesproject.org)