

# Lawn Care Tips for Shoreline Properties

To many people a yard without a lawn is not a yard. Lawns provide play areas for children and sports like croquet. A lawn's open space is ideal for enjoying the sun and outdoor dining or entertaining.

But aren't there water quality problems with having a lawn in a shoreline area? Yes, in fact, there are. The same nutrients that promote a lush green lawn can promote lush green growth of aquatic plants and algae in a lake. Studies on some lakes have indicated that lawn fertilization is one of the largest sources of human-induced pollution. Although nutrient pollution can be minimized by carefully managing fertilizer application or not fertilizing at all, the very existence of a lawn which extends to the water's edge causes other types of problems, such as near shore habitat destruction, increased overland runoff to the water, and weakened shoreline soils increasing the likelihood of erosion.

Lawns are not a natural landscape feature and generally require high maintenance. You can still have a lawn on a shoreline property and protect water quality, especially if the area adjacent to the shoreline has natural vegetation. This brochure provides some tips on how you can manage your lawn without impacting the lake's water quality.

## Guidelines for Shoreline Lawn Care

If you do choose a lawn as your preferred landscape option for your yard, follow these guidelines to minimize your impact on surface waters:

### Natural Vegetation

Maintain natural vegetation along the shoreline. Maintaining natural vegetation with trees, shrubs, and ground cover can preserve water quality, enhance aesthetics, and protect your property from shoreline erosion. (For more information on establishing natural vegetation refer to the Watershed Council's Lakescaping brochure.)

### Fertilizing Tips

Before applying fertilizer, test your soil to determine which nutrients, if any, are needed. Soil testing is available through your local Michigan State University (MSU) Extension office for under \$10. MSU will return test results with fertilizer recommendations.

If fertilizer is necessary, be sure you're fertilizing only the lawn and not the lake! Use the smallest amount of fertilizer possible to maintain good grass cover. In the spring, use small amounts of a slow release form of nitrogen. This method allows the grass to use the nitrogen and remain vigorous while minimizing the amount of nutrients entering the water. If the lawn is not growing well, apply a very small amount of nitrogen early in the summer. Try not to apply fertilizer before a rain.

Do not use a fertilizer containing phosphorus unless a soil test indicates a need for it. Phosphorus is the most critical nutrient in lakes and streams in northern Michigan. Even a small amount of phosphorus added to a lake or stream can stimulate excessive growth of aquatic plants and algae.

### **Lawn Cover**

If you are establishing a lawn, plant a fescue mixture rather than bluegrass. Fescue requires much less nitrogen per square foot than bluegrass. Creeping red fescue is well suited for the growing conditions in northern Michigan.

### **Grass Length**

Do not cut the lawn too short. Recommended cutting height is two to two and a half inches. This allows healthier, greener growth with less fertilizer. Leave grass cuttings on the lawn to help retain moisture and add nutrients to the soil.

### **Watering**

Water the lawn with lake or stream water to keep it green and thriving without the use of fertilizer. Nutrients in the water can be utilized by the grass, reducing concentrations in the lake or stream. A thorough weekly watering during dry spells promotes deeper root growth and healthier grass than light watering. Avoid excessive watering, especially on sandy soils, as it can cause nutrients to leach from the soil and move into surface water.

### **Pesticides and Herbicides**

Avoid pesticide/herbicide and fertilizer mixtures. Since many commercial lawn herbicides can harm aquatic plants and animals if they get into the water, it is better to dig up or live with the weeds. If you decide that weeds must be treated, apply the herbicide in the fall. This will minimize runoff and reduce harm to trees, shrubs, and aquatic life.

Pesticides not only can contaminate water and wildlife, but can cause harm to humans too. Many alternatives to pesticides are available and can be equally if not more effective than pesticides.

### **Composting**

A compost pile located away from the lake or stream is a good way to dispose of leaves and grass clippings. If you don't compost your yard waste, dump leaves, grass clippings, or brush back from the lakeshore. Burning leaves is not recommended, as it causes air and water pollution. If you have a fire ring near the shore, periodically remove the ashes for disposal away from the waters edge.

**Professional Care**

If your lawn is maintained by a lawn care professional, discuss your priorities for water quality protection with them. Be an informed consumer. Don't let them put anything on your land that will harm your lake.

**Consider Alternatives**

There are many alternatives to a highly manicured lawn. Preserving or restoring natural vegetation may be more attractive and beneficial. Some other options to consider include a pruned lake/river/stream viewing corridor, a deck, or a small patch of lawn near your house with a diverse, low-maintenance mixture of trees, shrubs, and ground cover planted in other areas.