

Most commercial lawn care programs create chemically dependent lawns. Applications of pesticides are hazardous to your children, pets, wildlife and aquatic life in our streams and ponds. Over fertilizing is not healthy for grass or beneficial soil organisms and can cause algae blooms in nearby waters. A healthy, vigorous lawn can resist pests, weeds and drought on its own. The following are the best ways to create and maintain an environmentally safe and beautiful lawn. It may take more than one year to succeed, but the benefits are well worth the effort!

 **SOIL TESTING** helps you begin a “soil care” program. A soil test kit is available from UMass.-Amherst at www.umass.edu/soiltest or (413) 545-2311, or buy a soil testing kit at a local garden or hardware store. Request recommendations for organic lawn care and the percentage of organic matter in the sample. Your soil sample should be at least 5% organic matter and preferably higher. The ideal pH for lawns is in the 6.5 – 7.0 range. The best time to test is in the fall so you will be ready for the spring. Samples should be air-dried before being mailed.

 **AERATE YOUR LAWN** if it hasn’t been done for several seasons and the soil is hard, dry and compact. *Aerate prior to applying fertilizers or compost.* Manual reel-type aerators are effective for small lawns; power aerators can be rented for larger ones.

 **APPLY ORGANIC FERTILIZER** and other soil additives (following soil test recommendations) in spring and fall for slow-release nutrients that will help to build healthy roots. *Beware of “organic” claims. Read the label!* Avoid non-natural ingredients like super-phosphate, “natural nitrite of soda,” which causes salt build-up, and sewage sludge/biosolids, which may contain harmful contaminants. In hot, dry summer weather, lawns can be sprayed with a liquid fish emulsion to prevent summer brownout.

 **COMPOST**--the key to organic lawn care--provides a stable source of nutrients, beneficial organisms and organic fertilizer for your lawn. Top-dress with ¼ inch of compost, preferably in spring and fall. Broadcast with a shovel or use a spreader open to widest setting. Compost is sold in different forms, including liquid, or you can make your own. Check the library or Internet for proper composting procedures.

 **MOW HIGH WITH SHARP MOWER BLADES.** Think “lush”! *Keep your grass high to shade out weeds and protect against drought.* First spring mowing should be at 2 inches to remove any winter fungus. Subsequent mowings for the rest of the season should be at 3 – 3.5 inches. Last fall mowing return height to 2 inches. Your grass should still look green after you have mown, not “scalped”! *Avoid cutting off more than one inch of grass blade at a time.* Leave your lawn clippings on the lawn for a free, natural nitrogen-fix your grass will appreciate. *Clippings do not cause thatch.* If you don’t do your own mowing, tell your landscaper how you want your lawn mown.

 **THATCH** is a build-up of dead grass roots and leaves caused by faulty watering practices, excessive fertilizing and pesticides. If you cannot feel the soil when you stick a finger down between the grass blades, there may be too much thatch. *Heavy thatch indicates soil deficient in microbial life.* Let nature do its work -- beneficial soil organisms use grass clippings left after mowing and other organic matter to add to the fertility of the soil on which your grass feeds. If your lawn has heavy thatch, add compost (or a liquid de-thatch product) to turn thatch into soil-building organic matter.

 **WATER YOUR LAWN PROPERLY** and only when needed. Your lawn’s water needs are site specific, influenced by soil type, drainage and sun/shade. *The goal of an organic lawn is to let nature provide the lawn’s water needs.* Established organic lawns, with dense turf and deep roots, are drought tolerant. Grass naturally goes dormant and looks slightly brown in late August and will green up again in the cooler fall weather. If you must water, a general rule is one time weekly for 3-4 hours to a depth of 2 inches. Early morning is the best time to water. *Please abide by town water restrictions.*

 **WEEDS** are indicators of poor soil conditions and faulty watering, mowing or fertilizing. *Dense turf is the best “herbicide.”* Grass itself is one of the most aggressive plants there is and will choke out weeds once you have nurtured the soil it grows in. Hand-weed small areas or “solarize” large areas (smother them under black plastic at end of summer), then re-seed heavily to let grass get the upper hand. *There is no such thing as a weed-free lawn.* Some weeds, like clover, are actually beneficial to your lawn, providing necessary nutrients. You’ll hardly notice the few weeds in a dense lawn that you keep mown high.

 **CORN GLUTEN** products provide natural, non-toxic pre-emergent weed control. Apply in early spring or fall. *Do not apply at the same time as grass seed.*

 **RE-SEED HEAVILY.** Early fall or spring is the best time to reseed a lawn. Invest in a good mixture of ryes and fescues, which are hardy and naturally drought-tolerant and are better in our climate than bluegrass.

 **DISEASE and INSECT PROBLEMS** are symptoms of soil problems and/or turf stresses that need to be addressed. It has been estimated that 90-95% of INSECT CONTROL is done by naturally occurring organisms (above and below ground) that are part of a healthy ecosystem. Pesticides disrupt this system, killing microbial life, beneficial insects and birds that work to keep disease and insect problems in check. Use beneficial nematodes for grubs, chinch bugs and sod webworms. Milky spore powder (species-specific bacteria) can also be applied in a grid pattern on the lawn for effective and long-lasting grub control. Both of these should be applied during the warm months.

YEARLY SCHEDULE:

Early March-End April

- Test soil if not done in fall
- Clean-up/aerate
- Re-seed or corn gluten, depending
- Add compost
- Sharpen mower blades
- First mowing at 2 inches

April through June

- Continue to sharpen blades
- Raise mower height to 3 - 3.5 inches
- Manual weed control
- Continue re-seeding bare spots
- Monitor for insect problems

June through August

- Respect natural summer dormancy
- Continue to monitor for insects/disease
- Apply beneficial nematodes and/or milky spore, as needed
- Sharpen blades/Mow high

Mid-August to Mid-September

- Test soil if not done in spring
- Aerate if necessary
- Best time to lime, fertilize, re-seed, and compost, if necessary

October and November

- Final mow at 2 inches
- New lawn or over-seeding
- Apply organic fertilizer at ½ rate
- Remove leaves as they accumulate or use mulching mower and leave on lawn



The Manchester Coastal Stream Team is a volunteer town committee affiliated with Salem Sound Coastwatch. Our mission is to help protect and improve the water quality and habitats of Manchester's coastal waterways. Monthly meetings are usually at the Town Hall, Manchester-by-the-Sea, Massachusetts.

For more information, refer to the MCST web page on the Salem Sound website at <http://www.SalemSound.org/MCST.html> or the Town of Manchester's website at <http://www.manchester.ma.us/> within the "Boards and Committees" section.



Simple Ways To Grow A Healthy, Organic Lawn

Work With Nature, not against it...
That is the simplest step towards a healthy, beautiful and sustainable lawn.

**A public service of the Manchester Coastal Stream Team
Manchester-by-the-Sea,
Massachusetts**

