

Northampton County Conservation District

The Northampton County Conservation District mission is to provide the public with a coordinated program of quality natural resource education and conservation within Northampton County. The conservation district efforts are focused on:

- Providing local conservation leadership
- Reviewing erosion and sediment control plans for developing areas
- Protecting water resources
- Sponsoring environmental education activities such as the county Envirothon

This information has been compiled by the Northampton County Conservation District and is intended to help you protect water quality by controlling soil erosion, rainwater runoff, and other forms of non-point source water pollution.

Northampton County Conservation District

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NORTHAMPTON COUNTY HOMEOWNER'S GUIDE TO "GREEN" LAWN AND YARD PRACTICES

This brochure provides practical information to Northampton County landowners about establishing and/or improving your existing yard using "green" yard practices. These "green" practices can help you save money, improve water quality, and promote wildlife habitat.



Healthy Lawn Establishment / Maintenance for New and Current Homeowners

A home represents one of the largest investments many people make in a lifetime. A dense healthy lawn can be an asset to your property and your neighborhood. Not only is a nice lawn attractive, but it also has several environmental benefits. When combined with sound landscaping practices, your lawn can help to reduce erosion, and filter rainwater runoff.

Streams, rivers, your neighborhood, and your own yard area can benefit from the reduced runoff and filtering capacity provided by lawns and conservation landscaping practices.



HEALTHY LAWN ESTABLISHMENT

Planting the right type of grass is an important first step in developing a healthy lawn. According to the Penn State Cooperative Extension, some of the grasses best suited for our region include Kentucky bluegrass, rough bluegrass, fine fescue, perennial ryegrass, tall fescue, bentgrasses, and zoysiagrass. A Penn State Extension Office or local nursery can help you select a blend appropriate for your lawn's growing conditions. Sunlight, drainage, depth of soil, and pH are the most important factors in growing.

When you're establishing a new lawn, a soil test is needed to determine if your soil needs lime (to raise pH) and fertilizers. The proper amount of fertilizer and lime can be mixed directly into the top few inches of topsoil before planting sod or seeding your new lawn.

If you're moving into a new development where the developer has installed a lawn for you, be sure to leave any silt fence, netting, and straw on the lawn in place until grass has had a chance to get established. If you observe erosion on your lawn, use additional netting in the eroded area and follow the reseeding guidance shown in the next section.

HEALTHY LAWN MAINTENANCE



After your lawn is established, you can increase its health and density, which will provide the best defense against weed infestation, through proper fertilization and maintenance. Follow these guidelines:

- Fertilizing - Excess fertilizing can cause water quality problems, so use fertilizer wisely. Apply according to the instructions, at the proper time and rate.
- Aerating - Aerating can be especially beneficial for heavy soils to help build a healthy lawn.
- Reseeding- Seed added to existing lawns is usually wasted unless the soil is cultivated first. To increase your chances of success, reseed by raking, adding topsoil as necessary, sowing seed, lightly raking again, and keeping the area moist. Use a seed mixture similar to that in the surrounding yard.
- Mowing - Most grasses in our area should be mowed to a minimum height of about 3 inches to promote more resistance to drought and disease. Unless grass clippings are excessive, they do not have to be removed from most lawns. Allowing them to decompose recycles plant nutrients.
- Watering - During dry, hot days of summer, grass survives by naturally "shutting down" above ground. Brown grass, therefore, is not necessarily dead grass. If you choose to water your lawn, consider doing so every 7 to 10 days and avoid watering during the heat of the day. More frequent waterings can produce shallow, more vulnerable root systems.
- Controlling lawn pests - The application of pesticides may occasionally be needed. Before applying any substance to your lawn, identify the problem and determine the most effective method. Contact your Penn State Extension agent for information on targeting a specific lawn pest.

Lawn care is a big job, and you may decide to use a professional. If you do, ask for a contract that will customize its service to your needs.

Additional lawn care information about can be found by contacting your local Penn State Cooperative Extension Office or at <http://turfgrassmanagement.psu.edu/homelawns.cfm>.



“Green” Yard Practices

Northampton County is growing rapidly. In their report titled “Comprehensive Plan, The Lehigh Valley...2030,” the Lehigh Valley Planning Commission has estimated that the population in Northampton County grew by 8.1% from 1990 to 2000, more than twice as fast as the average for Pennsylvania (see <http://www.lvpc.org/>). The Lehigh Valley Planning Commission projects that from 2000-2030, the population increase in the county will be about 28%.

With this population change, additional homes with lawns and landscaped areas will be managed by individual landowners. The “Green” yard practices described here are a way for homeowners to take responsibility for the protection and conservation of the natural resources in Northampton County.



LAWN ALTERNATIVES USING NATIVE PLANTS

In some situations, grass or lawns can be a maintenance burden or difficult to grow. Troublesome areas can include steep slopes, wet or shady areas and highly erodible areas. In these cases, lawn alternatives should be considered. When selected carefully, lawn alternatives improve infiltration of water into the soil, slow runoff, and reduce maintenance.

Lawn alternatives that you may consider include:

- Ground covers that require very little maintenance and work well in hard to reach areas.
- Wildflower and/or grass meadows that can provide a colorful, low-maintenance alternative to lawns.

- Water or rain gardens that can create interesting sound and texture additions to your landscape.
- Vegetable gardens that can be a fun and useful lawn alternative.

Landscaping that incorporates native, perennial plants (plants that are generally defined as occurring in North America before European settlement) can be especially beneficial. Native plants have evolved to local conditions over thousands of years and form an integral part in the life cycles of the local wildlife. In addition, native plants are generally hardier than other ornamental plants you might find in many nurseries because they have adapted to their locales over a long period of time. They are the most likely to survive extreme weather conditions and generally require less maintenance, pesticides, and fertilizers than other ornamental plants.

Additional information on lawn alternatives and the use of native plants can be found at <http://www.dcnr.state.pa.us/forestry/wildplant/native.aspx>.

COMPOSTING

Recycling leaves, grass clippings, and other yard and kitchen waste by composting is a great way to supplement or replace the use of fertilizers in your yard. A composter doesn't take up a lot of space and doesn't require a lot of time and energy.

Instead of paying for bags of bark mulch to spread under shrubs and trees and in garden beds, consider chopping leaves in your yard with a mulch mower and then incorporating them into your landscaped area. This approach mimics the way a natural



ecosystem would function.

For more information on composting, see <http://composting.cas.psu.edu/>.



STREAM-SIDE BUFFERS

If you have a home along the Delaware River or a stream flowing through your property, the water can be a valuable asset. Unfortunately stream bank erosion has become a major problem for some with the recent flood events in Northampton County, coupled with increasing rates of development.

Attractive vegetative buffers near streams can enhance your property, help prevent stream bank erosion, and intercept eroded soils and other contaminants before they reach the water. Trees are especially important to stream bank stabilization. Tree roots not only stabilize banks but also remove excess nutrients (fertilizers) and sediments from the stream that can be harmful to fish and water quality. Trees also provide shade and decrease water temperature, which is beneficial to fish and other aquatic life.

Benefits of “Green” Yard Practices

By adopting beneficial landscaping, homeowners can enjoy many benefits including:

- Reduced pesticide use that will help provide a safer environment for the family
- Reduced soil erosion, flooding, and costs for storm water management
- Greater opportunities to enjoy nature
- Reduced landscaping costs, maintenance, labor, and yard waste

In addition, water quality and wildlife habitat also benefit (see next section).



IMPROVE WATER QUALITY

Homeowners can help to protect water quality by implementing some of the practices described in this brochure. “Green” yard practices minimize the amount of sediment, fertilizers, and pesticides that may negatively impact water quality.



In addition, many of the practices described here will also help you conserve water. For homeowners that are faced with an abundance of water or excessive storm water runoff, consider collecting your roof runoff in rain barrels that can be used for watering nearby gardens and lawns. Rain gardens can also be an attractive yard feature if you have a particularly wet area.

CREATE BACKYARD HABITAT AND ATTRACT WILDLIFE

Wildlife is dependent on good habitat which includes food, water, shelter, and space. By using the practices described in this brochure, even a small yard can be landscaped to attract birds, butterflies, frogs, and other small animals. Proper selection of plant material can meet your aesthetic needs and at the same time provide food and shelter for interesting wildlife.

For additional information on creating wildlife habitat in your back yard see <http://www.nwf.org/backyardwildlifehabitat/>.

NEED HELP OR MORE INFORMATION?

Contact the watershed specialist at the Northampton County Conservation District at 610-746-1971.

