

Landscape Workers now need License to Apply Fertilizer

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On January 1st, 2014, a new law went into effect that state lawmakers, environmental advocates, and lawn care professionals hope will reduce Florida's stormwater runoff pollution that has been a decades-long problem.

What is runoff pollution, you ask? When it rains, water flows down our streets, sidewalks, and driveways. Everything that's on the pavement, like grass clippings, fertilizer, animal waste and oil, gets washed into storm drains.

What many people don't realize is that our storm drains don't lead to the nearest water treatment facility, like our homes' water pipes do. Instead, they lead to a stormwater basin, such as your neighborhood retention pond, or empty directly into the closest water body, such as Lake Toho. The water is not filtered or cleansed first. On many of the storm drains, you will see the sign "Only rain down the drain" and this is the reason why.

This new law has been established to minimize runoff pollution. The law states that all lawn care professionals applying fertilizer as part of their business must take a day long class on topics such as fertilizer, pesticide safety, irrigation, and general landscape care. They must also pass an exam during class, called the Green Industries Best Management Practices (GI-BMP) test, to become certified and obtain the Limited Certificate for Urban Landscape Commercial Fertilizer Application license. This new law is regulated by the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services and the Florida Environmental Protection Agency.

This means that no matter what type of fertilizer is used (granular fertilizer, liquid fertilizer, manure-based fertilizer, etc.) or whether you pay a friend or a landscape maintenance company, anyone who is paid to apply fertilizers to lawns and landscapes must have the fertilizer license. The primary reason for the license is to educate professional landscapers about proper fertilizer use and protect our water resources.

Fertilizer becomes a problem in the environment when either too much is applied or it is used at the incorrect rate or during the wrong time. Rain or irrigation water can move the nutrients found in fertilizer off site. They can leach downwards into the soil and groundwater or runoff the soil surface into the storm drains and surface waters.

Once in a creek, lake, river, or retention pond, fertilizer behaves similarly as it does in the landscape. Fertilizer provides nutrients for plants to grow. In the water, it also provides nutrients for invasive aquatic weeds and algae to grow. In certain conditions this causes eutrophication, an overabundance of algae growth which gives water bodies a green, scum-covered appearance. As this plant grows and dies, it uses up oxygen in the waters, reducing the amount of oxygen available for fish and other aquatic species. These scenarios can lead to fish kills and reduced water quality.

If you do hire a professional landscaper, please make sure he or she has the Limited Certificate for Urban Landscape Commercial Fertilizer Application license. If you do not hire a landscape professional to fertilize your lawn and landscape, you can still help to reduce water pollution by applying fertilizers appropriately and following other landscape practices such as blowing grass clippings, fertilizer, and other debris off hard surfaces and back onto the lawn. Remember not to dump or wash anything other than stormwater down a storm drain.

Apply fertilizers according to the fertilizer label. Also, only apply fertilizers when plants are actively growing. This is typically between the months of March and October. Do not apply fertilizers when heavy rainfall is predicted. Heavy rainfall can wash away the fertilizer. When fertilizer is applied at the correct amount and at the right time, the majority of it is used up by the lawn and landscape plants. When too much is applied or it is applied at the wrong time, leaching and runoff of the fertilizer can occur, leading to pollution.

Classes for professional landscapers on the GI-BMPs are offered through the University of Florida/IFAS Extension in Osceola County. They next class will be held on February 25th. Classes on lawn and landscape care are also offered for homeowners. Please go to <http://osceola.ifas.ufl.edu> for a list of upcoming events.

If you have questions about the new fertilizer law or for answers to other lawn and landscape questions, please contact the Osceola Master Gardeners at (321) 697-3000 or email me at jwel2@osceola.org.