

Only Rain Down the Drain

Eleanor Foerste, Natural Resources
University of Florida IFAS Extension in Osceola County

Many residents spend the weekend working on yard projects. Whether planting, mowing, trimming or edging, be sure only rain goes down the drain.

Developments often have manmade stormwater ponds to hold water that runs off property, sidewalks and streets after rainfall. Sometimes, residents that live on stormwater ponds think they are natural lakes. Whether ponds are manmade or natural, it is important to keep the water clean.

So what does your weekend landscape project have to do with clean water and water quality? Lawn care practices, plant selection, plant placement, and pest management can either cause water pollution or help water quality in your neighborhood water body and downstream at the lakefront.

1. Blow grass clippings or leaf debris into the yard not the street, storm drain or stormwater pond. Rainwater will flush them downstream. Not only is it illegal, but as leaves and grass clippings decompose, they use oxygen in the water and living critters die. Fish kills may result and that is a stinky problem. No need to rake leaves that fall from trees and throw them away. If they fall onto driveways or sidewalks, blow them back onto the lawn. Mow over them to chop them fine and they will enrich the soil in your yard as they do in natural forests. Cities invest in street sweepers to collect leaf litter from streets so they don't wash into storm drains. Usually, the leaves are composted for use in city landscapes.
2. Water plants only as needed. The less you water, the less water is accidentally sprayed onto paved surfaces like driveways, sidewalks and roads and carried downstream to stormwater ponds and lakes. Low maintenance lawn grasses like bahiagrass can go dormant (brown and dry) during dry spells and do not require much water or fertilizer to survive.

3. Fertilize using University of Florida IFAS recommendations to avoid excessive plant growth, diseases, and water pollution. Fertilize when plants are growing but not before heavy rainfall. Heavy rains leach the fertilizer below the roots of plants. Once dissolved in the soil, the fertilizer moves downstream with the stormwater runoff. Fertilizer helps plants grow, and that includes plants, called algae, that grow in pond water. Algae is an important part of the food web and helps feed many tiny critters that become fish food, but too much of a good thing is not pretty. Hot weather and lots of dissolved fertilizer in the water can lead to green algae scum on our ponds and lakes and possible fish kills.
4. Shopping for new plants for the yard? Be sure to get the right plant in the right place. Think beyond just sun or shade tolerant. Plant things that can survive with natural rainfall once established (after about 2 months). Refer to the Florida Friendly Plants searchable database at <http://www.floridayards.org>. The Florida Water Star Program also has a searchable plant database at <http://floridawaterstar.com/landscaping.html> You can identify plants by water needs, growth habit and many characteristics. Find out how large they will grow and space them for mature size, not just the size you see them in other landscapes. When designing new areas or replanting beds of plants, group them based on similar water needs so plants that need more frequent watering are not with drought tolerant plants.
5. Plant placement makes a difference in preventing stormwater runoff, too. Leaves deflect raindrops and reduce the runoff force to slow water that would carry soil and nutrients downstream causing water pollution. Shade cools the soil for good root growth.
6. Use organic mulches such as leaves, pine needles, and bark. Decomposing mulch and leaf litter in plant beds adds water holding capacity and nutrient holding capacity to our sandy soils. They can absorb and hold more water and fertilizer, resulting in less runoff.
7. Rinse off yard equipment and wash cars over lawn grass to avoid runoff. Use biodegradable cleaners instead of strong chemicals.

8. Recycle used motor oil instead of pouring it down storm drain. They go directly to a pond or lake carrying pollutants downstream.

Prevent pollution while you care for your landscape this summer.

If you notice your grass or other plants are not growing well, contact the Master Gardener volunteers at the UF IFAS Extension Office in Osceola County. They have many resources to help you identify plants growing in your yard and diagnose plant problems. Call 321-697-3000 or bring samples to the office at Osceola Heritage Park, 1921 Kissimmee Valley Lane, Kissimmee, FL 34744.