HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

PROTECTING OSCEOLA LAKES

What does lawn care have to do with water pollution? More than you may realize. Some of our common landscape maintenance practices cause significant pollution in our ponds, rivers, and lakes.

When it rains, fertilizers and pesticides wash off of landscapes and into storm drains. If your property is waterfront, it washes directly into the water body. Water that goes down storm drains is channeled into stormwater ponds, lakes, or rivers. Sooner or later, even stormwater that is channeled into a pond will flow to the nearest water body.

Contrary to popular belief, stormwater is not cleaned or filtered at the sewer plant. Instead, the fertilizers and pesticides are washed into lakes and ponds with the rainwater. So what are we to do? Stop fertilizing and controlling pests? Not at all. Fear not; you can have a beautiful, healthy lawn without contributing to water pollution. There are many simple ways to prevent pollutants from entering our waters.

First let's take a look at the reasons for keeping lawn chemicals out of the water. Obviously, fertilizer makes plants grow in your lawn, but it also makes plants grow in your lake. When lakes have too many nutrients in them, the water can become green from algae, or covered in floating algae. These are just some of the visible symptoms of nutrient overload. Another consequence of nutrient pollution is the loss of plant and animal diversity, which is not always so obvious.

Pesticides kill the things we don't want in our lawns, like chinch bugs or fungus. Unfortunately, some pesticides can harm or kill things we do want, like fish and frogs. The active ingredients in many ant baits for instance, are highly toxic to aquatic life.

It doesn't seem like the small amount of fertilizer and pesticides running off of your lawn would be detectable in a huge lake, does it? However, when your polluted runoff is added to the polluted runoff of the landscape on your block, in your neighborhood, in your city, etc., it can have quite and impact.

The following landscaping "Do's and "Don'ts" will help you keep a healthy lawn and a healthy lake.

DO let horticulture staff at the Extension Plant Clinic help you diagnose your landscape problems and explore various treatment options.

DON'T routinely use pesticides if you don't have pest problems. "Preventative" treatments ("just in case" treatments) are a waste of time and money. Until you know the appropriate treatment for the specific problem you are having, avoid using pesticides.

DO apply the amount of water recommended on the product label using a hose or sprinkler system.

DON'T apply fertilizers or pesticides if rain is expected within 24 hours. Even if the product label says "water in", applying the correct amount of water is critical for the product to be effective. You cannot control the amount of rain that falls on your lawn. It may rain too little for the product to work well or it may rain so much that the product is washed right off the lawn, or filtered right through the soil.

DO request that your landscape professionals keep a "no-chemical zone" around sensitive areas.

DON'T apply fertilizer or pesticides near storm drains, within ten feet of the water's edge, in a swale (i.e.-ditch), or other areas where rain is likely to carry chemicals into water.

DO leave grass clippings on the lawn where they break down quickly and become free fertilizer for your lawn.

DON'T put grass clippings, leaves, etc. down storm drains or in water bodies. As plants break down, they release nitrogen, which causes excess nutrients in lakes.
DO plant "buffer plants" on slopes if you live on the water. Plants like ornamental grasses or Asiatic jasmine will help filter pollutants before they reach the lake.

DON'T remove all the vegetation from the waterfront. Plants at the water's edge filter pollutants and keep the shoreline from eroding. Additionally, you can be fined for removing shoreline vegetation without a permit. Call Ed Harris at 407-275-4004 to inquire about permits.

If you own a watercraft, you may want to collect water samples with the LAKEWATCH program. Lakewatch gives citizens the opportunity to gather important data used for managing Florida's lakes and monitoring changes in our lakes. Call Eleanor at 321-697-3000 to find out how to become a volunteer.

July is Lakes Awareness Month; help keep our lakes clean and safe by using Florida-friendly landscaping practices all year long.

Call 321-697-3000 to register for these free upcoming classes:

Landscaping for Wildlife
Make your yard a habitat for Florida's wildlife.
July 27th, 10:00am-Noon
Extension Services, Osceola Heritage Park

Low Maintenance Landscapes
Discover the secrets of "Florida-friendly" landscaping.
August 18th, 6:30pm-8:30pm
St. Cloud Civic Center, 3001 17th Street

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