

FAQs

What is a healthy lawn?

A healthy lawn is one that follows **best practices** to present healthy and resilient plants, soil and environment; avoids a spiral of chemical dependency; conserves water and energy; and does not risk the health of children, pets, pollinators, wildlife and our water systems.

Why is a Healthy Lawn important now?

- River Forest is disconnecting sewer and storm water pipes in order to address flooding issues in the Village. It means lawn runoff go directly into our local waters, which affect the drinking water for communities downstream. Healthy, native plantings can also assist with water conservation and avoid flooding.
- In River Forest we have a high quality forest which is rare and endangered. It provides habitat for plant and animal diversity.
- Bees and Monarch butterflies are experiencing population crashes associated with widespread chemical applications in the landscape. They are bellweather species for the insect world.
- There is increasing concern about the long-term health effects of lawn products on human health, especially that of young children

What are 'best practices'?

Best practices are broadly accepted and readily accessible habits to create a healthy lawn. They include

- Avoid chemical pesticides and fertilizers
- Water appropriately and mow high
- Use native plants

Avoid chemical pesticides and fertilizers

How do I use organics on my lawn?

Talk to your lawn care provider and ask to see all products applied. If organics are not being used ask them to supply them. If you service your own yard you can find organic fertilizer locally at Good Earth Greenhouse and Green Home Experts.

How often do I need to fertilize my lawn?

A soil test will tell you if your soil has the right mix of nutrients for the grass you have. Too much fertilizer goes unused by the plants, gets washed away and pollutes the DesPlaines River.

Water appropriately - 1" per week

How do I know if I water too much?

Without rainfall most lawns need 1" water once a week.

How do I know how much water is 1"?

Buy a rain-gauge. Read it weekly and empty it for the coming week. Measure your sprinkler output by placing a container (ie a clean tuna can) on the lawn. Time how long it takes for the water to measure 1" in height. Water that long once a week. If it has rained adjust accordingly.

Can I save money by watering less?

Sprinklers use treated drinking-quality water which is expensive. You can save a lot of money.

Mow high - 3" high and leave clippings

Why mow high?

The higher the grass, the deeper the roots. Grass with deep roots is more resilient. It can resist drought and use (free) nutrients in the soil better. Longer grass also helps conserve moisture in the soil.

Diversifying plant materials and native plants

Don't native plants attract a lot of bugs?

A native plant will have co-evolved with native bugs and are both resistant and useful to native life forms. If you attract the right kind of insects you may be rewarded with a garden that has butterflies, bees, hummingbirds and more.

A plant from Asia or Australia may grow here but has no natural spot in the ecosystem. It either has no defenses and becomes an escalating battleground between hungry insects and the gardener; alternately it feeds and shelters nothing.

Know your soil

What does it mean to know your soil?

The health and character of your soil means that certain plants will thrive and others will fail. In addition, the conditions the soil is exposed to are important to know.

To know your soil examine it and note the areas with

- soil compaction (along driveways, short-cuts, dog paths and routes to play area etc)
- standing water after storms and heavy rainfall
- dry and cracked soil, prone to drought

- heavy shade
- constant sun

Next, test the soil to learn what nutrients it needs or has too much of. Testing entails taking soil samples and sending them to a lab.

How do I test my soil?

This video gives directions and there is a **list of labs** at the end of this document.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=niCaJ5a0Ho0<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=niCaJ5a0Ho0>>

How long will it take for my lawn to adapt to Healthy Lawn practices?

Allow for two years for any lawn to adjust, move away from chemical dependency and for the soil to become healthy enough to start organic processes.

I use a lawn care company. What can I do to have them follow 'best practices'?

Meet with them to tell them about best practices. Take it apart and see what they can do now, what they can do this season and what they can do next year. Help them plan ahead and ask to review products together. If they are not willing to work with you hire a company that will.

Below is a list of companies in our area who offer natural lawn care practices*

Dig Right In Landscaping, Inc.
708 485-1234

Hulen Landscape Contractors
708 443-3381

Mark Koza Landscapes, Inc
630 745-1845

*if your lawn care company will offer this service please contact us through the Park District office

More information

How do I control weeds organically?

- top dress with corn gluten in the spring before the forsythia blooms
- develop a higher thicker lawn with deeper roots which will outcompete weeds (water, mow and feed with best practices)
- use appropriate grass mixtures suited for the changing Chicago climate
- replace lawn in difficult areas with other, native plants

- reset expectations to include some weeds especially in the transition period - a completely uniform lawn is neither natural nor resilient
- each weed thrives under certain conditions - whether soil compaction or mineral imbalance so know your soil and act accordingly
- don't treat all weeds alike
- invest in the right tools and
- remove weeds manually or ask your lawn care provider to do so

Can you provide a link to diagram how to read my weeds?

Sure, there's a chart on page 2 here -

<http://www.beyondpesticides.org/pesticidefreelawns/resources/Read%20Your%20Weeds-Organic%20Lawns.pdf>

Should I leave clippings or take them away?

Leaving lawn clippings in place will also partly help fertilize the soil and partly provide mulch to conserve moisture in the soil.

What can I do about problem areas in the lawn which always looks poorly?

Replace lawn with other plants and make sure you include natives.

Can I diversify my grass mix?

There are many sorts of grasses and they perform best under various conditions. Some grasses are bred to withstand a lot of foot traffic and are ideal for sports fields. Some grasses are bred for other climates altogether and will never thrive except for with the life-support of chemical additives. A mix of grasses and fescues bred for our climate makes a robust, resilient general purpose lawn.

Do native plants look messy?

There are many different plants that can be used in a formally or informally. Books, landscape professionals, native plant societies or a plant nursery that stocks natives will be helpful.

What are pesticides?

Pesticides are a class of chemicals that includes herbicides, insecticides, and fungicides that pose serious risks to both human health and the environment. Pesticides are poisons - they are designed to interrupt basic life processes that are often not unique to the target pest.

What are the concerns to do with human health?

Research has linked pesticides to cancer, asthma, and birth defects as well as neurological, behavioral, reproductive, hormonal, and immune system disorders.

But doesn't the EPA regulate pesticides?

By law no pesticide is allowed to be called safe. The EPA reviews data provided by the manufacturer to determine whether it will pose unreasonable adverse effect to human health and the environment. It is the active ingredient that is reviewed and specifically whether an active ingredient can perform its intended job (to kill) without immediate and serious repercussions to non-target organisms - not minimal repercussions.

No long-term studies are mandatory to evaluate long-term impacts.

The EPA only evaluates the active ingredients not the entire formulation as sold to the public, which is often more hazardous

Are synthetic pesticides faster and more effective?

Synthetic pesticides are poisons that act quickly but can destroy the beneficial microorganisms in the soil, creating a cycle of dependency which weakens the plant. In the long term, synthetic pesticides creates a lawn prone to weeds and diseases.

How do I dispose of left-over pesticides?

Any left-over pesticides need to be disposed of as hazardous waste. The nearest depot is in Naperville 154 Fort Street or in Chicago at Branch Street.

If I get weeds won't my neighbors complain?

A Healthy Lawn looks like a traditional lawn. It is worth noting that many plants we call weeds were considered beneficial by our grandparents who saw dandelions as food and clover as a farmers' friend. Advertising continues to shape our expectation of what a desirable lawn should look like.

How do you mow high?

Set the mower blades to 3" or ask your lawn care service to do so. Some special varieties of grass may need a different height - consult with a Master Gardener or a landscape professional.

Useful information

Local testing labs

Cook Co. Farm Bureau

<http://www.cookcfb.org/membership/programs/soil-testing>

STAT Analysis [312-733-0551](tel:312-733-0551)

Chicago Technology Park, 2242 W Harrison Street, Chicago, IL 60612

STATinfo@STATAnalysis.com<mailto:STATinfo@STATAnalysis.com>

A&L Great Lakes Laboratories, Inc.

3505 Conestoga Drive, Fort Wayne, IN 46808-4414
www.algreatlakes.com<<http://www.algreatlakes.com>>

Plant and soil help

U of I Master Gardeners at Cook Co. Farm Bureau
708-354-3276 Hours: Mon/Thurs 9 am - 1 pm, April 15 - November 15

Did you know?

- 63,000 sq miles of land is being used for lawn in the U.S.
 - 82% of households use pesticides (National Home and Garden Pesticide Use study conducted by the EPA)
 - Almost 70 million pounds of active pesticides are applied to urban lawns each year (37)
 - National Report on Human Exposure to Environmental Chemicals reports that 29 out of 44 commonly used pesticides were found in most people who were tested
 - US Geological Survey report "Pesticides in the Nation's Streams and Ground Water, 1992-2001" found pesticides in 96% of all fish. 100% of all surface waters and 33% of major aquifers in the major water systems studied
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- 58 million gallons gasoline are used in lawn mowers per year
 - typical suburban lawn uses 10,000 gallons of water above and beyond rainfall/year
 - leaf blowers produce 26 times more carbon monoxide than a new light duty vehicle and 49 times more particulate matter (aka soot)
 - 270,000 BTUs of energy required to produce one 100-lb bag of inorganic 6-6-6-fertilizer
 - 625,000 BTUs to cover one acre of turf in liquid pesticide
 - up to 10% of nitrogen in synthetic fertilizer may volatilize or evaporate into the air as ammonia and in high heat and humidity this quantity can rise up to 60%
 - pesticides are VOCs and contribute to declining air quality
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- 74% households fertilize and homeowners use 4 times as much fertilizer per square foot as farmers. The excess gets washed off by rain and the phosphorus and nitrogen cause simple aquatic plants and algae to flourish and they use up the oxygen in the water. Other, more complex life is stressed, killed or pushed out. This excess vegetation also contaminates our drinking water supplies.

More information

Alliance for the Great Lakes <http://greatlakes.org/cleanwater>

Beyond Pesticides <http://www.beyondpesticides.org/lawn/index.php>

EPA Greenacres Landscaping with Native Plants
<http://www.epa.gov/greenacres/wildones/index.html>

EPA Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement <http://www.epa.gov/greatlakes/glwqa/>

Midwest Pesticide Action Center <http://midwestpesticideaction.org>

The Mike Nowak Show <http://www.mikenowak.net/radio.htm>

Millennium Reserve <http://www.millenniumreserve.org/about/>

U.S. Composting Council <http://compostingcouncil.org>

U.S. Geological Society's Water Science School <http://water.usgs.gov/edu/>

West Cook Wild Ones <http://westcook.wildones.org>