Keeping Your Yard Green and Our Water Clean!

The recent surge of long-awaited warm weather has brought some of us back to a long-lost, yet oh so familiar place… our yard! In the weeks ahead we will joyfully watch spring bring our yard back to life. This sacred space surrounding our home hopefully brings feelings of comfort, relaxation, pride, and security. Whether we are lounging with a book in the hammock, playing ball with our children, enjoying a cookout with friends, or tending to a flowerbed, our lawn is an essential space to our family and an extension of our home. We love our lawns! Oh, those great swaths of luxuriant green! We love them so much, in fact, that today the United States is covered with approximately 30 million acres of turf, making grass a bigger agricultural crop than corn and soybeans combined. And our love of green brings in the green, as lawn care is now a lucrative multimillion dollar industry.

The green is here indeed! Since the average size of a home lawn is 1/3 of an acre, all of that yearly mowing, blowing, watering, weeding, and fertilizing require resources and create consequences. Since the post-war era, the notion of the perfect lawn became an integral part of our suburbia status and thousands of new chemicals, including synthetic lawn care products, entered our stores, our homes, our yards, and inadvertently, our waterways. Over the last 50 years the amount of nitrogen and phosphorus entering our waters has escalated dramatically and nutrient pollution is becoming one of America's costliest and most challenging environmental problems. This pollution now threatens our drinking water, our fishing and tourism industries, our property values, our freshwater habitats, and our health. Recent large scale algal blooms fed by the increased presence of nutrients have reached unprecedented numbers in Lake Erie and nearby waterways. Though these harmful algal blooms are the cumulative effect of many different sources, we cannot overlook the 80 million tons of synthetic lawn fertilizers Americans apply each year to our beloved lawns.

From the Ground Up: Building Healthy Soil

The good news is that we can have both - healthy, green lawns and clean, blue water! This year the Geauga Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) is enabling homeowners to break their addictions to lawn care chemicals starting from the ground up. Through educational opportunities and resources, the District is promoting soil health through natural lawn care and helping residents evaluate their old habits, access the needs of their lawn, and apply newly-learned natural lawn care practices that build organic matter, improve soil health, and create a self-sustaining, low-maintenance lawn.

By collaborating with our storm water partners, Good Nature Organic Lawn Care, and other SWCDs and agencies, Geauga SWCD has already hosted one soil health workshop and another regional event is in the works for this fall. These workshops provide an overview of soil health and management, along with ways to implement a natural lawn care system. Topics include soil tests, grass types, organic fertilizers, proper mowing and watering techniques, and ways to control weeds and pests. Free soil testing kits and resources are provided to participants with assistance from the ODNR Division of Soil and Water Resources Healthy Soils Mini-Grant.

Start with a Soil Test

An easy and essential first step to any lawn care program is to test your soil. Just like us, soil needs adequate food, air, and water to function properly and stay healthy. Soil should be considered a living, dynamic body and only healthy soil can produce healthy plants. Anything done to the yard or plants that does not consider the needs of the soil is simply a waste of time and can often cause more harm than good. In fact, many synthetic fertilizers and pesticides actually destroy the beneficial organisms in a lawn's ecosystem. Organic lawn care focuses instead on soil management techniques by building up the nutrients, organisms, and life in the soil over time. These long term results ultimately improve the quality of the soil, increase its ability to hold water and nutrients, and reduce yard maintenance and the money and resources needed for such maintenance - like fuel, water, products, and time. If you haven't already, contact your SWCD or Ohio State University Extension office to obtain a soil testing kit. Test results will provide solid, scientific, and reliable guidance for improving your soil and greening your lawn. Now is the time to make a difference… beginning in your own backyard!