

LAWNSENSE

Keeping your lawn attractive and pest-free the healthy way



By replacing all or part of your lawn with a native ground cover and using indigenous plants in your landscape, you not only help the environment, you help yourself. Native landscapes, or “Greenscapes,” require less nurturing than exotic ones, which means you can spend less time weeding and watering. What’s more, native plants have adapted over time to local conditions and grow more vigorously, so you can avoid using harmful synthetic fertilizers, pesticides and large quantities of water; this improves water quality, increases biodiversity, reduces maintenance costs and protects your family’s health.

Using organic soil amendments and certain cultural practices to create a healthy lawn and landscape eliminates the need to use pesticides and quick-release high nitrogen fertilizers that pollute the Cape’s coastal estuaries and embayments. Nitrogen loading in embayments causes excess algae growth that shades out eelgrass and results in the destruction of valuable fish and shellfish habitat. Pesticides have been implicated in acute poisonings, chronic diseases (such as cancer) and developmental, neurological and behavioral disorders in children.

As you maintain your lawn and landscape, maintain your perspective as well. Remember that dandelions don’t pose a health risk to your family and pets--**but pesticides do.**

Soil Basics for a Natural Lawn

Soil is key to establishing a lush sustainable lawn. A lawn is made up of thousands of individual plants. Plants need good soil to thrive and be healthy. Healthy plants extract nutrients from the soil that make them strong and able to survive harmful insects and diseases and competition from weeds.

6 inches of good loam are needed to develop a healthy soil. Don’t accept sand or clay mixes labeled as loam. If you use 6 inches of good loam as a lawn base you’ll have fewer problems altogether. If you don’t have 6 inches of loam, build up to it by adding compost, good quality loam, or a mix of both. Add ½ inch of loam/compost twice a year to your lawn until you build up to 6 inches of well draining soil.

Get a complete soil test before adding nutrients or lime. Adjust pH to 6.5 (preferably with calcitic lime). If your soil shows < 5% organic matter, apply 1/4”-1/2” of finished compost every fall.

Plant a MIX of grasses - e.g. fine fescues with perennial rye and small amount of bluegrass that is endophytically enhanced for dealing with chinch bugs, billbugs, and sod webworm. A turf monoculture does not compete as well against weeds as a mixture

of grasses. If your lawn area is shaded-consider various low maintenance native ground covers instead of grass. You reap what you sow.

Use organic 3-1-2 fertilizer at the rate of 1 lb. per 1000 sq. ft. (at least 1/3 should be in water- insoluble form) if you are also fertilizing with compost and grass clippings. Don't feed with synthetic chemical fertilizers. Don't over fertilize-it can create juicy, succulent blades vulnerable to disease. If you live by a water body-don't fertilize at all.

Natural Lawn Maintenance

Maintain your lawn by using cultural practices that favor grass over weeds. Below are some hints for keeping your lawn healthy and attractive without using harmful pesticides and polluting chemical fertilizers.

Cut the grass no shorter than 3" high and don't cut more than 1/3 of the leaf blade at any one time. Don't be tempted to cut shorter. Good mowing practices are key to inducing deep root growth and shading out weeds. University studies have shown this can control certain weeds as well or better than herbicides!

Cut only with sharp mower blades. Resharpen blades after every 8 hours of use. Dull blades tear grass rather than cutting it cleanly. Torn grass blades are more susceptible to disease.

Leave grass clippings on the lawn. This adds nitrogen and stimulates earthworms. Chop leaves with your mower and leave them on the lawn, too.

Water deeply but infrequently to encourage deep roots; too much water invites fungal disease, shallow roots and root rot. As soil organic matter builds up less (or even no) water will be needed. Automatic watering systems can waste water and promote disease if not timed correctly or tailored to actual weather conditions. Never water at night.

Alternatives to Chemicals

Pesticides and synthetic fertilizers can kill beneficial critters like earthworms, ladybugs, honey bees, butterflies and other pollinators; they pollute water supplies as well. There are many effective alternatives to using pesticides and synthetic fertilizers.

Use corn gluten to suppress crabgrass and other weeds. Make sure to apply corn gluten early in the year (when the forsythia is blooming) **before** weeds emerge. Spread only on established lawns at 20 pounds per 1000 sq.ft. It also contains 10% Nitrogen - so factor that in if you also fertilize. (Be sure no people or animals in your home have an allergy to corn.) Use 1:1 vinegar to water mixture to kill weeds; pull the rest before they go to seed; flame weeds in walkways.

Correct thatch buildup by cutting back on water and fertilizer and eliminating pesticides. Spread a light layer-3/8"-of compost over the lawn. Compost microbes will break down the thatch and also suppress disease. Aerate, if necessary.

Use Grub Guard (beneficial nematodes) or Milky Spore for control of grubs.

Don't use pesticides (herbicides, insecticides, fungicides, etc). -icides suppress the soil's biological activity which in turn reduces its ability to suppress pathogens (disease-causing microbes); -icides also kill earthworms which build and aerate the soil. It takes a while for some soil microorganisms to get over a hit with pesticides; some species never recover-leaving your soil vulnerable to further disease and infestation. You may undo all your other good lawn practices by applying pesticides.