

Healthy Lawns and Yards for Healthy Communities

This is the time of year of beautiful warm weather, sunshine, opportunities to spend time outdoors ... and little yellow signs. These little yellow signs announce the latest pesticide spraying, with a circle around images of adults, kids and pets, and a diagonal line through it indicating “off-limits.” They are cropping up on people’s lawns all around town, along with the beautiful blooming daffodils and crocuses. So what’s the big deal?

A uniform lush green lawn is a point of pride for many people, however these come with many costs, costs that really add up. Annually, lawns consume a lot of resources—nearly 3 trillion gallons of water, 200 million gallons of gas for mowing, and 70 million pounds of pesticides in the U.S. Many people don’t realize that lawns maintained with synthetic fertilizers and pesticides pose a serious health threat to people, pets and the environment. Lawns also decrease natural habitat vital to wildlife, and pesticides kill many of the insects that form the base of the food chain and include our essential pollinators. And the air pollution from gas powered lawnmowers also contributes to climate change.

Why Chem-Free?

Lawn care chemicals—applied by homeowners or lawn care companies—contain potent toxins that kill organisms considered pests, such as dandelions and beetle grubs. Scientific evidence shows that these chemicals also affect people, especially children, and pets. Exposure to certain lawn care pesticides has been associated with increased risks of a variety of serious health problems, including asthma, several types of child and adult cancers, as well as cancers in dogs.

The effects of harmful lawn care chemicals reach far beyond your family and yard. Lawn care chemicals make their way through the surrounding environment in rain runoff. This polluted runoff can flow into streams and seep into groundwater, degrading water quality and promoting growth of harmful, sometimes invasive, aquatic plants. Lawn care chemicals also move through the food chain, becoming more concentrated and harming wildlife. What’s more, using herbicides and pesticides to tackle weeds and insects can actually be counter-productive to your lawn’s health, because these poisons also kill beneficial organisms in the soil that help produce the nutrients plants need to grow. This weakens the grass, fosters thatch and encourages disease.

How to Have a Healthy Lawn and Yard

Fortunately, you can have an attractive and healthy lawn without using harmful synthetic chemicals. You can make simple changes to your lawn care routine, like mowing higher (3”), leaving your grass clippings on the lawn, using organic fertilizers, aerating to reduce soil compaction, and de-thatching, to make your lawn healthier and more vigorous naturally.

You can improve the health of you soil. Common weeds considered by many as pests are a sign that the soil is deficient in nutrients or unbalanced in some way, or very compacted or poorly drained. Instead of treating the symptoms using pesticides, it’s important to discover and treat the reason the pests are present, the underlying soil conditions. Soil testing is the first step to learning more about your soil’s health. You can have your soil tested for free by the [CT Agricultural Experiment Station](#), and receive a report including recommended soil amendments to improve your lawn most effectively.

Take the pledge to go chem-free! Use safe alternatives to get rid of common pests if needed. You can pull out dandelions at their weakest—when blooming; eliminate crabgrass by mowing high and using organic fertilizers; treat weeds in driveways or sidewalk cracks with white vinegar; and control grubs with alternatives like beneficial nematodes or Neem.

You can also reduce the size of your lawn by growing a variety of other plants to promote a healthy, diverse ecosystem in your yard. Grass requires a lot of sun, water and good soil—it is one of the highest maintenance plants we can grow. Instead, plant groupings of native trees, shrubs, grasses and flowers that are compatible with our climate and environmental conditions; use ground covers that require less maintenance than grass like the native Pennsylvania sedge; choose plants that support our local pollinators, including butterflies and bees; or grow edibles or plant a vegetable garden! You may find that you are saving yourself a lot of money and a fair amount of work as well.

Low maintenance grasses are another option, according to local gardening expert Tom Christopher. These include the fine fescues, planted as a blend of several different types, which can thrive with little to no watering, only need mowing once a month or less, and do well in full sun or partial shade. Check out his [Growing Greener](#) podcasts, some of which address sustainable and organic lawns.

What More Can You Do?

Are you concerned about others who use lawn care chemicals in your neighborhood or community? You can register with the state to get advance warning of nearby commercial pesticide spraying at the [pesticide pre-notification registry](#). You can also talk to neighbors and friends about the harmful effects of using pesticides—both on private property and in public areas like playing fields.

Together, by changing our behavior and helping spread the word, we can make our yards, streams, and local environment better.

Middletown's Project Green Lawn Campaign

Environmental advocates got together with City staff and commissions in 2006 to start Project Green Lawn, an initiative to encourage residents and businesses to maintain healthy lawns free of synthetic pesticides and fertilizers. This public awareness campaign was a collaboration between the Public Works Department, Resource Recycling Advisory Commission and Commission on Conservation and Agriculture, with support and assistance from the Connecticut River Coastal Conservation District and the Jonah Center, and grants from The Rockfall Foundation, Middletown, CT, and New England Grassroots Environment Fund. The centerpiece of the campaign is an educational brochure, which can be downloaded from the [City website](#). Some of the information in the brochure is summarized in this article. If you are interested in obtaining copies of the brochure to distribute in the community to help inform others, please contact Kim O'Rourke, City of Middletown Recycling Coordinator, kim.orourke@middletownct.gov

Here are a few good resources for organic lawn care, diversifying habitat in your yard, and reducing the size of your lawn:

The Organic Lawn Care Manual, by Paul Tukey

[Grassroots Environmental Education](#)

[Beyond Pesticides Lawns and Landscapes](#) (numerous fact sheets available)

[NOFA Organic Landcare Program \(homeowner resources\)](#)

[USDA "Backyard Conservation" booklet and tip sheets](#)

[National Wildlife Federation Backyard Wildlife Habitat program](#)

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