



# Background

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**The first step in fertilizing your lawn should be to get a soil test. The test will tell you how much and what type of fertilizers your soil needs for optimum plant growth. Testing kits are available at most local hardware stores or you can send a sample off to your local Soil Conservation District office.**

**Most soils in this region have extra reserves of phosphorus, a common ingredient in do-it-yourself fertilizers. Commercial fertilizer with no- or low - phosphorus content is often the best option in the Chesapeake region. A soil test can tell you for sure.**

**Keep fertilizer off paved surfaces and don't apply it before it rains. Otherwise, you'll just be sending the fertilizer—and your money—down the drain.**

**Leave grass clippings on the lawn after mowing. Nitrogen from the clippings will nourish the soil, which means you'll need less fertilizer.**

**For more information please visit [www.chesapeakebay.net](http://www.chesapeakebay.net) or call 1-800-Your-Bay.**

## Proper Lawn Fertilization in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed

Both nitrogen and phosphorous are essential to all life-forms within the Chesapeake Bay watershed. Nitrogen assists plants and animals in synthesizing protein while phosphorous is essential for cellular growth. And while these nutrients are essential to all plant life within the Bay, an excess of these same nutrients can be harmful.

Every year, millions of pounds of nitrogen and phosphorous are applied to lawns throughout the Chesapeake Bay watershed as lawn fertilizer. The nitrogen and phosphorous that is not immediately absorbed by the soil or taken up by plants eventually reach the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries through storm-water runoff.

### When life givers become life takers

Excess amounts of phosphorus and nitrogen cause rapid growth of phytoplankton, creating dense populations, or blooms. These blooms become so dense that they reduce the amount of sunlight available to underwater bay grasses. Without sufficient light, plants cannot photosynthesize and produce the food they need to survive. The loss of sunlight can kill the grasses.

Unconsumed algae will ultimately sink and be decomposed by bacteria in a process that depletes dissolved oxygen. Like humans, most aquatic species require oxygen. When the oxygen is gone, fish and other species will die unless they move to other areas of suitable habitat.

### Bringing the Bay to your backyard

Put your yard in touch with its inner Chesapeake by drawing on what is natural and traditional in this swath of the mid-Atlantic. Skip the cookie-cutter hyper-green lawn for what best suits our area: A home surrounded by trees and shrubs, with natural shade and a softer, healthier, more inviting landscape that comes with proper care.

The three most important things you can do now are:

- Hold off on fertilizer until fall to avoid creating weak roots. Excessive fertilizer won't help your lawn; it will weaken it and send runoff into local streams and the Bay where fish and shellfish are already at risk.
- Add more trees and shrubs to break up the dull expanse of lawn and add more color and variety. That will create a more eye-pleasing aesthetic, provide more natural shade, help prevent the runoff that threatens stream health and mean fewer Saturdays with your lawnmower.
- Consider landscape alternatives that reflect the Chesapeake tradition, with native plants, planting islands, rain gardens, water gardens and natural shade for the patio or deck. These lower-cost or lower-maintenance alternatives to the typical lawn are bound to suit any lifestyle.