

A Greener Approach to Green Lawns



Did you know that American homeowners apply 10 times more fertilizer, herbicides, and pesticides to their grass than farmers apply to their crops? This results in chemically dependent lawns that negatively affect the health of people, pets, plants, and wildlife. By adopting a common sense, environmentally savvy approach to caring for our backyards, it's easy to create a beautiful lawn that's healthier for everyone—and save money in the process!

a greener approach.



less is more.

Consider converting part of your lawn to meadow by letting the turf grasses grow and augment them with a native seed mix that includes colorful wildflowers for beauty and biodiversity. Mow annually to control woody plant growth and spot control invasive plant species that may emerge. If your township has a lawn height ordinance, talk to them about the benefits of grassland meadows to the local ecology.



Meadow at Stoneleigh: a natural garden

get to know your soil.

If you are applying fertilizer to your lawn without first understanding your soil's requirements, you are probably wasting your money. For \$10, you can purchase a soil test kit from your county's Cooperative Extension Office. Penn State's Agricultural Services Lab will test your sample and send you results and information on steps you can take to bring your soil to ideal growing conditions. (For more information, visit www.aasl.psu.edu or call 814-863-0841.)



Soil prepped for a pollinator meadow planting at Bear Creek Preserve

loving lime.

If you feel compelled to put something on your lawn each year, try lime. Most soils in southeastern Pennsylvania are acidic; lime helps to neutralize this acidity. A balanced pH (a measure of soil acidity) will improve the availability of nutrients, encourage thatch decomposition, and benefit soil micro-organisms, all of which are essential to the soil's health and fertility. Lime can be applied to your lawn any time of the year. Because it takes several months to be fully incorporated into the soil, however, it's best applied in the fall. (The soil test you get will reveal the amount of lime required to bring your soil to optimal levels.)



Lime can be used to neutralize acidity

dress it up.

Consider applying a 1/8-inch to 1/4-inch top dressing of decomposed organic matter such as garden compost, well-seasoned manure (never fresh), or leaf compost (often available free from the township) to your turf. These amendments improve drainage, add nutrients, and improve your soil's capacity to hold water so it's less likely to dry out in the summer. .



Compost bin at Crow's Nest Preserve

cut it out.

Sharp mower blades produce a cleaner cut and slice through grass rather than pulling it by the roots, so be sure to sharpen them annually. Cutting with a sharp blade will give your lawn a more uniform appearance and will help extend the life of your mower because the engine will not have to work as hard. While you are at it, set the blades for a mowing height that will remove only the top one-third of the grass. This higher setting will allow the grass to compete with lower growing weeds. Taller grass also shades the ground from the sun, reducing the need to water. It's best to begin the season mowing at 2½ inches, and then gradually raise the mower height as the season continues to 3½ inches in the heat of the summer. And did you know a typical lawn mower emits 10 to 12 times more hydrocarbon than an automobile? Consider switching to a battery powered, electric, or push mower. These create zero pollution, and—in the case of the push mower—gives you a great workout.



Sharpen mower blades annually

clip and save.

Turf clippings decompose rapidly and are best left on the lawn where they can contribute a substantial amount of nitrogen and other nutrients to the soil. Any large clumps of grass that might remain after mowing can be used to mulch around trees or in the garden or added to your compost pile.



Grass clippings can be used as mulch

develop a wilder aesthetic.

There is much to appreciate about so-called weeds, not the least of which is how much healthier your yard will be without all the chemicals often used to eradicate them. And weeds can offer unexpected benefits to your lawn's ecosystem. For example, white clover and dandelion attract aphid-hungry ladybugs and beneficial pollinators such as native bees. If you can't curb your urge to kill weeds, use corn gluten meal—a non-toxic byproduct of the corn milling process—as a pre-emergent in early spring. Studies indicate corn gluten meal reduces weeds by 60 to 90 percent.



White clover at Stoneleigh: a *natural garden*



Lawn, meadow, and native plants at Stoneleigh: a *natural garden*

get inspired.

Come see how lawn, meadows, and native plantings can successfully work together at Natural Lands' Stoneleigh: a *natural garden*. For hours and directions, visit stoneleighgarden.org.