

WHAT IS A HEALTHY LAWN?

A healthy lawn means a safe lawn.

A healthy lawn is much more than dense turf and minimal weeds. A healthy lawn is an ecosystem of plants, earthworms, insects, air, water, and micro-organisms. An important feature of a healthy lawn is that it is a safe place for our families and our pets. How we choose to care for our lawns affects not only our own families, but also, our community and environment.

Healthy soil:

The foundation of a healthy lawn.

Healthy soil is the foundation of a healthy lawn. Earthworms and insects tunnel air pockets into the soil that help supply roots with air and water. Micro-organisms help this process by binding soil particles and nutrients in beneficial ways for grass roots. Strong biological activity from worms and micro-organisms help deliver nutrients, air, and water to grass. Healthy soil supports healthy turf, which in turn grows thick and strong and can resist pests including weeds.

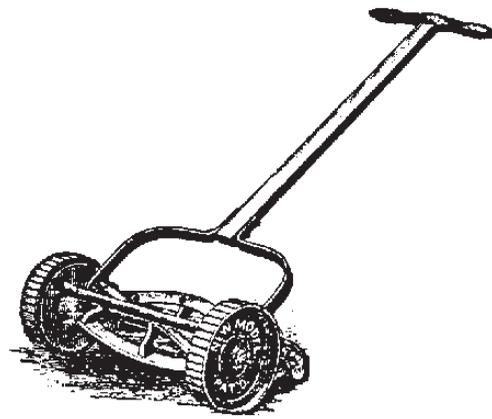
Stress-free turf:

Another key to a healthy lawn.

Lawns grow best in full sun on well aerated soil. Conditions such as shade and soil compaction can stress turf. A lawn under stress is more likely to suffer attacks from insects, bacteria, and fungi and less likely to compete well with weeds. Keep your lawn stress free to keep it healthy and strong.

What happens to lawns when pesticides and conventional chemical fertilizers are used?

Pesticides and conventional chemical fertilizers damage soil health and weaken turf. Concentrated doses of conventional fertilizers feed shallow roots. The deeper roots, which are necessary for strong turf, get little nourishment and become stressed. Stressed lawns with shallow roots require more water and are more vulnerable to weeds, insects, and disease. Additionally, years of using pesticides and conventional chemical fertilizers decrease the soil's biological activity from worms and other beneficial organisms. 'Inert' ingredients that are commonly mixed with conventional fertilizers can also harm these beneficial organisms.



HEALTHY LAWN TIPS

PLANTING AND SEEDING

- Reduce the amount of turf you have to maintain. Try landscaping with native plants.
- Use grass species for your area and conditions. Choose a mix of shade and sun grasses. 'No mow' or fine fescue grasses work well for areas in part shade where you don't walk much.
- For sunny lawns, add dwarf white ('Dutch') clover seed at 2–5 oz per 1000 ft². Clover in lawns helps add nitrogen.
- Avoid planting a lawn in the summer. Fall or early spring is best. Let the lawn go dormant in the summer.
- Set your mower blade high, to 2–3". Longer grass is more resistant to disease and will shade out weeds.
- Overseed lawns by adding grass seed to bare areas and existing lawn in the spring and fall. Dense grass helps keep out weeds. Corn gluten cannot be used at the same time since it will prevent germination of grass seed.

SOIL HEALTH / FERTILIZING

- Let grass clippings fall on the lawn. They add nitrogen to the soil. Mulch mow your leaves in fall for the same reason.
- Core aerate lawns every spring or fall, pulling out plugs to bring air to roots. Make paths of field stones or bark chips to prevent compaction.
- Apply a thin layer (½–1") of compost once or twice a year in spring and fall to build your soil. Or, have a professional apply active compost tea.

- Fertilize with nitrogen once a year (shady lawns) or twice a year (sunny lawns) in spring and fall. Use fertilizer from natural sources such as chicken manure, corn gluten meal, alfalfa, kelp, and fish.
- Have your soil tested to see if it has the proper nutrients before applying fertilizer. (Call the University of Wisconsin-Madison Soil Testing Lab (608) 262-4364 <http://uwlab.soils.wisc.edu>).

WEEDS

- Prevent weeds if possible. Monitor weeds as they appear and pull or rake them out. There are upright weeding tools that make it easier. Cut weeds before they go to seed.
- If weeds begin to take over, spot kill entire areas. Use boiling water, a flame weeder, or organic herbicides that contain ingredients such as concentrated soaps, vinegars and plant oils.
- Kill larger areas by smothering with black plastic or carpet for several months.
- Try corn gluten meal (12–20 lbs per 1000 ft²) in early spring or fall to halt the germination of broadleaf weeds. If you plan to overseed, corn gluten cannot be used at the same time since it will prevent germination of grass seed.

OTHER TIPS

- Water your lawn only if it is new or is very dry in spring or fall. Then water deeply.
- If you pay a company to take care of your lawn, choose one that specializes in organic lawn care or ask for the above services from your current provider.