

## Green Lawn Care

### Making Your Yard Environmentally Friendly

By Brad Schmett

Having a beautiful yard doesn't mean you have to sacrifice the health of the environment. Low emission lawn equipment, organic fertilizers, and thoughtful landscaping can help you protect the environment as you beautify your personal space.

#### Low-Impact Landscaping

A mix of trees, shrubs, and grass is effective visually as well as environmentally. Trees shade the house from sun and insulate it from winter winds, helping reduce energy usage. Shrubs can provide structure to the landscape and offer habitat for wildlife and birds. Native plants are typically low maintenance and reduce the impact on the environment even more by limiting the influx of invasive species.

Local agricultural extension service personnel can provide suggestions for the appropriate turf grasses for your area. Choosing an appropriate grass not only increases the chance of success with your lawn, but also helps limit fertilizer use and watering. Grass roots grow in proportion to the length of the blades, so keeping grass at around 2-1/2 to 3 inches tall helps to establish deep roots that can gather water and soil nutrients efficiently. Longer blades also shade the soil surface, reducing water evaporation and discouraging weed seed germination.

Watering too frequently wastes precious water supplies. Don't use automatic sprinklers indiscriminately. Even in dry areas, home lawns simply don't require daily watering. The best rule of thumb is to water deeply but infrequently. Also watch the rate at which water is applied; try to imitate a slow, soaking rain shower. Let the landscape dry completely before watering again.

#### Organic Fertilizers

Organic fertilizers help nourish your landscape without increasing watering needs, developing suffocating thatch, or encouraging pests. However, some organics are made from non-renewable resources. Watch out for heavy usage of guano, rock phosphate, greensand, and peat moss. Commercial harvesting of these organics can have a negative impact on the environment. Instead choose fish emulsion, seaweed extracts, or compost. Making your own compost or using that available through local farmers and ranchers is the most environmentally-friendly choice.

Whatever organic fertilizer you choose should be only an amendment to your landscape. Your first step is to insure that your soil is healthy by monitoring the organic matter composition. Overuse of any fertilizer, even organics, is bad for your plants and for the environment. A soil test is the best way to determine exactly what type and quantity of amendments your soil needs. Your local agricultural extension service can help by providing soil test kits.

#### Proper Lawn Equipment

In 1990, Congress required the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to investigate the air quality problems associated with small engines. EPA determined that the home use of gas-powered lawn equipment accounted for almost 5 per cent of the total man-made hydrocarbons contributing to harmful ground-level ozone. EPA initiated standards to lower these emissions.

Consumers can now purchase low-emission small engines at every lawn and garden equipment outlet. All new manufacture of this equipment must meet EPA standards and the manufacturers are required to label each engine as meeting EPA regulations. Using this new equipment greatly reduces your impact on the environment. Plus, these engines are more durable and fuel efficient. After purchasing new equipment, remember to recycle your old equipment for scrap instead of selling it. This helps remove high-emission engines from operation.

Another option is electric equipment and manual tools. Electric mowers and trimmers do not emit damaging carbon monoxide and hydrocarbons. Many rechargeable models are now available and are easier to use than model requiring electric cords.

The use of electric equipment doesn't eliminate your carbon footprint entirely as electric generation does create air pollutants. To really "go green" try the old a reel mower. Many light-weight models are now available and are very efficient for small yards. You supply the power, reducing fuel costs and giving you a good work-out in the process. In addition, reel mowers make a very sharp, clean cut and producing a prettier lawn than power mowers.

#### Summary

Going green in your yard doesn't mean you have to be a source of pollution or environmental degradation in your neighborhood. It may take a little more thought, but there are plenty of options that help you create a beautiful landscape and a healthy planet.