

Are You Smart in Your Use of Lawn Fertilizer?



Fertilizing in the fall is a great way to get a jump start on a lush, green lawn next spring, but applying fertilizer improperly can pose a hazard to local water bodies. Fertilizer is composed of nitrogen, phosphorous, and potassium; and when applied to lawns, it helps grass grow. However, problems can arise from improper usage - by applying too much product or not sweeping up fertilizer on driveways and sidewalks, the result can cause excessive algae growth and an unhealthy imbalance in lakes, streams, and rivers.

Many fertilizers contain phosphorous, which enables lawns to grow faster. Unfortunately, when phosphorous ends up in a stream or lake, it also makes algae grow. The good news is that phosphorous is only needed for new growth. Once a lawn is established, most Indiana soils already contain enough phosphorous.

“Adding more phosphorous to our lawns is like trying to fill an already full gas tank in our cars,” said Indiana Department of Environmental Management (IDEM) Commissioner Thomas Easterly. “Homeowners with plans to fertilize their lawns are encouraged to purchase zero or low phosphorous fertilizers and to check nitrogen, phosphorous, and potassium numbers on fertilizer bags.” When fertilizer is applied before a rainstorm or if it is spread on the sidewalk or paved driveway or street, much of it will be washed into the storm sewers. From there, the fertilizer travels to the nearest stream, river, or lake.

Recommendations for proper lawn care and fertilizer use include:

- Test your lawn and soil. Contact your local county extension office to find out how to test your soil and determine how much nitrogen, phosphorous, and potassium your lawn needs.
- Select a fertilizer that is right for your lawn and soil. The label on fertilizer bags lists a fertilizer grade, which is a national standard, and it consists of three numbers which represent the amount of primary nutrients; the first number is the amount of nitrogen, the second is the amount of phosphorous, and the third is the amount of potassium.
- Find alternatives to fertilizer high in phosphorous. Choose phosphorous-free products that are available at local lawn and garden centers. As an alternative, consider using organic compost or homemade compost. Garden or yard waste make excellent compost which releases nutrients more slowly.
- Fertilize at the proper times. As fall fertilization helps prepare lawns for next year, spring fertilization makes grass grow faster, causing the need to mow more often. Therefore, fertilize in the fall, not in the spring.
- Use fertilizers sparingly. Lawns and many plants need less fertilizer, less often, than one might think.
- Be mindful and cautious when applying fertilizer. Sweep up any fertilizer that lands on hard surfaces such as driveways, sidewalks or streets. Never hose off these areas as the fertilizer could run into storm drains and streams.
- Maintain a buffer strip of natural vegetation, such as wildflowers and native grasses bordering watercourses and ponds. This traps and keeps excess fertilizers from seeping into the water.
- Refrain from bagging grass. Use a mulching lawn mower to cut one-third of the blade length each week and naturally fertilize your lawn with grass clippings.

For additional information, contact Karen Teliha, IDEM Community Health and Education Coordinator, at (800) 988-7901 or visit their [website](#).

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a publication prepared by:
Kosciusko Lakes and Streams
Tippecanoe Watershed Foundation.