

Massachusetts Master Gardener Association

FACT SHEET



Have Gardening Questions? The **Master Gardener Help Line Hours** are 10 a.m. – 2 p.m. on Fridays (all year) as well as Wednesdays (March-November) and Mondays (April-October).

Phone: 617-933-4929 Email: mghelpline@masshort.org.

Healthy Lawn Alternatives

Lawns are an American icon. But the perfect lawn we are encouraged to strive for is not perfect for the environment, your wallet or your family. It is a high maintenance landscape choice requiring large amounts of water, chemicals, labor and money.

Lawns are not natural to this part of the world. Ours were inspired by the estates of England, where the climate is cooler and wetter. The average US lawn is 15000 square feet, needing 40 hours of mowing and producing two tons of clippings each year. Lawn watering accounts for one-third of all urban water use. How much lawn do you need—as a play area, for entertaining, for curb appeal?

Let's look at how to have a great lawn that's not unhealthy for your family or environment.

1. Start by getting a soil test. How can you add anything to your soil before you know what it needs? A \$9 test from UMass will tell you what's missing—and what's not!
2. Aerate your lawn—use a spring metal rake to remove winter debris before spring growth begins. If it has been heavily compacted, have it mechanically aerated.
3. Skip the herbicides. Whether we call it weed control or crabgrass preventer, it is a poison that damages the environment by killing off the good bacteria and fungi that make soil healthy and fertile.
4. Fertilize with an eyedropper. Too much is far worse for the grass and environment than too little. Top dressing your lawn with just ¼" of compost adds a natural fertilizer and enriches the soil. Repeatedly fertilizing

promotes quick, but not healthy, growth.

5. Mow properly. Grass mown to three inches shades out many weeds and keeps its own roots cooler, needing less water. Leave clippings where they fall, they add nitrogen (fertilizer) so you don't have to. Clippings do not cause thatch on a healthy lawn.
6. Make certain your mower blade is sharp in order to cut and not tear the grass. Replace your heavily-polluting gas mower with an electric, battery driven or push reel mower.
7. Add some clover to the mix. Until the 'weed and feed' combination was invented, clover was part of most lawns. Clover takes nitrogen from the air and produces food for the itself and nearby grass, reducing the amount of fertilizer you need to add..
8. Don't water! Half of all lawn water is lost to evaporation, wind or overwatering, When your lawn goes dormant during the heat of the summer, you kill grubs, not the grass. Grass will green up rapidly when the weather cools and rain returns. If you must water, water early in the day, one inch, once a week.
9. Hold the pesticides. Most insects are not harmful to your lawn or garden. Insects will attract birds—the best pesticide in the world.
10. Shrink your lawn—how much lawn do you really need or use? Consider replacing lawn with ground covers where you seldom walk, shrub beds for color and low maintenance, a vegetable garden for fresh produce.

The Massachusetts Master Gardener Association is a non-profit organization whose mission is to share knowledge and experience with the public through outreach programs in education, horticulture and gardening; to provide the Master Gardener Training Program to interested members of the public; and to provide graduates of the Master Gardener Training Program with educational and practical opportunities to extend their knowledge and interests in gardening and related topics. <http://www.massmastergardeners.org/>