

The Four Seasons of Water Quality Protection

A yard provides a very personal place to observe the four seasons. The first blooming bulbs of spring, tomatoes or corn of summer in the garden, fiery colors of autumn or the first winter snowfall are all important, annual events. Each season also has its own landscape maintenance needs. Home landscape management activities have impacts far beyond the individual property lines, neighborhoods, and the Village because of the way landscapes are linked together by water moving through the environment.

By recognizing how each home landscape is connected to the environment as a whole, and managing the landscape with this connection in mind, everyone can contribute to protecting and restoring natural resources, especially local water quality. Very small changes in everyday landscape management activities in every season of the year can add up to very big changes in water quality protection.

Spring

- Recycle winter debris. Lawns and gardens need to be raked out to remove the leaves, twigs and branches deposited during winter storms. Use this material as the base for a new compost pile OR chop it up (with a lawn mower or shredder) and use it to re-mulch around foundations, under shrubs and trees, and in groundcover beds rather than going out and buying bags of bark mulch. Don't dump brush and leaves into streams or wetland areas. They add excess nutrients to the system and may cause flooding by blocking water flow.
- Sweep up leftover salt and sand from the road or driveway to keep it out of storm drains and local water courses. This sand will contain salt and other pollutants, so don't use it in vegetable gardens or sand boxes, or dump it in a pile "out back". Store it in buckets for next winter.
- Rethink the early dose of lawn fertilizer. Avoid "weed and feed" type products that mix pesticides and fertilizers. Why pay for chemicals that you don't need or that force you to start mowing earlier and more often? Put off the first dose of fertilizer until mid-May or apply a thin layer of compost to add organic material to the soil while providing a more balanced dose of nutrients for healthy lawn growth.
- Cover bare soil. If lawn areas are bare or plantings have died over the winter, don't leave exposed soil. Re-seed or mulch to prevent soil erosion. Consider dead plants an opportunity to add native species with multiple season interest to the landscape.



Summer

- Avoid wasting water. Most plants and the lawn are happy with one inch of water a week, so keep the hose coiled up when the rain has been coming down.
- A thick (at least two inches) layer of mulch in gardens, around shrubs and under trees prevents evaporation of water from the soil, keeping the ground cooler and plants happier. Thick mulch layers also inhibit weed seed germination. Organic mulches provide some nutrients as they decompose, reducing the need for fertilizers.



- Avoid lawn stress. Keep the lawn mower blade sharp, mow often enough that no more than one-third of the grass blade is cut off at a time, and try to mow when the grass is completely dry. A mulching mower blade recycles grass clippings while mowing, returning moisture and nutrients to the soil and reducing the need for fertilizer.
- Cut down on chemicals. Cut down on or eliminate fertilizer use. Upgrade your soils by adding composted organic matter rather than chemicals that may damage the natural microbial communities in the soil and promote pest problems.

Autumn

- Gardens need bedcovers. When cleaning out vegetable and flower gardens, don't leave the soil bare for the winter.
- Plant things! Early autumn is the best time to transplant shrubs and other perennials and to re-seed lawns. Choose grass seed mixes that match your site. Early autumn is the best time for a single dose of fertilizer for good grass root growth and a healthy lawn next spring. Slow release or organic fertilizers stay where plants can use them and out of the local waters and wells. Keep watering all new plantings until the ground is frozen to give the roots plenty of opportunity to grow.
- Save the leaves. Leaves have lots of landscaping uses. Make a compost pile, chop them and mulch the landscaping and garden beds, or create new beds under the trees from which they fell.



Winter

- Rethink snow control. Sand and salt from snow removal are two major sources of water pollution they aren't exactly good for the lawn or other plants either. Use them sparingly, if you must. Consider cutting down on the total amount used over the winter.



Each idea here is a tiny twist on “gardening as usual”.
Protecting water quality and the environment just requires a
little thought and a little care from individuals and provides
big benefits for everyone.