
“THE PUDDLE”

THE NORTH KINGSTOWN DEPARTMENT OF WATER SUPPLY NEWSLETTER

September 2021

Healthy Lawn Care and Renovation

Lawns can often be renovated simply by improving management

Now is the time to work towards an attractive lawn that also protects our water resources. Late summer/early fall is the best time to re-seed and renovate. A lawn that is healthy and well-established can out-compete most weeds and withstand a certain amount of stress from drought, insects, and disease.

- **Don't guess, soil test.** Whether you are seeding a new lawn or renovating an existing lawn, a soil test is very important. It is the only way to know how much lime and fertilizer (if any) are needed.

Maintaining proper soil pH through liming is very important for lawn fertility. When soil pH drops below 6.0, soil nutrients can become “tied up” and unavailable to the grasses. Soils in RI are naturally acidic, so correcting soil pH is an important first step, it frees up nutrients in the soil. Native plants such as mountain laurel, hollies and rhododendrons can naturally tolerate acidic soils, so reducing lawn area with native plants reduces the need for management intensive inputs.

Fertilize the lawn only if needed. Consider using organic fertilizers or compost, which provide a slow, steady release of nutrients. When leaving the lawn clippings on the lawn, most lawns will not need more than 2 lbs. of N/1,000 sq. ft. per season. Apply no more than 1 lb. N/1,000 sq. ft. at any one time – one application in May and one application in September is best. Do not apply fertilizer beyond October 15th to reduce pollution risk.

- **Choose lawn grass mixes that require less fertilizers, pesticides and water.** A slice-seeder is one way to introduce new seed into an existing lawn. Turf-type tall fescue and fine leaf fescues are tolerant of drought and low fertility. Most fine leaf fescues are also shade tolerant. White clover is beneficial in lawns; it's a legume that “fixes” nitrogen in the air and converts it to a form that plants can use, improving soil fertility.

- **Proper mowing** is important for maintaining lawn health. Mow to a height of two to three inches, which encourages deeper roots, discourages weed growth, and reduces evaporation. This reduces watering and pest control needs. Mower blades should be kept sharp and the lawn mowed frequently enough to avoid removing more than one third of the leaf blade to further reduce risk of lawn disease problems. Consider leaving grass clippings on the lawn as a source of natural nutrients. When mowed properly with a sharp, mulching blade this does not create problems with thatch build-up.

- **Address problems with soil compaction and thatch build-up.** This results in shallow roots and reduced water infiltration and air flow. Efforts to improve soil fertility will not be as successful and pollution risks due to runoff will be high until these problems are corrected. Mechanical soil aeration and coring can help loosen compacted soil. Thatch is a dense layer of dead grass, stems and roots that develops between the soil surface and the growing grass. While some thatch is normal, excessive thatch problems are often a sign of over-fertilization and improper mowing. Mechanical de-thatching in the early fall is recommended for lawns with more than one-inch of thatch build-up.

Consider Alternatives to Lawn: Depending on your yard conditions, lawn grass may not be the best landscape choice for certain areas. Early fall is also a great time to establish native and sustainable trees, shrubs, groundcovers and other plants that are naturally pest resistant and tolerant of certain conditions. Shade gardens, rock gardens, border beds, permeable patios and walkways may offer a site-suitable alternative that saves time, money and labor.

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If you've ever dodged the rain, falling in sheets from the roof above you, only to have to wade through a giant puddle as you get to your car, then you've encountered stormwater. Most of us probably have noticed stormwater flowing down the street during rainstorms. But have you ever given thought to where that water winds up or what is actually in the water? The reality might surprise you.

In North Kingstown most stormwater heads either directly to the Narragansett Bay, or it gets there through storm drains emptying into the Hunt or Annaquatucket Rivers. While many people assume that storm drains lead to some type of treatment facility, that is almost never the case, and it definitely doesn't happen in North Kingstown. Whatever enters local storm drains eventually enters the Narragansett Bay.

The first obvious question is, Why is that a problem? The problem is that stormwater is polluted water. When rain hits the pavement, it picks up and mixes with what's there. That includes everything from bacteria in dog waste that someone didn't scoop to oil leaking from a car. It includes the fertilizer that your neighbor spilled on the sidewalk and the soap that he used to wash his car in the driveway. It also includes the countless cigarette butts in the streets and sand from wintertime snow removal.

There are many sources of contamination for stormwater, leading to various consequences for local waters. Most notably, highly polluted stormwater runoff can contribute to closures of swimming beaches and shellfishing grounds and can contaminate drinking water sources.

The second, perhaps more important question is, What can we do about it? Polluted stormwater is the result of local land-use policies and our everyday personal actions. We might feel that there's not much we can do about the former, but there's certainly a lot we can do about our daily practices. And it doesn't require big changes.

The rule of thumb that can make a huge difference with respect to stormwater is to keep as much water as possible off paved surfaces and to keep the water that does run off, as clean as possible. For example, if you own a home, divert your rain gutters onto the lawn instead of the driveway or sidewalk. If you spill fertilizers, pesticides, or grass clippings on the pavement, sweep them back onto the lawn. If you walk your dog along the street, pick up the waste.

And never, ever put anything down a storm drain or in the path of a stormdrain. Because now you know, stormwater isn't just the inconvenient puddle that always manages to be right in front of your car door. It's a major source of water pollution, and it's headed directly to our Narragansett Bay.

For tips to help safeguard our waters, visit: <http://www.ristormwatersolutions.org>