



Homeowners Guide: Sustainable Lawns



Fertilization: Adding Nutrients



We like the look of green turf grass in our yards: lawns need periodic fertilization in the spring and fall to provide the necessary nutrients such as nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium. It is best to determine the fertility of the soil beneath the turf in your lawn before fertilizing. Adding too much fertilizer can run off the landscape and drain to local storm sewers that drain directly to local streams, lakes, and ponds.



Whether you DIY or hire a lawncare company, have the soils in your lawn sampled and tested to determine fertility levels. Most soils in Iowa have adequate amounts of phosphorus so no need to add more. Excess nutrients drain into local waterways and causes algal blooms that impact aquatic life. Several labs in Iowa will analyze samples for a low fee.

[Follow guidance by ISU extension.](#)



Fertilizer bags have three numbers on their labels (pictured left) in a # - # - # format. These numbers are the percentage of the three primary nutrients in the fertilizer. The first of these numbers is the amount of Nitrogen, followed by Phosphorus, and Potassium. As stated above, Iowa soils are rich in Phosphorus, so look for fertilizers with a 0 for the middle number. Sweep excess from street, sidewalk, and driveway back onto lawn.



Soil Quality Restoration



Lawns with good soil quality reduce the need for watering and minimize the need for fertilizers. Soil quality restoration (SQR) is the process of improving soil health on new or existing lawns. To perform an SQR, aerate the lawn, evenly spread 1/2"-3/4" of compost, reseed if needed, then water until vegetation is established. Some communities across Iowa have cost share programs to cover some of the costs. [Check with your city.](#)

Pesticide Use



Pesticides may kill pesky bugs that you don't want in your yard, but they may be causing unintended harm. Sprayed lawns decrease delicate pollinator populations, and have been found to impact human health. Short term exposure can lead to eye irritation, rash, dizziness, and vomiting, and long term effects can cause cancer and birth defects. For alternatives to pesticide use check out the [Good Neighbor Iowa program.](#)

Lawn Weeds



Lawns grow violets, dandelions, clover, crabgrass, and a host of other weeds that can break up lawn uniformity. You can tolerate the weeds or use herbicides to combat them. If you choose to use herbicides, only use them as spot treatment and not across your whole lawn. Look into natural alternatives to spraying. Find out more at the [Iowa State University Extension website.](#)