

ABCs of Organic Lawn Care

The goal:

Feed the soil, not the plants--a different way of thinking about your lawn."

The benefits:

Aside from mowing, minimal maintenance the peace of mind from knowing that you're not using chemicals with warning labels. We have well water in Madison, so what you put on your lawn does go into the aquifer.

Know your soil.

To find out your pH, order a soil test kit from Rutgers, www.njaes.rutgers.edu. It costs \$20 and comes with access to a master gardener hot line for lawn questions.

Fight weeds with corn gluten.

Available at Home Depot, corn gluten will knock back crab grass and will be about 65% effective the first year. Meanwhile you can build up soil health so that grass can compete favorably with the weeds and keep them in balance.

Fertilize with compost, not chemical fertilizers.

Fortunately, compost is easy for Morris County residents to obtain. It can be picked up for free at the Morris County Municipal Authorities location in Parsippany (www.mcmua.com) or delivered for a fee. A 5000 square foot lawn requires four cubic feet of compost, applied a half-inch thick.

Keep your grass tall.

If your grass is 2.5. to 3.5 inches, it will shade out weeds.

Cut it and leave it.

Grass clippings are 80 to 85 percent water. They contain valuable nutrients and decompose quickly, disappearing when they filter down to the soil.



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Cut It and Leave It

Leave the grass clippings on your lawn and return nutrients to the soil

“Cut it and leave it” means free, natural fertilizer for your lawn. Clippings are 80–85% water, and contain nitrogen along with other valuable nutrients. They decompose quickly, disappearing when they filter down to the soil.

Save time, save money, and reduce your carbon footprint

Time: Mowing takes 20–25% less time when you “cut it and leave it” because you won’t have to stop and empty your mower bag or fill waste containers and haul them to the curb.

Money: You’ll reduce or eliminate dependence on purchased fertilizer or buying natural additives such as compost.

Methane reduction: In a landfill, grass clippings, like food waste, decompose and emit methane—a greenhouse gas that is far more harmful than carbon dioxide (CO₂) and a cause of 25% of global warming, according to [Yale Climate Connections](#).

Mow high to shade out weeds

Longer lawns allow more photosynthesis and help to create healthier, better-looking grass with flourishing root systems. They shade out weeds, cool the roots and the soil, and reduce the the need for watering.

Keep your grass long (and your clippings short). Set your mower high so your grass will be 2.5 to 3.5 inches.

Mulching mowers help out by chopping the clippings into fine pieces that slip easily down to the soil. Most new mowers are mulching mowers; if not, you can attach mulching equipment to your existing mower.

What to do with excessive growth

If you are behind on mowing, or if heavy rain causes fast growth, double mow. Set the mower higher than usual and cut no more than the top third of the grass. In a day or two, set the mower height down and bring the lawn down another third of its height. Continue this process until you reach the desired height.

Reduce your lawn, help pollinators, replenish the aquifer

Turf grass is a monocrop that ecologist Dr. Douglas Tallamy calls “a no-man’s land” for butterflies, bees, and the insects that birds and wildlife depend on for food. Reimagine your lawn as “area rugs” where activities take place, instead of expanses of bare wall-to-wall carpet.

Plant more native shrubs, trees, and flowers—the food that insects and caterpillars need. For inspiration, watch this Borough-sponsored talk, **“Nature’s Best Hope with Dr. Douglas Tallamy”** at [Rosenet.org/396/Environmental-Commission](https://rosenet.org/396/Environmental-Commission).

Less lawn, more drinking water. Madison gets its drinking water entirely from the Buried Valley Aquifer beneath our town. Lawns do little to capture rainfall, and actually contribute to stormwater runoff. Trees and shrubs are far better water stewards.

Let your lawn go dormant in summer

Give your mower a rest. In the heat of the summer, your lawn naturally goes dormant. Park your mower and don’t worry about brown patches—your lawn will perk up in cooler, rainy weather.

Be water smart

Outdoor water use accounts for about 30% of average household water use nationwide. In Madison, water use rises dramatically in the summer, which is why the Borough institutes these voluntary water restrictions:

- Water only on odd or even days (depending on if your address number is odd or even).
- Do not water from 8 am to 8 pm. Watering when it’s cool reduces evaporation (and your water bill).

If you use a sprinkler system, make sure it’s set so you do not water during or immediately after a rain, and is set to avoid wasting water on the street, driveway and sidewalk. Smart sprinkler controls use weather reports and soil to adjust watering and conserve resources.

The EPA estimates that as much as 50% of outdoor water use is wasted due to inefficiencies in irrigation methods and systems.

Learn more: epa.gov/watersense/watering-tips.

Talk to your lawn service

Many lawn services use mulch mowers, so “cut it and leave it” is a natural. Mulch mowing helps lawn services save time—and money, as there’s no need to haul barrels in a trailer and pay for extra fuel. In the summer when lawns go dormant naturally, ask your lawn service to mow less frequently and remind them not to use leaf blowers—clippings will be minimal. Any fallen leaves will only add nutrients to your garden beds.

