

Test your soil.

A soil test identifies the nutrients already present in your soil, so you only apply the right amounts of what your soil needs. It will also tell you if you need to add lime for pH balance. For more information, call the UMASS Soil Testing Lab at (413) 545-2311 or visit their website at <http://soiltest.umass.edu/> Use the results of a soil test and figure out the types of grass you have planted to determine if you need to add enhancements.

Eliminate fertilizer use.

Many lawns do not need any fertilizer at all. If you must use organic materials – this is easy to do by:

- Recycle grass clippings by leaving them on the lawn. As they decompose, clippings will provide the soil with nutrients, reducing chemical fertilizer needs.
- You can also create a compost pile and use the compost as a slow-release fertilizer.

If you must add fertilizer use organic. Made of biological material rather than simpler chemical compounds, organic fertilizers need to be broken down by microorganisms in order to be made available to plants. The main benefit of organic fertilizers is that they work slowly, which means less runoff of excess nutrients into waterways. Organic matter also improves the structure of the soil, increases water retention, and promotes the diversity of life underneath your feet.

Remember the best organic fertilizer may already be growing in your yard. During spring and summer, leave your grass clippings where they fall. Let them act as a mulch and they will supply about a quarter of all the nutrients your grass will need. In the fall, chop up your leaves with your lawn mower. Worms and microorganisms will return the leaves' essential nutrients to the soil.

Skip the weed killer. The best way to keep away unwelcome plants ("weeds") is to create a thriving lawn. Grasses create a thick mat that makes it hard for competitors to grow. Over-seed your lawn with grass seed and your grass will act as its own weed suppressant. One species' weed is another species' food. Look at dandelions from a bee's perspective: Dandelions are part of a bee's breakfast, among the first flowers to bloom in areas where winter sends most plants (and bees) into dormancy.

Maintain vegetation buffers. Maintain a strip of natural vegetation between your lawn and any adjoining wetlands or surface waters. This vegetated buffer zone will help filter and trap nutrients before they are able to reach the water, as well as help prevent erosion.

Minimize Watering. In southeast Massachusetts, there is generally sufficient rainfall so that watering of lawns is not necessary. If you wish to maintain your lawn's green appearance during a hot and dry summer periods, water your lawn once a week with 1 inch of water to avoid the onset of dormancy (set out a small cup or can to measure how much you are really watering).

Mow less, mow higher. Let your grass grow to at least a three-inch height and you'll reduce the amount of energy you'll burn, help cool the soil to avoid scorching your lawn, and allow your grass to out-compete competitors like crabgrass.

Use a rain barrel and drip irrigation. Attach a low-pressure soaker hose to a 40-60 gallon rain barrel to slowly water your lawn rather than blasting it with water from a sprinkler. Be sure to drain your rain barrel after the growing season so that the barrel doesn't freeze and crack in the winter.

Get a battery-powered mower or a push mower. The only carbon dioxide emitted when using a push mower is the exhaling you'll do while getting a good workout mowing your lawn. While a battery-powered mower uses electricity that may come from fossil-fuel sources, electricity is always cleaner than directly burning gasoline.