

Working Smarter on Your Lawn

As you drive by the historic Mellen Common in Wayland's town center, you may notice the attractive grass which is maintained as part of the "Demonstration Organic Lawn Project." It is co-sponsored again this year by the Wellhead Protection Committee and by the Sudbury, Assabet, and Concord Wild and Scenic River Stewardship Council.

The Mellen Common grass is never watered and has only organic fertilizer applied. The only pesticide (insecticide or herbicide) used is corn gluten, which is simply ground up corn husks. No four-step program. No grub-proofing, weed-proofing, or any other proofing. No daily, or even weekly, or ever, watering.

It is our mission at the Wellhead Protection Committee to encourage protection of both the quantity and quality of our water supply. With the heavy rain and flooding this past spring, you may question why we all should be concerned about water conservation.

Groundwater is actually back down to its usual summer levels. Lawn watering doubles Wayland's water use in the summer and removes water from the aquifer that feeds both the water supply and the Sudbury River. In addition to supplying homes and businesses with potable water, adequate water reserves must be maintained at all times to fight fires and respond to other unexpected emergencies.

By watering your grass, you are training it to grow only shallow roots near the surface, which makes it weaker and dependent on more watering and frequent fertilization and vulnerable to insects and disease. The cycle of applying lawn fertilizer, herbicides and pesticides can be toxic to both people and the plants and animals that live in the river.

The average lawn needs about one inch of moisture per week including Mother Nature's contribution. If rainfall is less than 1", water may be applied to make up the difference although this is not necessary. If you must water, please follow the odd/even day watering restrictions which are again in effect in town. Watering is allowed only between the hours of 7:00 pm and 7:00 am with inground and aboveground sprinklers.

The modern lawn is largely a product of the marketing industry. The goal is to sell you various applications (fertilizers, pesticides, etc.), sprinkler systems, and the services associated with them. But you can have an excellent lawn with less

fuss and expense by "working smarter, not harder," and having a little tolerance for the occasional weed or two.

So what does it mean to "work smarter" when it comes to a lawn?

First, get the timing right. The best time to plant grass seed, by far, is in September. The only other reasonable times are October or early spring. Do NOT try to plant grass in the summer! Grass is a cool weather plant and needs time to establish itself before summer heat.

Second, learn to mow right. That means high, between three and four inches, and using a mulching mower so the clippings are returned to the lawn. And do NOT mow on a schedule. Mow when the lawn needs it, not by the calendar. That means you might mow two or three times a week in the spring and once a month in midsummer.

Third, apply the right stuff at the right time. That means a long-lasting fertilizer, preferably organic, around Labor Day, and corn gluten in the early spring when forsythia is blooming. Corn gluten is a natural pre-emergent weed control and also serves as a fertilizer. But don't use it when seeding, as it stops germination of grass seed as well.

Fourth, accept the natural order of things. That means not worrying about a few weeds and not worrying when the lawn naturally goes dormant and brown in August. It will green up again in September.

If all of the above isn't enough, you may have to work on your soil. Test it and apply lime if necessary. Top-dressing it with compost is the best way to improve any soil. And if the number of weeds is intolerable, you can always pull them by hand or, as a last resort, use a spray can herbicide to selectively kill them.

This summer by "working smarter, not harder" on your lawn, you can help protect Wayland's water supply and the health of the Sudbury River.

Wellhead Protection Committee

Sherre Greenbaum, Jennifer Riley, Linda Segal, Tom Sciacca, Kurt Trampusch