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Compassionate Lawn Care

Manicured, chemical-laden lawns are out, and organic, woody yards with groundcover, hedgerows, and dead wood are in. Today's ecology-minded, health-conscious citizens find the latter far more interesting and beautiful. So do animals, birds, and fish!

Toxic Dangers

Lawn chemicals are a threat to the Earth and all its creatures. Americans use 10 times more pesticides per acre on their yards than farmers use on crops.(1) These chemicals poison the yard they're applied to and travel via storm drains, streams, and toxic clouds to poison other areas. While most of us don't have overt reactions to lawn chemicals, there is little doubt that they are harmful to us, our companion animals, and wildlife.

A survey of Scottish terrier guardians conducted by Purdue University found up to a seven-fold increase in the incidence of bladder cancer among dogs exposed to lawn herbicides. The head researcher said, "The level of risk corresponded directly with exposure to these chemicals."(2) According to *The New York Times*, champion ice skater Christina Locek was sunning herself in her Illinois backyard when a lawn-care company began spraying insecticides onto a neighbor's lawn. The spray drifted into Ms. Locek's yard, across her and her cat and dog. The cat died within minutes, the dog died within a few hours, and Ms. Locek said that she collapsed within moments. She is now legally blind, permanently disabled, and unable to work.(3)

A study of golf course superintendents, who often apply or are exposed to pesticides, were revealed to have brain cancer and non-Hodgkin's lymphoma rates that were twice the national average, prostate cancer rates that were almost three times the national average, and a cancer of the large intestine incidence nearly twice the national average.(4) *The Washington Post* reported that Navy Lt. George Prior developed a headache and a rash, followed by a high fever and vomiting, after spending the day at a golf course. He entered a hospital, where his skin blistered and peeled away, his organs failed, and he died. The cause of death was toxic epidermal necrolysis, a skin reaction caused, according to a Navy pathologist, by exposure to a fungicide that had been applied to the golf course.(5)

An estimated 375 plants and animals listed in the Endangered Species Act are exposed to and possibly harmed by pesticides associated with lawn and garden care.(6)

Grass: Think Quality

A chemical-free lawn, like a tree, detoxifies the air, removes pollutants, and brings better health to four- and two-legged property users. The unseen underground activity of worms and microorganisms helps make lawns healthy. Allowing this biological activity to go on, unharmed by pesticides, causes roots to become stronger, making chemical fertilizers unnecessary.

Sow grass in the fall, when the weather is cooler, and there is less competition from weeds. Keep the seeds moist.

Grow a mixture of grasses that do well in your area, rather than a single variety. Zoysia, a spreading perennial grass, grows in thick, chokes out weeds, and stays green without watering.

Avoid walking on wet or soft lawns. Where the soil is compacted, use an aerator—available at rental stores—to punch small holes into the ground, or walk over the soil in shoes with cleats. Raking removes thatch and other dead organic material that can smother grass.

Maintaining Your Yard

Gas-powered mowers consume 800 million gallons of fuel every year.(7) They're noisy, and—along with other gas-guzzling accoutrements, such as blowers, trimmers, and chainsaws—they account for more than 5 percent of urban air pollution.(8) Consider using an electric or hybrid mower or, better yet, a rotary-blade push (reel) mower, which makes less noise, gives you a great workout, and is easier on your lawn, the environment, and your wallet!

However you cut your grass, use a sharp blade and mow high; a grass height of 2 inches will shade out crabgrass and many weeds. Leave grass clippings on the lawn after you mow. This natural, free fertilizer breaks down easily and provides as much as half of the nitrogen and potassium that a lawn needs to stay green and thrive.(9) Plus, earthworms and natural organisms eat the clippings, providing a natural cycle of fertilizing and aeration.

Even leaves, which provide winter protection for tree roots, can be left in place if they are ground up with a mower. If you water your lawn, replace wasteful sprinklers with soaker hoses or "impulse" sprayers, which shoot water out in an

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efficient jet as the head turns. Plant groundcover in difficult areas. Mulch exposed ground with wood chips, hay, or pine needles to keep moisture around plants.

Increase activity in spent soil areas by top-dressing them once in spring and once in fall with organic matter such as compost, leaf mulch, or peat moss. This makes plants healthier and more resistant to insects, drought, fungi, and disease.

Lawns can survive with little or no fertilizer. There are excellent new organic fertilizers on the market, such as corn gluten, which adds nitrogen and discourages crabgrass growth.⁽¹⁰⁾ Beware of harmful petroleum-based products that are represented as "organic" even though they contain only a little manure.

Remember, in a natural, healthy lawn, the grass will be slower-growing, stronger, and more drought-resistant.

Finally, don't worry about dandelions or other weeds. Weeds are judgment calls. Clover, for instance, has root nodules that contain bacteria that are beneficial to grass and other plants. Dig out plants that you don't want by hand, and enjoy the exercise and chance to spend time in your healthy yard.

Landscape: Go Wild

Big lawns can be high maintenance. Says one expert, "We call it the No. 1 spoiled brat plant in the plant kingdom."⁽¹¹⁾ For that very reason, corporations and apartment-complex owners often plant lawns only in the areas around buildings, leaving the outer areas of their property woody and natural, with tall grasses, wildflowers, evergreens, hedgerows, and bushes to provide cover and homes for wildlife. Homeowners can follow these examples on a smaller scale within their own yards.

Plant a mix of shrubs, trees, and flowers that will provide nuts, berries, seeds, and nectar throughout the year to attract birds, nature's best insect controllers, and provide homes and food for wildlife. Foster hollies, for instance, provide winter berries for food, winter foliage for cover, and places for wildlife to raise young. A butterfly bush (*buddleia davidii*) is irresistible to butterflies. One family in Wisconsin boasts that they do little yard work, use no chemicals, and are never bothered by mosquitoes during the summer because allowing their hostas take over the yard has all but eliminated the pesky insects.⁽¹²⁾ Rocks and leaf and brush piles also provide cover and places for animals to raise young.

A pond with a shallow end makes a good water supply for birds. You might want to locate it in a place where you will be able to watch the wildlife activity from a window throughout the year.

A window-box planter containing marigolds, zinnias, or red salvia can attract hummingbirds and butterflies to a sunny window. Hummingbirds are attracted to almost anything red.

Your local garden-supply company is a good source for more information.

Dead Wood for New Life

For birds and small mammals, snags (dead trees) and stumps are ecological gold. Many creatures—nuthatches, woodpeckers, squirrels, raccoons, bluebirds, owls, chickadees, wood ducks, and wrens—nest in them and feed on their insect tenants.

Top off—don't chop down—snags 12 inches or more in diameter. Remember to check for nests and dens first. Big dead logs and underbrush that are away from the house are also desirable. Mosquitoes will disappear from your yard as elegant, snag-nesting swallows, swifts, and purple martins sweep through the air. Huge great-granddaddy den trees can provide homes for peregrine falcons, barn owls, and ivory-billed woodpeckers.

If beavers live nearby, contact PETA for a free beaver pack, which contains detailed information about getting along with these gentle animals.

What You Can Do

Quebec and other cities in Canada have laws that prevent or restrict the use of pesticides and fertilizers; similar restrictive ordinances apply to some schools, athletic fields, and parks in the U.S.⁽¹³⁾ Some European countries have banned 2,4-D, a common herbicide.⁽¹⁴⁾

Never use pesticides on your lawn or garden. Encourage your neighbors to follow your lead. Nothing will promote the benefits and joys of an organic, natural lawn better than your own beautiful, cruelty-free yard!

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