

## The Grass is Not Always Greener...

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The grass is turning green and everyone has pre-emergent and fertilizer on the brain. We have to get out there and lay down the barrier that will keep that dreaded weed from sprouting up in our beautiful lawn. I bet you never thought of lawns as controversial but they are. Many people believe that it is their responsibility to their neighborhood to have a great expanse of beautifully manicured turf. Remember the advertisements about the bad neighbor who allows his dandelions to go to seed and blow into his neighbor's perfectly coifed yard? No one wants to be a bad neighbor, but from where did all of this "conditioning" come?

At this time each year there is a constant barrage of advertisements in newspapers, magazines, and television from garden tool, lawn mower, plant and seed companies and garden centers, and of course the fertilizer companies who would be happy if you fertilized your lawn every month!

Ok, I admit I was one of those people always struggling with the eradication of every last weed in my yard! It was a topic of conversation at parties and family get-togethers, a constant source of frustration and expense. Little by little as I got older, as my life was taken over by events, more and more other types of green began to creep into my yard, replacing the neatly trimmed, even colored expanse of green... Clovers, violets and yes, dandelions. Guilt began to replace the frustration I had been feeling. Then I took the Master Gardener class! Revelation! I learned all the reasons why that great, green expanse of grass shouldn't be lauded, in fact the opposite.

No matter how much fertilizer you put on your lawn, it can take up only so much. No matter how big the smorgasbord you provide, your grass will use only what it needs. Warm season grasses like Bermuda, Centipede, Zoysia, and St. Augustine should be fertilized in the spring when they are waking up and beginning active growth. Cool season grasses like the Fescues and Kentucky Bluegrass should be fertilized in the fall since they slow their growth during the summer months and begin active growth again in fall.

First, let me say I am not a "tree hugger", but my eyes have been opened to the damage excess fertilizer has on our environment, particularly our waterways. There can be too much of a good thing. When you feed your lawn, unused nitrogen is washed through the soil into the groundwater, rivers and into the ocean where the high levels of nitrogen can create algae blooms. An algae bloom steals oxygen from the water and can result in fish kills and death of plant life in the oceans....dead zones.

When it was introduced, nitrogen was thought to be the panacea for earth's starving population by helping to increase food production. It is still serving that purpose, but now it is being recognized as a serious threat, mainly because of its overuse. Besides the problem with algae blooms, nitrogen overload can reduce the amount of other nutrients in the soil resulting in "dead soil" and besides that, fertilizer is expensive! If you are over-fertilizing your yard, you may as well be throwing dollars into the ocean because that is where most of your fertilizer is going.

Needless to say I have learned to appreciate the 'other' green in my yard. The clover, violets and dandelions provide nectar for the bees and food for the wildlife (and salad fixin's)...but that is a story for another time.

If you want to know what kind of grass you have in your yard, contact a Master Gardener. Master Gardeners are available in person at the Main Street Library on Tuesdays from 11:00am – 1:00pm or by phone on Thursdays from 2:00 – 3:00pm at (804) 693-2602.