General Lawn Care Tips

Knowing how to care for a lawn in an ecologically sustainable way will make it much easier to comply with the new fertilizer regulations and still have a beautiful, natural lawn.

- Choose a grass seed blend that is adapted to our low-nitrogen, sandy soils. Perennial ryegrass and fine or tall fescues are good; avoid bluegrass, as it needs two times the nitrogen to grow in our soils.
- Test your soil's acidity and add lime if needed to bring the pH up to 6.5. This will help the grass absorb nitrogen and reduce leaching. Professionals know that a little lime can save a lot of nitrogen.
- Use the highest deck setting on your lawnmower, never removing more than a third of the shoot growth per mowing.
- Leave the clippings on your lawn – they are a natural source of slow-acting nitrogen fertilizer and also protect your lawn from drought.
- Topdress the lawn each spring by adding ¼" to ½" loam, until soil is 6" deep. This will help reduce nitrogen leaching into the groundwater.
- Pull weeds by hand instead of using chemical herbicides.
- Don't overwater – it's unhealthy for the grass, but also increases nutrient runoff.
- ***Finally, the simplest but most important of all:*** Reduce the amount of lawn area in favor of low-maintenance plantings, gardens, and native vegetation.

Try these tips and you will help keep the Vineyard's drinking water, ponds and bays clean for all our enjoyment.

Thank you!

Background and Purpose

The new Fertilizer Regulations were conceived to protect the Island's surface and ground waters from impairment from excess nitrogen and phosphorus loading. Generally, excess nitrogen threatens coastal estuaries and drinking water, while excess phosphorus is a greater concern for fresh water ponds and streams. Both nutrients are important for plant growth and health and when applied in the correct amounts are absorbed by turf. In excess or used incorrectly, they threaten the Island's drinking water and coastal ponds, and ultimately the health of our Island's people and environment.

The information presented here is a summary to allow homeowners to stay in compliance with the law. For more details on the fertilizer regulations, including rules for buffer zones, golf courses, exceptions to limits on nutrient levels, or any other questions, please contact your town's Board of Health. The full text of the bylaw can be viewed at the M.V. Boards of Health website, **www.mvboh.org**

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Lawn Fertilizer Regulations

Martha's Vineyard Homeowner's Guide

Know the Right:

Season
Weather
Place
Time
Amount
Stuff

Beginning in 2015, a new bylaw will limit the usage of fertilizer on lawns. The regulations apply to all of Martha's Vineyard – and they **apply to everyone**, homeowners as well as professional lawn care companies.

While the technical language of the law may be confusing, have no fear! Simply follow the 6 guidelines inside and you can be sure to be in compliance with the law, *and* have a healthy, non-polluting lawn.

Prepared by the

M.V. Boards of Health

and

Vineyard Conservation Society

Fifty Years of Protecting Our Island Environment

The Right Season

Fertilize **only** between April 15 and November 15. Lawns don't take up nutrients when they're not actively growing.

The Right Weather

Don't apply ferilizer in the rain, when rain is forecast for the next few days, or any time the ground is saturated.

The Right Place

Be careful where you're spreading it! Sidewalks, driveways, and patios don't absorb any of the fertilizer, leading to substantial runoff.

The Right Time

Once a month is the maximum! However, applying a slow-release organic fertilizer just once in the spring and again in early fall is usually enough.

The Right Stuff

Before you buy any fertilizer, check the label! At least half of the nitrogen content must come in slow-release form, and it must not contain any* phosphorus (aka phosphate, phosphoric acid, etc.). Organic products, such as compost and compost tea, are treated as slow-release nitrogen and are generally recommended.

**There are several exceptions allowing for the use of phosphorus, including:*

- *when a soil test taken within the last three years indicates the need for phosphorus*
- *when establishing or repairing turf*
- *when organic pelletized fertilizer is being applied. In this case, phosphorus can be applied provided the fertilizer's phosphorus:nitrogen ratio is not more than 1:4.*

The Right Amount

Apply at most a **half pound** of nitrogen for every 1,000 square feet of lawn **per application**, for a total of not more than **three pounds per year**.

This one takes a little calculation. First, how big is that lawn? A soccer field is 79,200 ft^2 – hopefully your lawn isn't that big! A basketball court is 4,700 ft^2; a tennis court 2,808 ft^2. Are we getting closer?

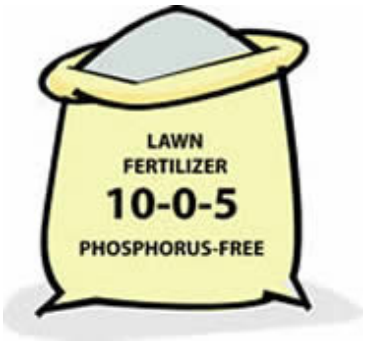
It's easy to estimate the square footage of a roughly rectangular lawn. Simply walk the perimeter with big strides, take the two sides of the rectangle and first multiply each by 3 (there are about 3 feet per stride), then multiply them together. If you have a more complicated shape, try piecing several smaller rectangles together.

Second, you need to know how many pounds of nitrogen there are in your fertilizer. Simply multiply the total nitrogen % by the weight of the bag: for example, a 20 lb bag of 12-0-6 (N:P:K, see box at right) contains 2.4 lbs of nitrogen (0.12 * 20lb).

Finally, divide your sqaure footage by 1,000 to calculate your maximum amount of nitrogen. For example, if your lawn is about 50 x 50 ft square, at 2,500 ft^2 you could use up to 1.25 lbs (2,500 / 1,000 * 0.5) of nitrogen. That's approximately half a bag of the above example product (1.25lb/2.4lb, or 52% to be more exact).

What's in your fertilizer?

First, check the front of the bag. The three big numbers show the levels of the primary nutrients in any fertilizer: nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium (commonly refered to as "N:P:K"). You want that middle number to be zero. Also, the product will probably advertise that it is "Phosphorus-Free" because many communities nationwide have restricted phosphorus.



Second, take a look at the "Guaranteed Analysis" label – it's probably on the back. Most products contain more than one form of nitrogen. Fast-release nitrogen can quickly "green up" a nitrogen-deficient lawn, but whatever amount is not used up by the grass within a few weeks simply becomes runoff and groundwater pollution. Slow-release nitrogen is designed to feed a lawn throughout the season and is also much better for the environment. For use on Martha's Vineyard, at least 50% of the total nitrogen content must be in slow-release form.

Want more info? Garden supply stores on Martha's Vineyard participated in writing these regulations, and will help you identify the products and amounts that will fertilize your lawn while protecting our coastal ponds.

Guaranteed Analysis

Total Nitrogen (N) 20.00%
10.0% Urea Nitrogen
10.0% Slowly Available Water Soluble Nitrogen*

Derived from Urea CAS #57-13-6, Urea Triazone Solution CAS #7098-14-8.

***Slowly Available Nitrogen from Urea-Triazone Solution**