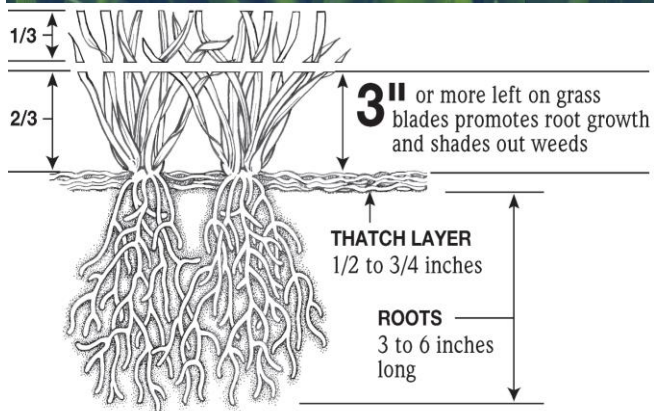


A CITIZEN'S GUIDE TO FALL LAWN CARE AND COMPOSTING FOR WATER QUALITY

Using healthy lawn care practices is one step toward cleaner rivers and lakes — even if you don't have waterfront property. Making sure you are watering responsibly and disposing of your yard waste correctly, can do a lot to help keep our water clean. A lot of sediment and algae problems we see in our waterways can be relieved by keeping lawn clippings out of street catch basins. Instead, sweep them back on your lawn. Clippings are mostly water, and break down quickly to return valuable nutrients to the soil. Local municipalities are doing their part by collecting yard waste or accepting it at drop-off locations. Do your part by preventing the problems at the source!



Steps to a Successful Healthy Lawn...

- Mulch Your Grass Clippings.** Let short clippings fall back on to your lawn. The clippings are a good source of nitrogen so you can reduce your fertilizer use.
- Cut High.** Leave at least 3 inches on the grass blade after cutting. Tall grass promotes root growth and shades out unwanted weeds.
- Soil Organic Matter should be at least 5%.** Healthy soil consists of at least 5% organic matter. Organic matter provides a natural reservoir of nutrients and holds water. To assess your soil, test for basic nutrients and organic matter every one or two years.
- Don't Guess...Soil Test!** MSU soil test boxes are available during the month of April to test your soil for nutrients.
- Aerate Compacted Soil.** In early spring use a core aerator to remove finger-like plugs of grass and soil or hire a landscape service. Aeration improves drainage and allows water and oxygen to reach the grass roots.
- Rake Compost into the Lawn.** Rake 1/2 inch of compost into an established lawn. Leave half of the grass blade exposed to sunlight and air. Compost adds microorganisms, nutrients, and organic matter, helping build soil fertility.
- Water Lawn to minimize stress.** To have a green lawn in Michigan your lawn only needs 0.5 to 1.5 inches of per week. Don't Soak your Lawn! Light frequent watering which reaches the grass roots is recommended by MSU.
- Use Earth Friendly Fertilizer.** Earth friendly fertilizers meet state requirements for low or no phosphorus. Visit www.crowc.org for a list of earth friendly fertilizers.
- Fertilizer in Fall.** Fertilizing in fall builds grass roots. Additional fertilizer before May is rarely needed. Do not spread fertilizer if the ground is frozen.
- Sweep Fertilizer from Paved Surfaces.** Fertilizers left on sidewalks end up storm drains, rivers, and lakes. Sweep extra pellets back onto your lawn.
- Mow Dry leaves.** In the fall, be sure to mow dry leaves into your lawn. This will help add organic matter and nutrients to your soil.
- Leave a Buffer zone near lakes and rivers.** Michigan law requires a "no fertilizer" buffer of at least 15 ft. near lakes and rivers.
- Avoid Weed-and-Feed Products.** Combination fertilizer and weed control products often contain unnecessary herbicides. These herbicides may cause harm to animals, plants and insects beyond the intended pests.
- Practice IMP— Integrated Pest Management.** Identify the weed or insect of concern and select the least toxic control option.

How to Compost!

Composting at home is as easy as 1 – 2 – 3 (- 4 – 5 – 6)! Here are 6 simple steps that will have you turning your food scraps into soil in no time – “Backyard Composting: 6 simple steps” provided by Chittenden Solid Waste District (CSWD.net)

- 1. Collect materials:** grass clippings, dead leaves, hay or straw, manure (from vegetarian diet), corn stalks, vegetable and fruit scraps, saw dust, coffee grounds, and filters, tea bags, and eggshells can all be composted. Newspaper, cotton or wool rags, and food soiled cardboard can also be composted, but must be shredded and added in small quantities. Any organic material will decompose, but it is a good idea not to add materials to a compost bin that will take a long time to decompose or that will attract animals. (See “What NOT to compost” sidebar)
- 2. Select a container:** the pile should be at approximately 1 cubic yard (3 feet X 3 feet) in size. Piles that are significantly larger or smaller may have problems. You can either purchase a pre-made bin or make your own.
- 3. Choose a location:** selecting a site for the pile is a balance between convenience and consideration. Although a well maintained compost pile should not generate odors or attract animals, we advise not placing it too close to outdoor living areas or property lines.
- 4. Build the pile:** the basic idea is to alternate wet and dry materials. This creates optimal conditions for the decomposition of organic matter. Have a leaf pile your compost bin. When you add food scraps, add at least that amount of dry leaves on top. This will also help keep odors down. To discourage insects, rodents, and other “vectors,” be sure to bury food scraps near the center of the pile and cover with dry materials. Do not add meat, dairy products, or fatty foods.
- 5. Let it cook:** The rate at which the microorganisms, including bacteria, fungi, worms, and insects, will decompose the material in the compost pile depends on 3 ingredients: air, water, and temperature. To ensure your pile is getting appropriate amounts of water and air, use a pitchfork to poke holes and open up areas in the pile to allow water and air to get in. The more you do this the faster you will have compost. The higher the temperature, the faster the microbes will break down the materials.
- 6. Harvest the compost:** the compost is finished when it is dark brown and has an earthy smell. To remove any large chunks, sift through a garden sieve or milk crate. The chunks can be placed back in the pile for further decomposition. Use the finished compost in your garden to add nutrients to the soil around plants. It can also be used to repot house plants, as a bedding for seedlings, or as mulch around trees and shrubs. Lawns love compost, too – sprinkle about half inch in the spring and fall and you’ll be amazed at how well your grass responds!

Why compost?

1. Reduce waste sent to landfill and freshwaters.
2. Reduce greenhouse gases.
3. Reuse organic materials.
4. Recycle natural nutrients.
5. Improve soil without chemicals which means saving money on chemical fertilizers
6. Produce rich humus for plants that can be used in your garden in the spring!

What NOT to compost:

- Grease or oil
- Dead animals
- Diseased plants
- Fatty foods or any meat or bones
- Human & pet waste
- Treated wood
- Coal or wood ashes
- Pine needles or oak leaves (small amounts are OK)
- Pesticide-treated plants
- Weeds with seeds or runners, invasive species – Burn these to keep them from spreading.

How to learn more about composting

Southeast Michigan has several resources for homeowners wishing to learn more about composting. The Southeastern Oakland County Water Authority (SOCWA) has a Healthy Lawn and Garden Program for anyone in southeastern Michigan. For more information visit: www.socwa.org. Michigan State University Extension also has a lot of information about composting, and has a Master Gardener Program. For more information go to the MSUE websites for Macomb www.macombcountymi.gov/msuextension and Oakland County www.oakgov.com/msu