

Ask Before You Hire

Choose a Lawn Care Service that's Right for You...and the Chesapeake Bay

Maryland's Lawn Fertilizer Law

Nutrients—primarily nitrogen and phosphorus—are key ingredients in fertilizer. Since 2001, farmers have been required to use nutrient management plans to protect waterways from fertilizer runoff. In 2011, Maryland passed the **Fertilizer Use Act**. Its aim is to reduce the amount of nutrients washing into the Bay from non-agricultural sources—mainly lawns and other managed grassy areas that collectively represent the largest single “crop” grown in the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

Under the law, lawn care professionals must be certified and licensed by MDA to apply fertilizer to lawns that they manage. In addition, the law requires both homeowners and lawn care professionals to obey fertilizer application restrictions, use best management practices when applying fertilizer, observe fertilizer blackout dates and follow University of Maryland recommendations when fertilizing lawns.

Increased emphasis is placed on lawn maintenance practices that promote a healthy lawn such as mowing to the proper height, recycling grass clippings and allowing lawns to go dormant during the summer. For more information on these and other backyard actions for a cleaner Chesapeake Bay, visit the websites below.



Maryland Department of Agriculture

Office of Resource Conservation

Nutrient Management Program
50 Harry S. Truman Parkway
Annapolis, Maryland 21401
410-841-5959

mda.maryland.gov/fertilizer



HOME AND GARDEN
INFORMATION CENTER
University of Maryland Extension

12005 Homewood Road
Ellicott City, MD 21042
extension.umd.edu/hgic

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Fertilizers and the Chesapeake Bay

The Chesapeake Bay has been called a “national treasure.” Its natural beauty, recreational opportunities and abundance of plant and wildlife have inspired and attracted presidents, foreign dignitaries, writers, fishermen, sailors and just about anyone who has ever visited its shorelines.

In recent years, however, the Bay has fallen victim to its own popularity. Nearly 17 million people now live in the Chesapeake Bay's watershed—a figure that has more than doubled since World War II. As Maryland becomes increasingly urbanized and farmland gives way to townhouse developments and gated communities, homeowners and professionals who care for lawns are being asked to join farmers in protecting the Bay from excess fertilizers.

Experts now know that fertilizers designed to make our crops healthy and our lawns green can find their way into the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries, where they contribute to the growth of algae blooms that block sunlight from reaching Bay grasses, rob the water of oxygen and threaten underwater life.



Select a Lawn Care Service

Fertilizer applied to a healthy lawn at recommended rates will not pose a threat to water quality. In fact, most lawns benefit from annual fertilizer treatments to encourage dense growth and increased resistance to pests and drought. Thick, healthy lawns absorb rainwater runoff and help keep soil and other pollutants from reaching storm drains, local streams and other pathways to the Bay.

A lawn care service is a popular alternative for busy homeowners who want someone else to care for their lawns. If you decide to use a lawn care service, this guide can help ensure an attractive lawn and a healthy Chesapeake Bay.

Narrow the Field

Follow these consumer protection tips when narrowing the field of potential lawn care providers.

- **Make sure the firm and its personnel are certified and licensed.**

If your lawn care provider uses pesticides to control insects and weeds—including “weed and feed”

products—he or she must be licensed and certified by the Maryland Department of Agriculture's (MDA) Pesticide Regulation Section. Trained personnel are issued identification cards from MDA and the business license number must be painted on the service vehicle. Call 410-841-5710 or visit www.mda.maryland.gov/plants-pests to search a database of licensed companies and certified pesticide applicators.

Lawn care professionals who apply fertilizers to lawns must also be certified by MDA's Nutrient Management Program. Visit www.mda.maryland.gov/fertilizer for a list of certified professional fertilizer applicators or call 410-841-5959.

- **Ask neighbors for recommendations.** Satisfied customers are the best indicator of a good company.
- **Get at least three estimates.** Make sure that all companies are bidding on similar services. Don't be afraid to ask for only the services that you want. Get in writing which services are optional and which are included.



- **Don't let cost be a deal breaker.** High quality fertilizer, seed and other products will inevitably cost more, but in the long run are worth the added investment.
- **Ask the company to measure your lawn before providing an estimate.** Cost is usually based on the size of your lawn. This measurement is also needed to ensure that fertilizer is applied at the proper rate for your property.
- **Ask if the service is automatically renewed each year.** Are there are penalties if you cancel your service agreement?
- **Ask what happens if you have a problem between applications.** Will an additional service call be free, or will you be charged?



Ask the Right Questions

Once you have narrowed your list of potential lawn care service providers, it's time to interview. Meet with a company representative in your home to answer questions, diagnose problems and learn as much as you can about the firm's fertilizer program before committing. Here are some key questions to ask:

- **When will you fertilize my lawn?** Fertilizer applications should be made when the grass is actively growing. Confirm that your lawn care provider follows these University of Maryland guidelines:
 - Warm Season Grasses*—(zoysia grass and Bermuda grass) These grasses stay green throughout summer and turn brown early in the fall. They should be fertilized in early summer when they are growing most actively.
 - Cool Season Grasses*—(tall fescue, bluegrass, fine fescue, and perennial ryegrass) These grasses grow best in cool weather. Shoots grow actively in the spring. Top growth slows in the fall, but root growth continues. Because Maryland weather is variable, these grasses may show growth at any time of the year. Most of the total fertilizer applied during the year should be applied in the fall to help the grass recover from summer stresses. Light applications may be made at other times of the year if the grass is growing. Applying fertilizer during periods of prolonged heat and drought stresses the grass, increases the potential for runoff and should be avoided. Applying fertilizer when the ground is frozen is prohibited.
- **Are slow release nitrogen sources available?** Nitrogen, a major ingredient in most fertilizers, promotes grass shoot growth and leafy top growth. Nitrogen is available in two forms: slow release and quick release. Slow release nitrogen provides more uniform plant growth over a longer period of time, with less chance of injury to the grass and a reduced potential for leaching. Quick release nitrogen promotes rapid grass growth and dark green color, but is more likely to leach through the soil. Ask your lawn care provider to use slow release nitrogen on your lawn up until November 15.
- **Should liquid or granular fertilizer be used?** Liquid and granular fertilizers work equally well in promoting a healthy lawn. Slow release nitrogen can be applied in granular or liquid form.
- **Will fertilizer be applied when heavy rain is forecast?** Ask your lawn care service not to fertilize if heavy rain is predicted. Heavy rainfall may cause nutrients

to leach through the soil or wash off the lawn and into storm drains. Nutrient losses will be minimized if slow release (water insoluble) nitrogen is used.

- **Will lime be applied?** Soil pH is a measurement of a soil's acidity or alkalinity. The lower the pH, the more acidic the soil and vice versa. Soil pH that is too high or too low inhibits the ability of the grass to absorb fertilizer and increases the likelihood that unused nutrients will leach into groundwater. Maryland soils can become more acidic over time. Turf grows best in soil that is slightly acidic; however, problems may start to occur if the pH falls below 5.4. Therefore, periodic applications of lime are often needed to raise the pH. Some companies apply a maintenance level of lime each year as part of their standard program. Others recommend a lime application based on soil test results. Find out what you're getting.
- **Does the firm use Integrated Pest Management?** Most lawn care services offer a variety of weed and pest control programs. Integrated Pest Management (IPM) is a method of controlling weeds and insects using a range of management strategies only when pests reach threatening levels. Frequent pest monitoring is required.
- **Ask for advance notice.** Lawn care companies should always provide homeowners with advance notice of pesticide applications so that lawn furniture and toys can be removed. The firm should place a chemical application sign on your property after treatment and tell you how long you should stay off the lawn.
- **How often is equipment calibrated?** Fertilizer sprayers and spreaders should be calibrated regularly in order to ensure that nutrients are being applied to your lawn at the proper rate. As a rule, the more frequently equipment is calibrated, the more accurate the fertilizer application.
- **Is the firm a member of a turf related professional organization?** Professional organizations such as the Maryland Turfgrass Council provide ongoing training opportunities for their members. They also update members on new products, equipment, regulations and safety issues.

Trust, But Verify—Know the Law

Make sure that your lawn care provider plays by the rules. Maryland's lawn fertilizer law includes new rules for lawn care providers that promote healthy lawns and protect waterways from nutrient runoff. Here are ways to verify that your service provider is on board:

- **Ask for a soil test.** A soil test is the single most important way to ensure that lawns are not over-fertilized. A soil test will also determine whether lime is required. Maryland law requires soil testing before phosphorus may be applied to established lawns.
- **Who will perform the work?** Be sure your lawn care professional is certified by the Maryland Department of Agriculture to apply pesticides *and* fertilizers to lawns.
- **Understand the rules.** Professionals must apply fertilizer using University of Maryland recommendations.
- **Inspect your property after a lawn care application.** Fertilizer may not be applied to sidewalks, driveways or other impervious surfaces. Any product that lands on these surfaces must be swept back onto lawns or cleaned up.
- **Identify streams, gullies or other waterways on your property.** Maryland's Lawn Fertilizer Law calls for "no fertilizer zones" of 10 to 15 ft. next to waterways to reduce the risk of fertilizer landing in or dissolving near the water.
- **Know fertilizer blackout dates.** Lawn care professionals are prohibited from fertilizing lawns between December 1 and March 1.
- **Between November 16 and December 1** lawn care professionals (not homeowners) may apply water soluble nitrogen to lawns. Applying a slow-release formula at this time of year is prohibited.

Maintain Your Lawn's Beauty

There are many things that homeowners can do to maintain and enhance the health and beauty of lawns while limiting environmental impacts. Here are a few tips:

- **Mow to the right height.** Mowing lawns to the proper height can reduce weed problems by as much as 80 percent. Low and infrequent mowing can damage your lawn as well. Remove no more than 1/3 of the grass height each time you mow.

Mowing guide.

Kentucky Bluegrass	2½ - 3 in
Tall Fescue	2½ - 3½ in
Perennial Rye	2½ - 3 in
Fine Fescue	2½ - 3½ in
Bermuda Grass	½ - 1 inch
Zoysia Grass	½ - 1 inch



Tip: Place a can on the lawn during irrigation. When one inch of water is collected, you can turn off the sprinkler.

- **Keep lawnmower blades sharp.** Have your lawnmower blade sharpened each spring. A dull blade can damage grass and increase the likelihood of disease.
- **Let lawns go dormant.** Some grass species have natural dormancy periods and will turn brown during the hot, dry summer months. Applying fertilizer to force a lawn to turn green during its dormancy period can damage the grass. It is also unnecessary to water grass that has gone dormant. Dormancy is a natural survival mechanism and lawns usually recover when the rains return. If you must water your lawn, (and watering of grass is not prohibited because of drought conditions), do so early in the day using a

sprinkler. As a rule, water less often for longer lengths of time. Avoid frequent, light watering—it promotes shallow root growth and encourages weeds.

- **Aerate the soil.** Water, air and nutrients needed by grass roots cannot penetrate soils that are compressed, compacted or have a high clay content. Aerate the soil to reduce compaction and allow grass roots to strengthen and grow. Lawn care professionals can provide this service or you can rent a sod core aerator from a lawn and garden supplier.
- **Recycle grass clippings.** Grass clippings are a free source of nutrients and will not cause thatch problems as long as the grass is not allowed to get too long before mowing. If clippings are too long, they may clump. Rake up excessive clippings for mulch or compost and mow more frequently. Sweep or blow grass clippings and other lawn debris away from street gutters. Grasscycling can reduce your lawn's nitrogen requirement by as much as 50 percent.



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