

PROTECTING THE CHESAPEAKE BAY

Maryland's Lawn Fertilizer Law

What Lawn Care Professionals, Homeowners and Businesses Need to Know and Do



Excess Fertilizer Harms the Chesapeake Bay

NUTRIENTS—primarily nitrogen and phosphorus—are key ingredients in lawn fertilizer. When it rains, excess nutrients can wash off the land and into the storm drains, streams and rivers that feed the Chesapeake Bay. Once in our waterways, excess fertilizers contribute to the growth of algae blooms that block sunlight from reaching Bay grasses, rob the water of oxygen and threaten underwater life.

Lawn fertilizer now accounts for approximately 44 percent of the fertilizer sold in Maryland. While certain restrictions on fertilizer use have been in place for farmers since 2001, everyone needs to do their part to help restore clean water in the Chesapeake Bay and the state's creeks, streams, and rivers.

Maryland's Lawn Fertilizer Law helps protect the Chesapeake Bay from excess nutrients entering its waters from a wide range of non-agricultural sources, including golf courses, parks, recreation areas, athletic fields, businesses and hundreds of thousands of urban and suburban lawns.

Answers to FAQs about Maryland's Lawn Fertilizer Law

- Q** I just want my lawn to be green and lush. Does the law make it harder for me to have a nice lawn?
- A** Maryland's Lawn Fertilizer Law helps homeowners maintain healthy lawns without using unnecessary amounts of nutrients. The law spells out common sense practices that can reduce the risk of fertilizer runoff while promoting best management practices that support healthy lawns.
- Q** My city/county already has a lawn fertilizer law. Which law do I follow?
- A** Maryland's lawn fertilizer law is statewide and supersedes any existing local ordinances.
- Q** If my lawn care provider is not permitted to apply the type and amount of fertilizer I want, can I do it myself instead?
- A** No. Homeowners are subject to the same fertilizer application restrictions as lawn care providers.



Maryland Department of Agriculture
Office of Resource Conservation

Nutrient Management Program - Turfgrass
50 Harry S. Truman Parkway
Annapolis, Maryland 21401
410-841-5959
mda.maryland.gov/fertilizer

UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND
EXTENSION

HOME & GARDEN
INFORMATION CENTER
extension.umd.edu/hgic

Recycled Paper
MDA 15.11.19



Requirements for Lawn Fertilizer Products Sold in Maryland

Maryland's Lawn Fertilizer Law limits the amount of nutrients that can be applied to lawns or turf and restricts phosphorus content in lawn fertilizer. The goal is to help homeowners and lawn care professionals maintain healthy lawns without applying unnecessary amounts of nitrogen and phosphorus.

Phosphorus-Free Lawn Fertilizer

Many Maryland soils provide all the phosphorus that established lawns need. Applying more phosphorus is unnecessary and will not benefit lawns. Maryland's Lawn Fertilizer Law prohibits lawn fertilizer products from containing phosphorus. Look for the middle number on a bag of fertilizer. It should be

zero. Specialty products containing phosphorus may be used when a soil test indicates the need for phosphorus or when a homeowner or business is establishing, repairing or patching a lawn. The law applies only to fertilizer products labeled for use on turf—not those used in gardens.

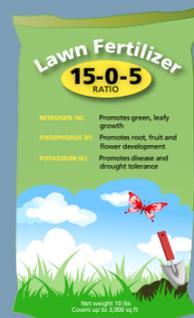


Nitrogen Content Reduced

To further reduce nutrient runoff, all lawn fertilizer products are labeled to ensure that no more than 0.9 pound of total nitrogen is applied per 1,000 square feet, per application. At least 20 percent of the nitrogen must be slow release to help minimize losses to the environment. Nitrogen content is represented by the first number on the fertilizer bag. Annual nitrogen limits established by the University of Maryland apply. Homeowners should visit extension.umd.edu/hgic for seasonal and yearly fertilizer rates.

How to Read a Fertilizer Bag

All fertilizer products are labeled with three numbers indicating the percentage of nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium (N, P, and K), the three main plant nutrients. Nitrogen promotes grass shoot growth and leafy top growth, phosphorus encourages root, flower and fruit production and potassium fosters hardiness, disease resistance and durability. A bag of 15-0-5 fertilizer contains 15 percent nitrogen, 0 phosphorus (as required by Maryland law) and 5 percent potassium. In terms of weight, a 10 pound bag of 15-0-5 fertilizer contains 1.5 lbs. of nitrogen, zero phosphorus and .5 lb. of potassium. Maryland's Lawn Fertilizer Law addresses nitrogen and phosphorus content only. Potassium is not considered a threat to water quality in the Chesapeake Bay.





Lawn Care Professionals Must Be Certified

Lawn care professionals hired to apply fertilizer to turf must be certified by the Maryland Department of Agriculture or work under the direct supervision of an individual who is certified. The law applies to professionals for hire as well as individuals responsible for turf management at golf courses, public parks, airports, athletic fields, businesses, cemeteries and other non-agricultural properties.

Register for Training and Certification

The Maryland Department of Agriculture offers fertilizer applicator training sessions and certification exams throughout the year and publishes a list of certified professional fertilizer applicators on its website. Lawn care pros should visit mda.maryland.gov/fertilizer for an exam schedule and to download the training manual and study guide.

Renew Certificates Annually by June 30

Certificates are renewable yearly with a \$100 fee and verification of two hours of annual recertification training.

Apply for a Business License

Licenses are required for individuals or businesses engaged in fertilizing turf. Businesses are required to employ at least one certified professional fertilizer applicator. Licenses are valid for one year and license holders are required to file an annual activity report with the department covering the previous year.

Avoid Penalties

Violators are subject to civil penalties of up to \$1,000 for the first violation and \$2,000 for each subsequent violation.

Homeowner Requirements and Tips



Homeowners and do-it-yourselfers are required to obey fertilizer application restrictions (see below, left), observe fertilizer blackout dates and follow University of Maryland recommendations when fertilizing lawns. Follow these best management practices for a healthy lawn and healthy waterways:

- **Read and follow** all label directions on the fertilizer bag.
- **Mow the grass high** to shade out weeds.
- **Remove no more than 1/3** of the grass height at each mowing.
- **Leave grass clippings** on the lawn to provide free fertilizer.
- **Sharpen lawnmower blades** in the spring.
- **Let established lawns go dormant** during the hot, dry summer months.



If You Hire a Lawn Care Service

Individuals and businesses that hire lawn care providers should confirm that professionals are certified and licensed by the Maryland Department of Agriculture. The department maintains a list of certified lawn care professionals on its website at mda.maryland.gov/fertilizer.

In addition, requests for bids, work orders, job specifications, and service contracts should be written to ensure that work performed does not conflict with Maryland's restrictions on fertilizer type, timing, amount, and application. Contact the Turfgrass Nutrient Management Program to determine whether specifications are within the law. When hiring a lawn care professional it is important to:

- **Identify** streams, gullies, or other environmentally sensitive areas.
- **Inspect** the property after a lawn care application to confirm that fertilizer has not been applied to sidewalks, driveways, or other impervious surfaces.
- **Be aware** of fertilizer blackout dates.

Fertilizer Restrictions

For Homeowners and Professionals

- ☛ **Everyone must follow** University of Maryland fertilizer recommendations.
- ☛ **A single fertilizer application may not exceed** 0.9 pound total nitrogen per 1,000 square feet and 0.7 pound of soluble nitrogen per 1,000 square feet except when using enhanced efficiency fertilizer.
- ☛ **For additional guidance**, homeowners should visit extension.umd.edu/hgic. For annual nitrogen recommendations, lawn care professionals should consult the *Maryland Professional Lawn Care Management Manual* at mda.maryland.gov/fertilizer.
- ☛ **Phosphorus may only be applied** to lawns when a soil test indicates that it is needed or when a lawn is being established, patched or renovated.
- ☛ **Fertilizer may not be used** to de-ice walkways and driveways.
- ☛ **It is against the law to apply fertilizer** to sidewalks, driveways or paved surfaces. Fertilizer that lands on these surfaces must be swept back onto lawns or cleaned up.
- ☛ **Do not apply fertilizer** if heavy rain is predicted.
- ☛ **Do not apply fertilizer** within 15 feet of waterways. This setback is reduced to 10 feet if a drop spreader, rotary spreader with deflector or targeted spray liquid is used to apply fertilizer.
- ☛ **Lawn fertilizer may not be applied** between November 15 and March 1.*
- ☛ **Enhanced efficiency fertilizers** may be applied at a rate of 2.5 pounds per 1,000 square feet or 80 percent of the annual University of Maryland nitrogen recommendation, whichever is less. The product must be approved as an enhanced efficiency fertilizer by the Maryland State Chemist.

*For Lawn Care Professionals only:

From November 16 through December 1 a maximum of 0.5 pound per 1,000 square feet of nitrogen may be applied.

