

Summer Tips for Transitioning to Organic Lawn Care

Scarborough Conservation Commission

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Thanks to the Pest Management Policy passed in 2011, all those who use Scarborough parks, playgrounds and sports fields have greatly reduced exposure to pesticides. (See 2019 PMAC Report at scarboroughmaine.org/government/boards-committees/conservation-commission FMI). Families, pets, wildlife and waterways will all benefit as more and more homeowners learn about organic lawn care, and like the Town, choose not to use weed and bug killers. Here are a few things you can do this **Summer** to begin a transition to a healthy organic lawn that is safe for people, pets and pollinators.

- **Mow Better - Mow high by setting mower blades between 3 and 4 inches.** Taller grass develops stronger roots and shades out weeds. Make sure mower blades are sharp to ensure a clean cut. Dull blades tear grass, making it more susceptible to disease. **Cut only the top 1/3 of grass blades and leave the clippings**, which is free, natural fertilizer for your lawn. Mow in the early evening, after the heat of the day and vary the mowing pattern every time you mow to prevent soil compaction.
- **Water Wisely** - Lawns need between 1 and 1.5 inches of water per week during the May to October growing season. Water deeply once or twice a week, depending on rainfall. Use a rain gauge to measure the amount of water from rainfall. Water between 6 a.m. and 10 a.m. to allow the water to soak into the ground before it can evaporate during the heat of the day and avoid watering at night to prevent fungal disease.
- **Over-seed** - Generously spread a mix of endophyte-enhanced fescues and perennial ryegrass seeds (look for a shady grass seed mix) all season long to reduce weeds and pests and be sure to add seed in thin or bare spots before weeds begin to grow.
- **Grubs** - In northern New England, the best way to treat grubs naturally is by using beneficial nematodes (microscopic critters that live in the soil). They are available through North Country Organics (norganics.com). For nematodes to work, carefully follow package instructions when using these living creatures. **Nematodes are best applied in late July/early August** when grubs are small and near the surface of the soil.
- **Lawn Alternatives** - Identify shady or wet areas not suited for growing grass. Consider replanting these areas with native ground covers, moisture-loving shrubs or shade perennials. Native plants are best suited to Maine's climate, growing season and soils. And because they have natural defenses against insects and disease, they require very little, if any, fertilizer or bug killers. They also attract beneficial pollinators like bees, butterflies and hummingbirds. To learn more, visit cumberlandswcd.org/documents-1/yardscaping and click on Native Plants. Check out helpful information at the Wild Seed Project (wildseedproject.net), University of Maine Cooperative Extension (extension.umaine.edu/gardening/manual/plants-for-the-maine-landscape/) and Audubon Native Plant Database (audubon.org/native-plants).

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Information for this article was drawn from the following sources: Cumberland County Soil & Water District (www.cumberlandswcd.org/yardscape), Friends of Casco Bay (www.cascobay.org/bayscaping), Univ. of Maine Cooperative Extension (www.extension.umaine.edu/gardening/manual/lawns), Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association. (www.mofga.org/Publications/Fact-Sheets) and Northeast Organic Farmers Association (www.organiclandcare.net). Visit their websites for more detailed information.