

## Spring Tips for Transitioning to Organic Lawn Care

Scarborough Conservation Commission

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Passed in September 2011, the Scarborough Pest Management Policy ensures that 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](http://scarboroughmaine.org/government/boards-committees/conservation-commission) FMI). Families, pets, wildlife and waterways will all benefit as more and more homeowners follow the Town's example to commit to learning about and transitioning to organic lawn care. If you are interested in a lawn that is healthy and safe for people, pets, and pollinators, here are a few easy things you can do this **Spring** to get started.

- **Begin with a soil test** - The only way to know what your soil needs is to do a soil test. It will tell you the levels of pH, nutrients and organic matter in your lawn and what to add to your soil to grow a healthy lawn. A soil test can be done any time, but doing it in mid to late spring will ensure you know what your lawn needs at the start of the growing season. Free soil test kits are available at the Scarborough Town Clerk's Office; Univ. of Maine Cooperative Extension Office, 5 Clearwater Dr., #104, Falmouth; and online at [umaine.edu/soiltestinglab/home/kit-request](http://umaine.edu/soiltestinglab/home/kit-request). Testing itself costs \$18.
- **Over-seed** - Use "endophyte-enhanced" perennial rye grass to seed thin or bare spots. It has the best chance of germinating before weeds emerge and will help resist pests and disease. Typically, shady grass seed mixes will have the right types of grass for our area.
- **Weed** - Pull young weeds by hand while roots are short and soil is moist. Also, learn to "read your weeds." They can tell you a lot about the mineral content, drainage and hardness of your soil. To learn more, go to [cumberlandswcd.org/documents-1/yardscaping](http://cumberlandswcd.org/documents-1/yardscaping) and click on Weeds.
- **Sharpen lawn mower blades** - Take your mower to your local hardware store or garden center to sharpen blades. Sharp blades give a "cleaner" cut and help prevent diseases.
- **Mow Smart** - Cut little and often. Mow at least weekly during the growing season and remove just the top one-third of the grass blades. Cut lawn down to 2 inches in early spring to stimulate growth, then adjust mower to the highest setting, preferably 3 to 4 inches, for the remainder of the growing season. Taller grass creates deep roots that resist drought, shades out weeds, and removes and stores carbon from the atmosphere.
- **Leave grass clippings** - They return important organic matter and nutrients to the soil. Mulched grass clippings can cut the fertilizer needs for your young lawn by 25-40%. For mature lawns (10-plus years), clippings provide all the fertilizer they need.
- **Lawn Alternatives:** Consider reducing the size of your lawn by planting low-maintenance native trees, shrubs and flower gardens. For a list of native shrubs, trees, ground covers and perennials, go

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to [cumberlandswcd.org/documents-1/yardscaping](http://cumberlandswcd.org/documents-1/yardscaping) and click on Native Plants. There is also lots of helpful information at the Wild Seed Project ([wildseedproject.net](http://wildseedproject.net)), University of Maine Cooperative Extension <https://extension.umaine.edu/gardening/manual/plants-for-the-maine-landscape/> and Audubon Native Plant Database ([www.audubon.org/native-plants](http://www.audubon.org/native-plants)).

**What? No fertilizer or weed or bug killers (weed and feed)?** Phosphorus-free, slow-release, **organic** fertilizer should be added **only** if called for in soil test results, and applied in early fall (not spring) when the plant will use it to strengthen its roots. Chemical fertilizers, including weed and feed, can be harmful to important critters in the soil and pose health risks for children, pets, and wildlife. And because many contain nitrogen, they can also pollute marshes, bays, and streams, harm aquatic animals, and trigger algae blooms.

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