

Kick the habit — save the planet

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It's spring and the time of year when we look at the lawn with new determination. Perhaps this year, that determination can be focused on caring for our lawns in a new way. One that is healthier for our families and pets and protects the environment.

Let's face it. Everyone loves at least a little patch of green turf. However, not everyone is aware that by EPA estimates 5-10 percent of all air pollution is caused by gas-powered lawn-mowing equipment. Or that in a University of Washington study, commonly used lawn insecticides showed up in the urine of toddlers.

Is a beautiful lawn possible without gas-guzzling mowers and “weed and feed?” Can we kick the habit and instead make some small changes that will protect our health, the health of our kids and pets, and the health of the planet?

Yes! And here's how to do it.

- Change your mowing practices and mulch your clippings.

Every time you mow your lawn, you are removing the “food factory” that feeds a healthy lawn. By mowing more often, and cutting off less of the blade each time, more of the food factory remains and your lawn will grow healthier. When you leave the lawn a little taller, the roots will grow longer, too, requiring less frequent watering. Remove only one-third of the blade height in any single mowing. When the lawn is approximately 3 inches, mow it to 2 inches.

If you use a mulching mower, you can return the finely chopped clippings to the lawn. These clippings quickly break down and can supply up to 25 percent of the lawn's nitrogen fertilizer need.

- Trade in your old mowing equipment and reduce pollution.

For tiny lawns, consider using a push mower and hand trimmers. The only “emissions” you give off are your own. For a typical urban- and suburban-sized lawn, battery-operated mulching mowers are a good solution. You will eliminate the “global warming gases” that come from using a gas mower.

- Apply organic fertilizer to your lawn for a slow, steady nutritious diet.

When you use an organic fertilizer, the soil's microorganisms slowly and steadily provide the nutrition the lawn needs over time. Doses of traditional chemical lawn food give a "spike" of fertilizer so the lawn greens up quickly. But the fertilizer is depleted quickly, making your lawn dependent on regular doses. Another problem, much of the chemical fertilizer can be lost to runoff or can percolate into the ground water.

- Pull weeds. Protect your kids and pets from chemical exposure.

Why are you spreading weed killer on every inch of your lawn? Is it a total weed patch? When weeds appear remove them with a weeding tool. Once you have rid your lawn of weeds, your efforts to grow a lush, healthy lawn will be the best defense against weeds in the future.

- Water sensibly for a healthier lawn and lower your water bill.

Lawns only need 1 inch of water per week to stay green, so monitor rainfall. A number of rain gauges and "weather stations" are available and fun to use. To supplement inadequate rainfall, apply the water in one session per week unless you have very sandy soil, or it puddles. Then apply in two separate waterings a few days apart. Water in the early morning. Water applied in the heat of the day can be lost to evaporation and wet grass at night is susceptible to lawn disease. And remember, patio, walkways and driveways do not require water.

- Give up on struggling lawn under the trees and embrace new planting opportunities.

No amount of fertilization, organic or otherwise, is going to support a good lawn where it is too shady. If you have tried fine fescue grass seeds, (the most shade tolerant), and still have a struggling lawn, give up. Plant a garden that will thrive in shade. Garden-center staff members would be happy to give you suggestions for plants that are ideal for shady spots.

Green lawns are great for curb appeal, entertainment and play. Let's keep them that way using a sensible approach that protects our health and environment.

Ladd Smith is the co-owner of In Harmony Sustainable Landscapes in Bothell.