

Prevent pollution, save money by thinking before fertilizing your lawn this year

Many homeowners use fertilizers to get the greenest, lushest lawn possible. But did you know that fertilizer is a large source of water pollution?

Stormwater runoff comes into contact with freshly-applied fertilizer and carries excess nitrogen and phosphorus to Salt Creek and the Des Plaines River, and then flows into the Illinois River, to the Mississippi River, and into the Gulf of Mexico. The nutrients stimulate the growth of algae in all of those waters along the way. The algae blooms cause oxygen in the waters to become depleted to the point that fish, other aquatic creatures, and plants cannot live. These areas are called dead zones.

The Gulf of Mexico experiences an annual dead zone spanning hundreds of miles that devastates the ocean ecosystem. Illinois is the number one contributor of nutrients to the Gulf's Dead Zone. The U.S. EPA has asked the state to reduce the amount of nutrients in its waters. Last year, the Illinois EPA convened a Task Force to study the problem, and discovered specific sources of the nutrients. The Des Plaines River watershed, which includes La Grange Park, is a priority area for reductions.

All of us can help prevent this pollution by using fertilizer sparingly, if at all. It is illegal for commercial landscapers to apply phosphorus fertilizer unless a soil test shows a lack of phosphorus. The soils in our area contain ample phosphorus, so there is no need for you to pay for the unneeded ingredient. The *2016 Nutrient Management Practices for Illinois Lawn Care Professionals* states they have never seen a yard in Illinois with phosphorus-deficient soil.

Homeowners may also have their soil tested to see if it is needed. When you do use fertilizer, choose wisely by picking a product that contains no phosphorous. The label will have three numbers on it representing the amounts of nutrients in the product: nitrogen, phosphorous, and potassium (N-P-K), in that order. Make sure the middle number for phosphorus is zero. Also, be sure to follow the directions for applying the product carefully.