

# Use phosphorus-free lawn fertilizer to protect Minnesota lakes and rivers

Minnesota law prohibits the application of phosphorus-containing fertilizer to lawns. Phosphorus is the primary nutrient that turns lakes and rivers green with algae.

## Phosphorus Law

**It is illegal to apply fertilizers containing phosphorus to lawns** in Minnesota. Look for the middle number on a bag of fertilizer. It should be zero (0).

### Exceptions

Fertilizers containing phosphorus may be used on lawns if a soil or plant tissue test indicates that it is needed **or** if you are establishing a new lawn by laying sod or seeding.

These restrictions do not apply to fertilizers used for agricultural crops, flower and vegetable gardening, or on golf courses by trained staff.

**It's also illegal to spread any fertilizer on hard surfaces** such as streets, sidewalks, and driveways. Rain can wash the fertilizer into nearby storm drains or road ditches, eventually getting into a lake or river near you. If you accidentally spill or spread fertilizer on a hard surface, clean it up immediately.



### THE PROBLEM: TOO GREEN



**GREEN AND MURKY** Excess algae and weed growth is a major problem in many Minnesota lakes and waterways. One pound of phosphorus can result in hundreds of pounds of algae.



**MORE PHOSPHORUS, FEWER FISH** Too much algae lowers oxygen levels and darkens the water. In severe cases, this can have a devastating effect on fish populations.

**Will phosphorus-free fertilizer keep my lawn healthy?**  
Soils in most parts of Minnesota already have an adequate amount of phosphorus to grow a healthy lawn. In these instances, adding more phosphorus with fertilizer is not needed and will not benefit your lawn.  
*Get a soil test if you want to know your lawn's phosphorus levels — see next page.*



### What do I look for?

On any bag or box of fertilizer, there is a string of three numbers. The middle number indicates the phosphorus content and should read "0".

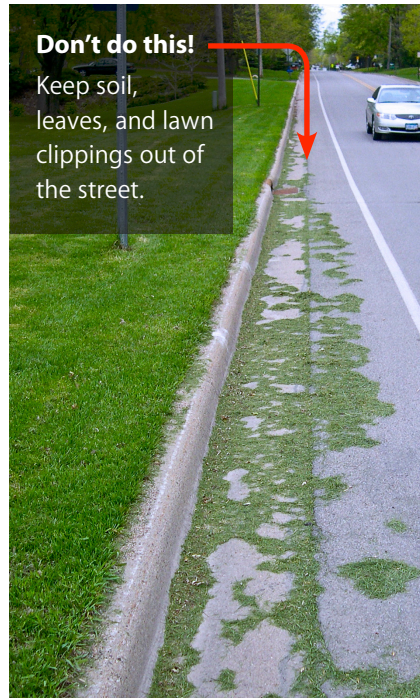


**DO THE GREEN THING: FERTILIZE RESPONSIBLY**  
Most garden centers and hardware stores carry phosphorus-free lawn fertilizers.

# What can I do to protect water quality?

Fertilizers, leaves, grass clippings, animal waste, and eroded soil are all sources of phosphorus. When they are swept or washed into the street or nearest storm drain, they end up in your local lake or river. You can do your part to protect water quality by doing the following:

- ▶ Buy phosphorus-free lawn fertilizer.
- ▶ Apply fertilizer at the recommended rate. Late summer is the best time. Don't fertilize before a storm. Never apply to frozen ground.
- ▶ Keep soil, leaves, and lawn clippings out of the street.
- ▶ Mow higher. Keeping your grass length to 2½ – 3 inches is healthier for your lawn.
- ▶ Pick up pet waste promptly. Pet waste can contain harmful bacteria as well as nutrients that cause excess algae and weed growth in lakes and rivers.
- ▶ Control soil erosion around your house. When left bare, soil is easily washed away with rain, carrying phosphorus with it. Soil erosion can be prevented by keeping soil covered with vegetation or mulch.



What's in your street is in your stream.



**SWEEP IT UP** Grass clippings, leaves, or fertilizer left on streets and sidewalks can be a major source of phosphorus pollution in lakes and rivers.



## How do I find out what my soil needs?

If you are concerned that your lawn may need phosphorus, a soil test is a good idea. Instructions on soil testing are available through the University of Minnesota Soil Testing Laboratory: [soiltest.cfans.umn.edu](http://soiltest.cfans.umn.edu), or 612-625-3101. The U of M charges \$15 per sample to analyze basic nutrition for lawns. The soil test results will include fertilizer recommendations.

A list of laboratories certified for soil testing by the Minnesota Department of Agriculture can be found at [www.mda.state.mn.us](http://www.mda.state.mn.us), then search "soil testing labs."

## For more information on lawn care

- ▶ The **Yard & Garden Line** is the University of Minnesota Extension's one-stop telephone link to information about plants and insects in the home landscape. Call 952-443-1426 or [www.extension.umn.edu/gardeninfo](http://www.extension.umn.edu/gardeninfo).
- ▶ **Sustainable lawn maintenance.** University of Minnesota Extension – *Sustainable Urban Landscape Information Series (SULIS)*: [www.sustland.umn.edu](http://www.sustland.umn.edu). From the home page, click on "Maintenance" then on "Sustainable Lawn Maintenance."
- ▶ **Minnesota's phosphorus law.** Minnesota Department of Agriculture: [www.mda.state.mn.us/phoslaw](http://www.mda.state.mn.us/phoslaw).
- ▶ **No-waste lawn.** Minnesota Pollution Control Agency: [www.pca.state.mn.us](http://www.pca.state.mn.us). From the home page, search "lawn and garden."