



TOWN  
OF  
SHELTER ISLAND

# HOMEOWNER GUIDE TO FERTILIZER AND LAWN CARE

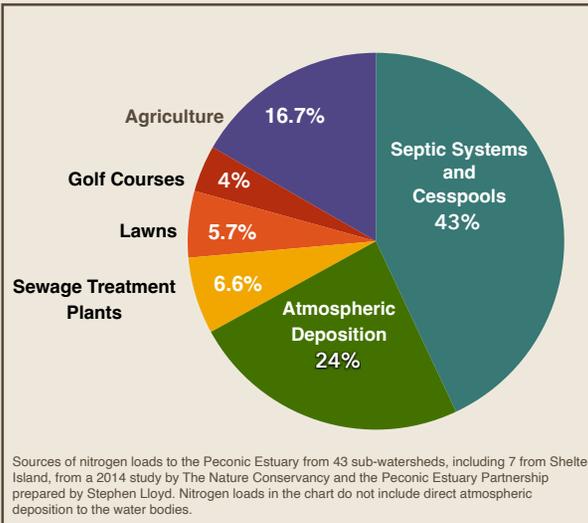


This brochure was produced by the Town of Shelter Island Water Advisory Committee & Green Options Committee with funding from a NYS Clean Energy Communities grant.

## INTRODUCTION

Fertilizers can be a benefit to the home landscape if applied properly and at the correct times of the year. However, if applied incorrectly the nitrogen in fertilizers contributes to the overload of nitrogen in our bays and creeks, which causes algae blooms. Excessive nitrogen in our drinking water is a threat to our health.

And though the percentage of nitrogen load from lawn fertilizers (5.7%) to the Peconic Estuary is much less than from septic systems and cesspools (43%), as shown in the nitrogen load pie chart, it's something we can easily control.



## SHELTER ISLAND FERTILIZER CODE

The Town Code Chapter 67, which augments NYS and Suffolk County fertilizer regulations, requires landscape contractors who apply fertilizers to be licensed. **The code states:**

- No person shall apply lawn fertilizer between November 1 and April 1.

- Definition of Fertilizer: Any organic or inorganic material of natural or synthetic origin which is added to soil, soil mixtures, or solution to supplement nutrients and is claimed to contain one or more essential plant nutrients. The term "fertilizer" does not include compost, or un-manipulated animal and vegetable manure and agricultural liming materials used to reduce soil acidity.
- No person shall apply lawn fertilizer to any impervious surface, including driveways, parking lots, roadways, and sidewalks.
- No person shall apply lawn fertilizer in a manner that allows fertilizer to enter storm drains or any other man-made stormwater receptacles or channels.
- No person shall apply lawn fertilizer to any turf or lawn area within 100 feet of any surface water.
- All landscapers who apply fertilizers must comply with the licensing requirements of Chapter 79, including the possession and display of a valid Suffolk County Nitrogen Fertilizer Turf Management Certificate.

Homeowners should check if their landscape contractor has the required Suffolk County Nitrogen Fertilizer Turf Management Certificate and if their license is up to date. Homeowners are encouraged to work with their contractor to create a Best Management Practice (BMP) for their lawn care.

Retail stores are required to post Suffolk County signs that advise consumers about the correct application of fertilizers.

## KNOW YOUR FERTILIZER

Most fertilizers contain three primary nutrients: nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium in varying ratios known as the N-P-K ratio. Nitrogen makes turf green and lush; phosphorus encourages a healthy root system; potassium contributes to overall plant health. Some fertilizers may be phosphorus free.

Fertilizers may also contain fast-release nitrogen that can act quickly on turf. However, any residual fertilizer not taken up by the grass can become runoff. Slow-release nitrogen feeds a lawn throughout the growing season and is less harmful to the environment.

## SOIL TESTING

Homeowners should have their soil tested for pH, organic matter, and nutrient levels. This test can be done by your landscape contractor or with DIY test kits.



A healthy lawn should have a pH between 6 and 7. Your test results will indicate what nutrients to add if necessary. For instance, don't add phosphorus unless indicated. Like nitrogen, excess phosphorus can also cause algae blooms in fresh and salt water.

## TURF MANAGEMENT TIPS

### MOWING HEIGHT

Adjust the height of your blade according to the seasons and weather. Mowing higher at 3-4 inches during hot, dry periods protects the roots.

### GRASS CLIPPINGS

Leave grass clippings on the lawn after mowing. They break down and provide free nutrients. Mowed leaf clippings can supply the same benefits. Consider making leaf piles in underused areas. They provide habitat for overwintering butterflies and moths and compost for your garden.



### RIGHT GRASS / RIGHT LOCATION

Check with your landscape contractor if you are using the correct grass variety for sun, shade, dry or moist soil.

## ALTERNATIVE LANDSCAPES

### REDUCE YOUR LAWN AREA

Consider shrinking an underused section of your lawn and replacing it with a native pollinator garden or meadow that lessens the need for water and fertilizers. The birds, bees and butterflies will thank you.

## CREATE A BUFFER ZONE

If you live in a nearshore area, create a buffer zone between your lawn and the bay or a creek with a colorful border or meadow of drought tolerant native grasses, shrubs, and flowering perennials adapted to coastal conditions that will filter fertilizers and nutrients from entering water bodies.



## HELPFUL WEBSITES

Suffolk County: Healthy Lawns Clean Water  
<https://healthylawns.suffolkcountyny.gov>

Lawn Care: Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County  
<https://ccesuffolk.org/gardening/horticulture-factsheets>



Scan the QR Code for Licensed Contractors.