

Long Island Nitrogen Action Plan – March Newsletter Lawn Care Tips

In this month's issue of the LINAP Newsletter, we focus on actions that can be taken to be eco-friendly this Spring.

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Tips for an Eco-Friendly Lawn

It's spring and lawn care is on the minds of many Long Islanders. Fertilizer is often thought of as a key ingredient to a healthy, vibrant lawn. But fertilizer use, especially improper application, can be harmful to the environment. Excess nitrogen in fertilizer pollutes our waterways, negatively impacts aquatic life and interferes with fishing, swimming and boating. In fact, fertilizer is the second leading source of nitrogen contamination of Long Island waters; residential wastewater is the primary source.

In this issue of the Long Island Nitrogen Action Plan (LINAP) newsletter, we review several ways to care for your lawn while protecting coastal waters, as well as, our drinking water supply. Most important, fertilizer should not be applied before April. Grass simply cannot efficiently absorb fertilizer at this time. Furthermore, it is illegal to fertilize your lawn in Nassau and Suffolk counties before April 1.

To be clear, lawns are not a natural landscape feature and usually require high maintenance. If having a lawn is your preferred landscape option, then following the suggestions below will help decrease the likelihood of overapplying fertilizer and, therefore, reduce the amount of excess nitrogen that enters groundwater and surface water.

1. **Don't start fertilizing!** If you're not currently using fertilizer and you are happy with how your lawn looks, then don't start fertilizing. Many lawns do not need any added fertilizer to spark joy in the homeowner.
2. **Keep those grass clippings on your lawn.** Mulching mowers finely chop grass into small pieces which get deposited into the lawn and decompose quickly. It is like adding a little bit of fertilizer every time you mow, and allows you to lessen, or eliminate, chemical fertilizer application. As a general rule, no more than a third of the grass blade should be removed during a single mowing. And it's also a good practice to keep the mowing height at least three inches high, which encourages deeper, healthier roots.
3. **Apply less fertilizer to your lawn.** If you decide to use fertilizer, especially on a well-established lawn, then apply one-third to one-half the amount recommended on the fertilizer bag. If you are satisfied, then you applied the right amount. Nice work!

4. **Calibration is key.** If you choose to fertilize, you'll need to calibrate your spreader in order to deliver fertilizer at the correct application rate. Equipment used to spread fertilizer should be calibrated for a LINAP recommended single application rate of a maximum of 0.6 pounds of total nitrogen per 1,000 square feet at least once annually or each time fertilizer products are changed. [Calibration directions](#) are available on the [Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County website](#).
5. **Timing is everything.** If you are going to fertilize, then apply it at the right time – close to Memorial Day and/or Labor Day. Fertilizer shouldn't be applied before April or after mid-October. Nor should it be applied during the hottest summer months when grass is dormant. Grass simply cannot efficiently absorb fertilizer at this time so don't bother trying – you'll just waste fertilizer and money. On Long Island, if you fertilize once a year, it makes the most sense to do so around Labor Day.
6. **Eliminate or shrink your lawn.** Consider reducing the lawn area requiring fertilizer. One of the most effective ways Long Islanders can do their part to protect local water resources, is to replace their lawn or a portion of it with less water-intensive landscaping, also known as “xeriscaping.” Xeriscaping makes use of drought tolerant plant species, often native plant species, requires little to no extra water and fertilizer as well as helping to absorb and filter rainwater. Also, xeriscaping is aesthetically pleasing and can increase property value.

If you live within the Peconic Estuary watershed and are considering doing some upgrades outside this Spring, the [Peconic Estuary Partnership](#) (PEP) may be able to help you out! PEP's Homeowner Rewards Program offers rebates for people who are looking to benefit the environment with sustainable practices such as for native plantings, rain gardens, and rain barrels. Visit the [PEP Homeowner Rewards Program](#) for more information on the program!

For more information, please visit the following resources:

[NYS DEC Lawn Fertilizer webpage](#)

[NYS DEC LINAP's Turf Grass Fertilizer Recommendations](#)

[NYS DEC “Leave it on the Lawn” webpage](#)



Take the Pledge! Commit to personal steps to reduce nitrogen pollution!

Small steps can lead to big changes and there are plenty of actions we can take to reduce nitrogen in our waterways and create a cleaner future for our most precious resource.

The pledge outlines 10 ways you can reduce personal nitrogen pollution every day:

- Be smart – fertilize your lawn responsibly but it’s best to not use fertilizers at all!
- Keep grass clippings on the lawn and bag your leaves.
- Replace your septic system or cesspool with an innovative and advanced treatment system.
- Sweep up any fertilizer that falls on walkways and driveways. Keep fertilizer, grass clipping and leaves out of storm drains.
- Direct downspouts into plant beds or the lawn rather than onto walkways and the driveway.
- Plant native trees and other plants in your yard.
- Leave a wide strip of deep-rooted plants along the shoreline.
- Pick up pet waste and reduce “poo-lution” (even in your own backyard).
- Drive less and consolidate trips when you run errands.
- Use a commercial car wash rather than washing your vehicle at home.
- Spread the word; encourage friends and family members to take the pledge and help reduce nitrogen pollution!

Take the pledge and be recognized as a leader in our community that takes action for a cleaner and healthier environment.

Click [here](#) to take the pledge!