Organic Lawn Care

With the dog days of summer hard upon us, people everywhere are desperate to save their lawns. They water excessively, spray herbicides and pesticides, and use fertilizers, all in the hopes of having a lush, green, weed- and pest-free yard for just a few weeks longer. Sure, it looks beautiful, but what are the consequences of over-watering and such heavy-handed chemical usage?

A study by the National Cancer Institute, of the U.S. National Institutes of Health, found an almost seven times greater risk of leukemia in children whose parents use pesticides on their homes, gardens, or lawns. A U.S. Geological Survey states that about a billion pounds of pesticides are used each year and that traces of those pesticides were found in every stream tested across the country. Of the thirty lawn pesticides most commonly used, nineteen have been linked to cancer, thirteen to birth defects, twenty-one to reproductive effects, and twenty-six to liver or kidney damage. (Sara Snow’s Fresh Living, Bantam Dell, 2009) Synthetic fertilizers get washed into the storm system (which runs directly into our waterways without any kind of filtration, whatsoever!), creating an overabundance of phosphorous in the water. This phosphorous causes excessive growth of algae, which in turn blocks sunlight, setting off a chain of events that results in areas called “dead zones” because no aquatic life can survive in them.

Over-watering is actually detrimental to grass. Frequent, shallow watering causes grass roots to spread horizontally, instead of digging deeper, which protects the roots and gives them access to more water. Watering excessively also washes chemicals off the lawn and into our water systems. If you must water your lawn, do so no more than once a week and to a depth of one inch. If you have an automatic irrigation system, set it to go off early in the morning. This way the water has a chance to penetrate the earth instead of evaporating as it does once the sun has been up past nine o’clock. And if it has rained recently or is forecast to rain, please turn off your irrigation system. For the truly dedicated, rain barrels can be set up to collect run-off and then used to water your lawn, garden, and decorative plants. Water is a most precious resource, and wasting it is frivolous!

The lawn is most often the play area for children and pets. They run over, roll on it, dig in it, and the more adventurous among them actually eat some grass. Then they come inside and track all those chemicals in with them. I can’t imagine anyone storing chemicals in their kitchen, so why would they want it brought in there on the bottoms of shoes or feet? And those signs that lawn companies put up in people’s yards with the company’s name on them? They are not for advertising. Lawn companies are required by law to post those signs so that people are aware that the grass has recently been treated with chemicals.

So what is the answer to all of these chemicals that we’re so freely dousing on our yards? There are five things to remember: keep the amount of grass down to only what is necessary, skip the chemicals altogether, spike your grass (just another reason to wear your golf shoes), leave the clippings, and use hand- or battery-powered lawn tools. There are plenty of eco-friendly fertilizers and deterrents (corn gluten is a particularly effective crabgrass preventer), and spiking the lawn allows oxygen to get down into the soil and let good insects, worms, and microorganisms support a healthy root system. Leaving the clippings on your lawn (spread out in a thin, even layer) supplies the soil with nitrogen as they decompose. And using lawn tools that are not powered by gas cuts down on air and noise pollution and also provides you with a pretty decent work-out! For more information, please visit [www.organicgardening.com](http://www.organicgardening.com) and then type “lawn care” into the search box.