



# Make Your Lawn Truly "Green"

## *A Lawn Guide for River Star Homes*



*The typical American over-fertilizes the lawn, and the excess fertilizer washes into our river—causing unhealthy algae blooms. Help make the Elizabeth River safe for swimming and fishing again. Do your part with these secrets to a healthy lawn that needs less fertilizer.*

## **BUILD A HEALTHY LAWN**

### **The best way to reduce the need for fertilizer is to create a healthy lawn:**

**Leave grass clippings on the lawn.** This alone can reduce the amount of fertilizer you need by half. Bag the first and last mow of the season, though, to reduce weeds.

**Add white clover seed!** Converting just 5 % of your lawn to clover can completely eliminate the need to fertilize. Clover adds nitrogen naturally. We recommend low-growing white clover (see back).

**"Top-dress"** the lawn. Spread a quarter-inch of compost over your lawn in spring and fall. Rake in.

**Water less, but longer** – Put out a rain gauge and only water if it's rained less than 1 inch per week.

**Mow high.** Mowing too low makes grass susceptible to weeds, pests and diseases. Know your species: Bermuda grass does best at 2 – 2.5 inches; St. Augustine and Zoysia at 3 – 4 inches.

**Identify your grass species.** If you've never looked closely at your grass, this might take a little effort –

but here's the reward. This is the only way to really know what will keep your specific grass healthiest. One kind of grass is best seeded in spring; another, in fall, for instance. So pull up a sprig from your lawn, then go to the computer to identify it at <http://www.ipm.ucdavis.edu/TOOLS/TURF/TURFSPECIES/> or <http://www.turffiles.ncsu.edu/turfid/ItemID.aspx?orderID=GR&orderDesc=Grass>.

**Choose the right grass.** We recommend warm season grasses (Bermuda, Zoysia, St. Augustine) best adapted to our Hampton Roads climate. Use Bermuda grass for full sun and St. Augustine or Zoysia for light shade. If you have cool season grasses (fescue, bluegrass, rye grass), consider converting to warm season grasses over time.

**Re-seed once a year.** A thick turf is one of the best ways to control weeds. Seed warm season grasses March – July; best results, March. Cool season grasses (not preferred in our area) are best planted mid-September to mid-October.

**Aerate it.** For a serious lawn makeover, rent a "core aerator" to open up the soil and improve root growth, water and nutrient absorption. Then top dress with compost. (Core aerators are available from Home Depot for \$56 for 4 hours; Grand Rental Station for \$66 for half-day.)

## IF YOU FERTILIZE

*Find out if you qualify for a free on-site consultation with our lawn care specialists on how to reduce fertilizer use. Available for River Star Homes in the Lafayette River area. Call or email Cheryl Copper, 399-7487 or [ccopper@elizabethriver.org](mailto:ccopper@elizabethriver.org).*

**Choose slow-release fertilizers** (coated & water insoluble) that help roots develop and that wash away less easily. Do not apply slow or time-released nitrogen at rates above one pound per 1,000 square feet. Apply only as much as it says.

**Use organic materials** such as compost and kelp.

**Never apply fertilizer if rain is forecast.** While controlled watering is necessary to allow fertilizer to soak in, a deluge will wash away much of what you've applied--into the river through street gutters and storm drains.

**Do not apply phosphorous** unless your soil test indicates you need it.

**Sweep any fertilizer off paved areas** before it washes away.

**Create your own compost.** Kitchen scraps (not egg shells), weeds, paper, leaves, and other things that we throw away can create compost that improves soil health [www.the-compost-gardener.com](http://www.the-compost-gardener.com)

## KNOW YOUR SOIL

**Soil Test.** Your lawn may not need fertilizer or it may not need the kind you're using. Find out with a soil test. We recommend a "low impact" soil test with A & L, [www.aleastern.com](http://www.aleastern.com). They'll give you river friendly advice with your results.



## REDUCE TURF, GROW FLOWERS & WETLANDS

**Convert more of your lawn to native plants** and flower beds. Learn how with our free Wildlife Habitat Guide.

**Plant a buffer** of low native shrubs and showy native ornamentals between your lawn and the river, or if you don't live on the river—between you and the street gutter. The buffer will do a better job than your lawn of absorbing storm water runoff. Our Wildlife Habitat Guide lists native plants for the Elizabeth River area.

**Conserve wetlands.** If you live on the waterfront, please—it's super important—keep your native wetland grasses along the shore. Wetlands are some of the most productive ecosystems in the world, as well as nature's pollution filters.

*River Star Homes is a citizen stewardship program of the Elizabeth River Project. This project received funding from HRSD, the Water Quality Improvement Fund grant program at Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation, grant WQIF-2010-P05, and a Chesapeake Bay Innovative Nutrient & Sediment Reduction grant from National Fish & Wildlife Foundation. Special thanks to Lynnhaven River Now and My Sister's Garden, Organic Lawn & Landscaping for shared lawn care tips.*

[www.RiverStarHomes.org](http://www.RiverStarHomes.org) - A Program of the Elizabeth River Project – (757) 399-7487



# IF SOMEONE ELSE DOES YOUR LAWN CARE

*Is your lawn care company helping you meet your goals as a River Star Home? Ask these questions to be sure.*

- 1. What kind of fertilizer do you apply? What proportion of this contains slow-release nitrogen?** We're hoping for at least 50% slow-release fertilizer. Ideal are organic fertilizers such as compost and kelp (seaweed). There are two problems with fast-release, chemical-synthetic fertilizers. First, when they release their nutrients quickly, they create excessive grass-blade growth at the expense of root development. This unbalanced growth weakens your lawn. Second, quick-release fertilizers leach away without being used by grass plants, especially in sandy soils. Unused nutrients then wash into the river, contributing to harmful algal blooms.
- 2. How do you control your rate of fertilizer application?** You should get a description of how to calculate the amount needed, based on your yard's acreage and fertilizer application rates. This increases the chances of your provider not over-fertilizing.
- 3. How do your recommendations reflect the specific conditions of my lawn?** In order to avoid over-fertilizing and over-watering, your lawn care company should first conduct a soil test and diagnose the needs of your specific lawn before discussing a plan.
- 4. Do I have warm or cool season grasses? What are the differences in terms of water and fertilizer needs?** If your company can't tell you, this should be a clue that they may not be adjusting fertilizing and watering to meet the specific needs of your yard.

- 5. What "green" practices do you follow when mowing?** What we like to see: Leave clippings on the lawn to compost as natural fertilizer. Ideally, the company also uses an electric mower, as gas mowers are a surprisingly large source of air pollution, which contributes to water pollution. Also, keep blades sharp.
- 6. What is your approach to weed control for my lawn?** Although tastes differ, ideal for the river is an approach that tolerates some "weed" species such as clover. Clover is not just beautiful, it restores nutrients. If 5 % of your lawn is clover, it may be enough for you to avoid adding fertilizers.
- 7. What alternatives to chemical pesticides will you use?** Ideal would be for the company to offer to sign a contract guaranteeing that chemical pesticides will not be used on your property. A company that posts the familiar warning sign after a visit is using toxic chemicals that could be harmful to your children and pets, not just to the river.
- 8. Does your company have a "Water Quality Improvement Agreement" with Virginia Dept. of Conservation and Recreation's Nutrient Management Program?** If not, consider referring them to this program where they can sign an agreement to follow green practices. Here's the phone number in Richmond: 804-786-1712.





# THE CLOVER SOLUTION

**Your lawn's (and the river's) good luck charm**



*White clover (trifolium repens) may just be the luckiest thing to ever happen to your lawn. Once a common part of the average American yard, clover was largely wiped out when herbicides became popular beginning in the 1950s. Now clover is starting to make a comeback because of its many benefits.*

## Clover Benefits

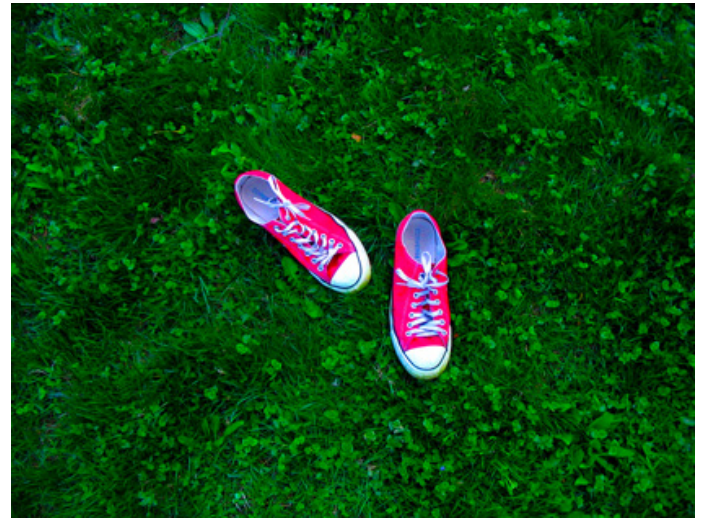
**Clover reduces or eliminates your need for lawn fertilizer.** Clover is a natural fertilizer; it “fixes” the nitrogen in the air and converts it into usable nitrogen in the soil. A yard containing as little as 5% clover can provide enough nitrogen to fertilize your entire lawn when you recycle the clippings!

**Clover stays green all summer with little or no watering.** Clover is relatively drought-tolerant and it greens up early in spring and remains green until the first frost.

**Clover requires little or no mowing.** White clover grows just 2-8 inches tall.

**Clover never needs herbicides** (in fact, most herbicides kill clover). Fortunately, clover out-competes most other weeds.

**Clover grows well in poor soil.** Clover tolerates a wide variety of soil conditions, including poor-quality soil.



## How to add clover to your lawn

**Add clover seed to your existing lawn,** or simply stop fighting the clover plants that are in your yard.

**Seed at 2 - 8 oz./1,000 sq. ft.,** depending on how much clover you want in your lawn (at 8 oz./1,000 sq. ft, clover will dominate). An average cost is \$6/lb. (found at Gardens in a Flower Pot and VA Beach Feed & Seed or order from Southern Exposure Seed Exchange). Seeds are small, so mix with sugar, sand or sawdust and distribute with a flour sifter. Rake first to loosen the soil.

**Seed in spring – or fall.** The best time to plant clover is in March or April, but late summer and fall plantings may be successful as well. New clover plants grow best in plenty of sunlight. If winter weather kills plants sown in the fall, simply re-seed in spring. Clover is a short-lived perennial, so it will require re-seeding every three years or so.

**Water the clover seeds gently,** and keep them damp until they take root (about two weeks after planting). Then water no more than once a week.

**In a few weeks, you'll have lush, thriving clover fertilizing your yard!**

