



# LAWN CARE GUIDE

## MAKE YOUR LAWN TRULY “GREEN”

You can achieve a beautiful lawn without chemicals! Excess fertilizer washes into our river—causing harmful algae blooms. Help keep the Elizabeth River healthy. Use these tips to create a healthy lawn that needs less fertilizer.

**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.

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

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

**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 for rental by the hour from many local hardware stores.)

**“Top-dress” with compost.** Spread a quarter inch of compost (about 3/4 cubic yard per 1,000 square feet over your lawn in spring and fall following aeration. Rake in. Compost provides valuable nutrients and microorganisms to keep your grass healthy.

**Identify your grass species.** This is the best way to really know what your grass needs to stay healthy. So pull up a sprig from your lawn, then go to the computer to identify it at <http://www.ipm.ucanr.edu/TOOLS/TURF/TURFSPECIES/>

**Choose the right grass.** We recommend warm season grasses (St. Augustine, Zoysia, Bermuda) for 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.

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

**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.

## If you fertilize...

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

**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 instead of synthetic fertilizers.

### Never apply fertilizer if rain is forecast.

While controlled watering is necessary to allow fertilizer to soak in, a heavy rain will wash away much of what you've applied—into the river through street gutters and storm drains.

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



**Reduce turf, grow flowers and 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.

See AskHRGreen's lawn care resources for more helpful info! <https://askhrgreen.org/campaign/lawn-care>

## Know your soil.

**Test. Don't guess.** 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 [www.waypointanalytical.com](http://www.waypointanalytical.com). They'll give you river-friendly advice with your results.

## 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 (sea weed). The benefits of slow-release fertilizer include low risk of burning the turf and more even, sustained root development and grass growth (less mowing). Plus, there is less risk of excess nutrients leaching into ground and washing into the river.

**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, keeping mower blades sharp is good for your grass.

### **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 just 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?** Ideally, your lawn care company will 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.

“Our home has earned my neighborhood’s yard of the month award several times, which helps to promote my use of organic and natural products. When we take good care of our home and yard, it helps others learn about practices to keep our river safe.”

- Hope McDonald,  
River Star Home



# CLOVER IS A GOOD LUCK CHARM FOR YOUR YARD AND THE RIVER!

White clover (*Trifolium repens*) was once a common part of the American yard, but clover was largely wiped out when herbicides became popular beginning in the 1950s. Clover is starting to make a comeback because of its many benefits.

## **Clover reduces or eliminates your need for lawn fertilizer.**

Clover is a natural fertilizer; it converts nitrogen in the air (which plants can't use) to nitrogen in the soil (which plants need). A yard containing as little as 5% clover can provide enough nitrogen to fertilize your entire lawn when you leave the clippings on the ground after you mow!

**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 outcompetes most other weeds.



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

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

## **Seed at 2 to 8 oz./1,000 square feet,**

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 Norfolk County Feed and Seed).

**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.

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