

# Rethink Your Lawn

With an estimated 40 million acres of cultivated grass in yards, athletic fields and golf courses nationwide, these pristine mowed areas may look pleasing to some eyes, but to the eyes of a pollinator they are vast, useless deserts void of any pollen or nectar sources. To make matters worse, these deserts frequently are laced with chemical fertilizers and pesticides which are harmful to pollinators, and in many instances harmful to pets, children, water supplies including your well, and the soil itself.

## What Can Be Done?

- 1) **Mow less frequently.** Studies have shown that lawns mowed every two weeks – or better yet, every three weeks – resulted in the presence of more bees and a wider variety of bee species. A bonus is that keeping the grass longer encourages growth of root systems making your lawn more resilient to draught and other stressors.

NOTE: For reduction of ticks it is often recommended that lawns be cut short. Remember that there are other ways to discourage ticks such as removal of barberry, use of tick boxes, and personal protection procedures.

- 2) **Let part of your yard go natural.** By not mowing a section of your yard you may be surprised to find a number of wild flowers which previously were not seen. You are creating a mini-meadow, which you could augment by actually adding a few native plants.

NOTE: Any invasive plants should be identified and pulled before they go to seed. Other methods of control should include only natural organic products.

- 3) **Plant part of your lawn as a pollinator garden.** This could be done by expanding established flower beds using native plants which are most beneficial to pollinators. Lists of native plants can be found at [Pollinator-pathway.org](http://Pollinator-pathway.org) and [Propollinators.org](http://Propollinators.org), or if unsure, ask your nursery for them.

Digging up lawn areas is labor intensive so a good way to avoid this is by placing cardboard, newspapers or mulch over the new garden area in the fall. This makes digging in the spring much easier.

Many garden designs are available as well as lists of native plants. Plan to have varieties which bloom at different times throughout the season. Also pollinators prefer flowers to be planted in groups rather than single species scattered throughout the garden.

Flowering trees and shrubs which benefit pollinators should be considered as well. Once established they provide denser floral resources and are easier to maintain.

## Why you should not use chemicals on your lawn.

- 1) Obviously, if you are planting to attract pollinators, you do not want to entice them to areas that may be harmful to their immediate or long-term health.
- 2) In addition to harming pollinators, lawn chemicals can be a risk to beneficial insects, birds, and other forms of wildlife

- 3) Through infiltration and run-off, these chemicals frequently are sources of pollution in well water and streams and rivers.
- 4) These chemicals are linked to many diseases and medical conditions in our children. Children are especially vulnerable to environmental toxins for many reasons. a) Their immune and regulatory systems are not yet fully developed, b) their normal activities include playing on floors and grass where pesticides accumulate, and c) their smaller size means that they are ingesting more chemicals pound for pound compared to adults.
- 5) Your pets are at risk for many of these same reasons, plus they are apt to lick their feet after being exposed in the yard.

### **How can I go organic in my yard?**

- 1) Obtain a soil test. Don't buy any fertilizer or soil amendment without first knowing what your soil needs.
- 2) Think of your soil as a living organism - an ecosystem in which millions of living creatures thrive and interact. Recent studies have shown that a teaspoon of healthy garden soil may contain more than 6 billion microbes. These microbes are necessary for the healthy functioning of plant processes. Do not kill them with unnecessary chemicals.
- 3) Do not use synthetic fertilizers which feed the grass but not the soil. Organic fertilizers and soil amendments will improve root systems as well as improve soil functioning. Ask for organic when buying any of these products.
- 4) Leave grass clippings on the lawn to return nitrogen to the soil.
- 5) Plant white clover seeds in the lawn. Clover provides nitrogen to the soil and flower resources for pollinators.
- 6) Top-dress once a year with a fine layer of compost or compost tea. This keeps soil bacteria healthy.
- 7) Aerate your lawn to improve water penetration and avoid soil compaction.

### **Special Problems**

- White grubs, webworms, chinch bugs, etc. Do not let your lawn care professional use systemic neonicotinoids such as Merit and Meridian. Instead, apply beneficial nematodes, watering lawn before and after application.
- Japanese beetle grubs: Again, no neonicotinoids. Instead, apply Milky Spore which can provide years of protection.
- Weeds: Do not use herbicides. Instead, using a spreader apply corn gluten each spring to control crab grass and other weeds. Pulling weeds by hand is another good option.

**MOW LESS \* DON'T USE PESTICIDES \* REDUCE LAWN AREAS**

