



This Green Life

A Journal of Sorts



A GREENER LAWN

May 2005

It's time to hang out on the lawn and enjoy the spring. In my case, that means a public lawn at one of the city parks. I have many to choose from, but my favorites are those in Battery Park City. Not only do they offer incredible views of New York Harbor, they are comfy to lie on, lovely to look at and chemical-free.



For me, these lawns are firsthand proof that it is possible to grow a soft, green, inviting bed of grass without pesticides -- one that you, your children and your pets can safely flop down, stretch out, roll around and sleep on.

Did you think your own lawn already was safe? Not likely if it's chemically treated. According to the National Coalition for Pesticide-Free Lawns, of 30 pesticides commonly used in lawns and gardens:

- 13 are probable or possible carcinogens
- 14 are associated with birth defects
- 18 are associated with reproductive problems
- 20 are associated with liver or kidney damage
- 18 can cause neurotoxicity
- 11 are suspect or known endocrine disruptors
- 28 are sensitizers and/or irritants that can cause inflammation or an allergic reaction.

The last in this list is the least of the problems, but also the most obvious because reactions are often visible and immediate. My own daughter seems to have suffered a reaction a few years ago when doing cartwheels at the park. Within minutes, she developed a severe rash on her hands and other body parts that had touched the grass. She was screaming from the pain and itch -- she wasn't sure which -- and we had to rush to the nearest pharmacy for something to alleviate her distress. The rash subsided over the next couple of days, and we quickly put the episode behind us. But I wonder what less visible, longer-term effects she might have had from what we assume was pesticide exposure.

It's a concern because children are at greater risk from pesticide exposure than adults. Not only do they absorb more pesticides per pound than adults, their developing organs are more vulnerable to toxins. And of course their exposure is higher because they tend to play on the ground and put their hands in their mouths.

Lawn pesticides are also dangerous to animals -- both pets and wildlife, including dogs, birds and bees. When the chemicals are washed by rain into storm sewers and waterways, they endanger fish -- and may end up in the water we drink, where they can threaten our health all over again.



Sheryl Eisenberg, a long-time advisor to NRDC, posts a new This Green Life every month. Sheryl makes her home in Tribeca (NYC), where—along with her children, Sophie and Gabby, and husband, Peter—she tries to put her environmental principles into practice. No fooling.

Go native. Native grasses require less watering and are more resistant to pests than conventional lawn grasses because they're suited to the local conditions and climate. They also make for prettier and more interesting lawns. Imagine lawn grass sprinkled with wildflowers and you'll see what I mean.



Spread the word. Once you've converted your lawn, let the neighborhood know -- maybe you can persuade others. You can [buy this sign](#) to post and [get tips on talking to neighbors](#) from the Washington Toxics Coalition.

If this way of cultivating a lawn strikes you as not only dangerous, but crazy, try the natural approach instead. The key is developing healthy soil that supports your grass; then, watering and mowing it properly to maintain the soil, encourage a good root system and crowd out the weeds. See below for an outline of what's required and look at the links for detailed information.

Of course, if your land is totally unfit for grass, you probably can't grow it naturally -- but then, maybe you shouldn't be growing grass at all. To paraphrase an old song from the 70s, if you can't have the yard you love, plant the one you can. You might find that you love it even more.

—Sheryl Eisenberg

EIGHT STEPS TO A SAFE AND NATURAL LAWN

- 1) Check your soil's pH.** It should be 6.5 to 7. If it's too acidic, add lime; too alkaline, add sulfur.
- 2) If the soil's too compact, aerate it** to ensure good air and water penetration. An aerating machine can be rented from many garden stores, or use a hand aerator if your lawn is small.
- 3) Apply compost to condition and fertilize** the soil before planting. If you plan to buy, rather than make, your compost, check the composting guide in the links for tips on how to tell good from bad.
- 4) Apply natural fertilizer as well** (since compost only has low levels of nutrients). You only need to fertilize your lawn once or twice a year. Fall and early spring are the recommended times.
- 5) When you mow, leave the clippings** on the grass to condition and fertilize the soil further. The clippings will provide organic matter and half your lawn's nitrogen needs. It's helpful, though not necessary, to use a mulch-mower.
- 6) Mow frequently, but don't cut too much off.** Most grass varieties do best at 2 1/2 to 3 1/2 inches high. Mow often enough that you never have to cut off more than the top third of the grass.
- 7) Water infrequently, but deeply.** Early morning is the best time of day. Midday watering results in water loss from evaporation. Evening watering leaves your lawn soggy at nightfall, which puts grass at risk of disease.
- 8) Don't let the layer of thatch get deeper** than half an inch. (Thatch is the dead plant material between the soil and blades of grass.) Remove the excess by raking.

Dealing with those pesky weeds. Cultivating a thick, tallish bed of grass will control weeds but not eliminate them altogether. So be prepared to do some hand-weeding, either by digging weeds up (with a garden tool that gets the roots) or spraying them with vinegar, alcohol or liquid soap.

Less can be more. Think about whether you really need, or want, your whole yard devoted to grass. Sure, it's great to sit on the lawn and soak up the rays, but it's even nicer if you can look out on a patch of habitat -- with honest-to-goodness wildlife in it. To learn how to develop habitat in your own yard, see [Backyard Wildlife Habitat](#).



Sheryl Eisenberg is a web developer and writer. With her firm, Mixit Productions (<http://www.mixitproductions.com>), she brought NRDC online in 1996, designed NRDC's first websites, and continues to develop special web features for NRDC. She created and, for several years, wrote the Union of Concerned Scientists' green living column, *Greentips*, and has designed and contributed content to many non-profit sites.

ONLINE RESOURCES

EPA: Healthy Lawn, Healthy Environment - <http://www.epa.gov/oppfead1/Publications/lawncare.pdf>
BROOKLYN BOTANIC GARDEN: The New American Lawn - <http://www.bbg.org/gar2/topics/sustainable/handbooks/lawns/1.html>
BBC: How to Create and Maintain an Organic Lawn - http://www.bbc.co.uk/gardening/basics/techniques/organic_lawncare.shtml
ORGANIC GARDENING: Compost Buying - <http://www.organicgardening.com/feature/0,7518,s1-5-21-110,00.html>
ORGANIC GARDENING: Organic Lawn Problem Solver - <http://www.organicgardening.com/feature/0,7518,s1-5-22-1055,00.html>
WASHINGTON TOXICS COALITION: Weed Management - <http://www.watoxics.org/pages/root.aspx?fromMenu=-1&pos=4|0|14>
GARDEN CENTERS: Soil Improver - <http://www.gardencenters.com/library/soilyear.htm>
HOMESTORE.COM: Dethatching and Aerating - <http://tinyurl.com/caz8w>
BEYOND PESTICIDES: Toxic Lawn Pesticides - <http://www.beyondpesticides.org/pesticidefreelawns/resources/backgrounder.pdf>

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