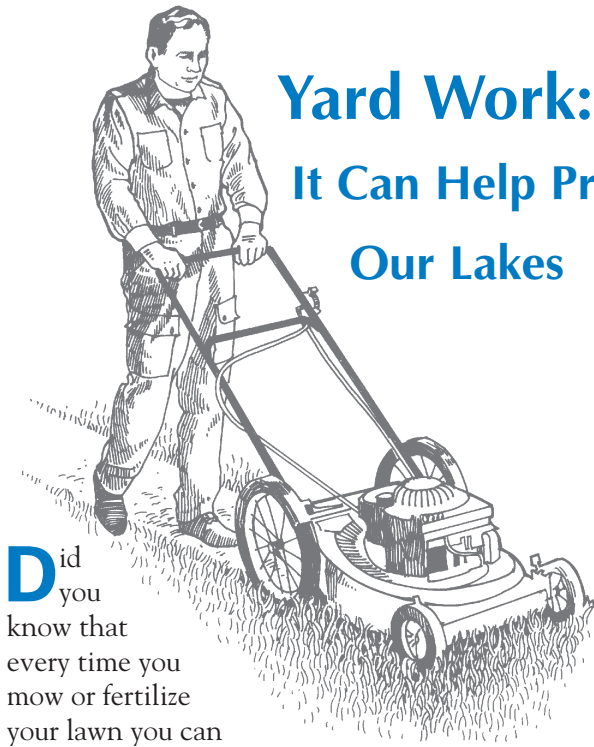


## Yard Work: It Can Help Protect Our Lakes



**D**id you know that every time you mow or fertilize your lawn you can affect water quality in your lakes? As you get started on yard work this spring, take a little time to learn about lawn management practices that produce a healthy lawn while protecting water quality.

### Early Spring

Now is a good time to tune up your lawn mower and sharpen the blades. Set the blades so the mower will cut the grass at a height of 2½ to 3 inches. Three inches might seem high, but taller grass blades shade out weeds and helps the grass develop deep roots that sustain it through dry periods and cold winters.

Mow often (at least weekly) when the grass is actively growing in spring and early summer. Weekly mowing keeps the grass clippings short so they filter down to the soil surface. These short clippings will decay and recycle nutrients into the soil. This means you won't have to add as much fertilizer to the lawn, to say nothing of raking or bagging the clippings. Early spring is also a good time to test your lawn's soil. Knowing your lawn's nutrient needs allows you to customize your fertilizer application, which promotes a healthier lawn. Often a soil test shows your lawn needs less nutrients than you think, which saves you money.

### Mid- to Late-Spring

Choose a lawn fertilizer carefully by reading the label of

ingredients. Products with slow-release nitrogen feed the lawn gradually and promote healthy growth. Improper nutrient ratios and cheaper fertilizers create a short burst of growth (requiring more mowing) with few long-lasting benefits.

All lawn fertilizers have a label with three numbers, such as 25-3-3. The numbers indicate, in order, the percentage by weight of nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P) and potassium (K) the fertilizer contains. Phosphorus is the nutrient that primarily causes excess weed and algae growth in lakes. Phosphorus is usually the least needed nutrient in established lawns, so try to use fertilizer with a low phosphorus content. Some stores sell fertilizer with no phosphorus.

May is also a good time to remove thatch if the lawn's thatch layer is more than ½-inch thick. Don't rake the thatch, grass clippings or other yard debris into the street or roadside ditches, where a good rain can wash this nutrient-rich vegetation into the lake.

### Want More Information?

Lake friendly lawn care requires a little bit of knowledge and planning. UW-Extension has numerous publications explaining environmentally friendly lawn care. These publications cover fertilizing, lawn and garden pesticides, lawn watering, weed control, shoreline landscaping and many other home and yard topics.

Readers with questions should contact your local UWEX or Land Conservation Department staff. Ask for the Yard Care and Environment series.

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