



Healthy Lawns, Healthy Waterways

What you need to know about Falmouth's Nitrogen Control Bylaw for Fertilizer:

Falmouth adopted this Bylaw to reduce the nitrogen pollution going into our estuaries. The Bylaw applies to nitrogen used to fertilize grass only. The Bylaw does not apply to fertilizer used on your flower and vegetable garden, greenhouse, houseplants, farm, or orchard. The Bylaw also does not apply to the establishment or repair of turf (after substantial damage) in its first growing season.

Prohibitions:

- **Don't fertilize** any part of your lawn **between October 16th and April 14th**, or directly before or during a heavy rain event. Don't spread fertilizer on paved surfaces and clean it up if you do.
- **Don't fertilize** any lawn located **within 100' of wetlands** - specifically the Resource Areas as defined in Falmouth's Wetlands Regulations, FWR 10.02 (1)(a - d).
- The Bylaw recommends that if you fertilize lawns not covered by the 100' prohibition, *fertilize sparingly!* The Bylaw encourages use of materials such as yard waste, compost or other similar materials that are primarily organic in nature and that are not considered "fertilizer" to improve the physical condition of your soil.

Growing a great-looking lawn:

Traditional Cape lawns endure for generations without fertilizer, and with very little water. Recycled grass clippings and atmospheric deposition (mostly rain) are natural sources of nitrogen. In many cases, this is all an established lawn needs. Even high-end turf, if treated properly, requires very little added nitrogen to flourish on Cape Cod. This sheet will help you learn to create, improve, and maintain a healthy lawn on the Cape with little or no fertilizer.

Points to remember:

- Soil should have a pH level of 6.5-7.0. Modify as appropriate to reach this level.
- 6" of topsoil is ideal; if you don't have it, add 1/4" to 1/2" of loam or compost top dressing every year.
- Over-seed with a mix of native grasses, fescues and perennial rye grasses. No Kentucky Bluegrass for the Cape.
- Mow about 3" high and keep the blade sharp.
- Leave the clippings on the ground in order to return nutrients to the soil.
- Native landscapes need very little water. If you need to, water deeply (1" each week) to promote deep roots. Use a tuna can on the ground to measure the water.
- Learn to use de-thatching, aeration, and overseeding to encourage thick, healthy turf that defeats weeds and pests.
- **Grass clippings and atmospheric nitrogen are enough to keep a lawn healthy for years, but if you must fertilize, do so only OUTSIDE the 100' restricted areas in the spring and/or fall with water-insoluble nitrogen and limit your applications to a yearly maximum of 1 pound of nitrogen per 1000 square feet.**
- Contact your local landscape contractor or garden supply house for information

For questions about this Town Bylaw, contact Dept. of Marine and Environmental Services at **508-457-2550**

DETAILS ON HOW TO GROW A HEALTHY LAWN WITHOUT FERTILIZER

TEST YOUR SOIL - Your soil pH should be 6.5 to 7.0. Below that, add lime. The Master Gardeners (508-375-6690) offer soil testing clinics in spring.

ENRICH YOUR SOIL - Grass grows best with 6" of topsoil. You can slowly build the depth of your topsoil by spreading a thin layer, 1/4" or less, of loam in spring or compost in fall on top of your grass. Loam containing an equal blend of silt, sand and clay works best on the Cape. Use compost from your own compost pile or from a reliable commercial source to minimize impurities. If you add nutrients to your lawn, you also can enrich soils by using organic fertilizers that contain organisms to promote soil conditioning through healthy biological activity.

USE CAPE-TYPE GRASS SEED - The best grasses for Falmouth are blends of mostly fine or tall fescues mixed with some perennial ryegrass. Compared with Bluegrass, **blends require minimal fertilizer and water**, are drought tolerant, and resist surface-feeding insects. Blends also are less susceptible to disease. If your lawn is mostly bluegrass, or has bare spots, add fescue and rye grass seed over the existing lawn.

MOW HIGH, RECYCLE CLIPPINGS - **Grass should be cut to about 3" long** to help retain moisture and choke out weeds. Re-sharpen blades at least once a year as dull blades tear grass. Leave clippings on the lawn – scientific studies show that clippings contain up to half the nitrogen that lawns need. Recycled clippings do not promote thatch; instead, they break down and disappear.

WATER DEEPLY – Many native landscapes do not require any water. Established lawns require only 1" of water per week, including rainfall. Once a week in early morning promotes deeper roots and stronger drought resistance. Use a rain gauge or use a 1" tall can for the season to monitor rainfall. Remember to obey any water restrictions in effect.

MAINTENANCE PRACTICES - Proper de-thatching with penetrating metal blades, tines or prongs, aeration, and spring overseeding together with the practices above develop a thick grass cover in which weeds and pests do not thrive. You will probably be able to pull weeds by hand or spot treat weeds and occasional pest infestations with an organic spray.

AND NOW, WHAT ABOUT FERTILIZER - If you follow the practices above, your lawn will require little or no extra nitrogen from commercial fertilizers. If you feel you really have to use some fertilizer, within the rules of the Nitrogen Control Bylaw, use the right kind of fertilizer, at the right times of year, and in the right amounts.

- Right Kind: It takes time for grasses to absorb nitrogen, so avoid water soluble nitrogen, and especially sprays. Instead, use granular or organic slow-release nitrogen formulations. Buy straight fertilizer – avoid combination products ("weed & feed") that spread chemicals across your entire lawn. If you need a weed killer, try gluten meal, a natural byproduct of corn processing.
- Right Amounts: When you fertilize your lawn, the Town of Falmouth strongly recommends that you apply nitrogen at the **lowest rate necessary**. A single application should not exceed 0.5 pounds of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet. Your total annual application should not exceed 1.0 pounds of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet.
- Right times of year: Fertilize only when the grass is growing vigorously: spring (after April 14th) and fall (before October 16th). Never fertilize in summer when grass is dormant or growing slowly. This just feeds the weeds! If you fertilize only once, do it in the fall to promote root growth for long term health.

BUYING AND APPLYING FERTILIZER - Use only as much of the bag as your lawn size needs. The label on the bag will tell you how to set your spreader for the correct rate. Ask for help if you have trouble reading the instructions on the bag!

GROW NATIVE SHRUBS - Plant low maintenance, native shrubs and plants to reduce lawn area. Contact either the Master Gardeners at 508-375-6690: the Cape Cod Conservation District at 508-771-8757 or WBNERR at 508-457-0495 for suggested plant materials.

OTHER RESOURCES - For more information on growing lawns without using fertilizers and pesticides, call Northeast Organic Farmers Association 978-355-2853, The Master Gardeners (508-375-6690) and search the Internet.