

SUBURBAN ACRES GREEN

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Lafayette River-Friendly Lawn Care

By Karen Mayne

Fall is when many of us try to perk up our lawns. If you paid attention to the latest advice about lawn maintenance and held off fertilizing your fescue lawn last spring, good for you! If you do fertilize, fall is the correct time to fertilize fescue lawns. (Summer was the time to fertilize zoysia, Bermuda, and St. Augustine lawns.) If you don't know what kind of grass you have, you can contact the Hampton Roads Agricultural Research and Extension Center on Diamond Springs Road at 363-3900 for information on obtaining free grass identification.

By now, everyone in the Suburban Acres neighborhood has probably heard of the grass-roots initiative to clean up the Lafayette River to make it swimmable and fishable by 2014. At the August civic league meeting, our City Council representative, Dr. Theresa Whibley, spoke of her support for this initiative. Dr. Whibley called the Lafayette "Norfolk's home river" since it lies totally within the boundaries of our city. One of the most important aspects of cleaning up the Lafayette is to reduce the amount of nutrients (nitrogen and phosphorus) entering the river. These excess nutrients cause algae blooms, which reduce oxygen levels in the water and can lead to fish kills. Lawn fertilizers are one of the sources of these excess nutrients in the Lafayette.

River Star Homes is a program of the Elizabeth River Project to get homeowners involved in helping to clean up the river. You can go to www.RiverStarHomes.org or call 399-7487 to join. It's free and you will get tips on being a good environmental steward, plus invitations for your family to participate in lots of fun and educational outdoor

activities. Members of River Star Homes can get a free 45-minute lawn care consultation if they agree to reduce their use of lawn fertilizer by 50 per cent.

Here are some things you can do this fall to help your lawn and help the Lafayette River:

Get your soil tested. The Virginia Cooperative Extension Service will analyze your soil for a small fee and tell you the proper amount of fertilizer or lime to use. You can call their Norfolk office at 683-2816 to find out how to get a soil sample mailing box and how the process works.

Be careful using fertilizers. Check the weather forecast and don't apply fertilizer if rain is expected, since rain will wash the fertilizer into the storm drains and then into the Lafayette River. and you will have wasted your money. A better alternative to chemical fertilizer is to use a thin layer of compost on your lawn in the fall. Compost will add nutrients and improve soil quality as it decomposes.

Use herbicides and pesticides sparingly, if at all. Maybe we can all live with a less than perfect lawn (and still win the Flora yard of the month contest!). These toxic chemicals can have adverse effects on pets, children, wildlife, and waterways if used improperly. Always read and follow label directions. and never use more than the recommended amount.

Don't rake leaves into the street. Leaves and pine straw make great (and free) mulch if you use the bagger on your lawnmower. Or, you can just run over the leaves several times with your lawnmower and mulch them right back into the lawn. a free source of fertilizer! Leaves in the gutters end up in the storm drains, causing clogs and street flooding.

Reduce the amount of lawn. By converting part of your lawn to shrub or flower beds, you will have less to mow (and save on gasoline) and less grass to water and take care of. Next month, we'll talk about landscaping. fall is the perfect time to plant new shrubs and trees.

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