



Lake Champlain
Basin Program



NEWS RELEASE

For Release: Immediate

RE: Phosphorus-free lawn care for fall

Date: August 28, 2007

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Fall Lawn Care Tip: Switch to Phosphorus-Free Fertilizer to Protect Water Quality

Local residents and businesses are urged to switch to phosphorus-free fertilizers through the “Don’t ‘P’ on Your Lawn” campaign. In this case, “P” stands for phosphorus—the most problematic pollutant in Lake Champlain and many other lakes. Phosphorus is found in most lawn fertilizers—whether organic or conventional. When fertilizers run off into waterways, they feed unsightly, smelly and potentially toxic algal blooms, and promote the growth of weeds in lakes.

“While phosphorus comes from many sources, including soil erosion and manure runoff, fertilizer runoff from lawns is also a source,” said Colleen Hickey, Education and Outreach Coordinator for the Lake Champlain Basin Program. “In urban and suburban areas storm drains and paved surfaces can lead untreated runoff directly to lakes and rivers.”

Reducing phosphorus runoff is so important to healthy waterways that several organizations are promoting the “Don’t ‘P’ on Your Lawn” campaign this fall. Partners include the Lake Champlain Basin Program, Cornell Cooperative Extension, Lake Champlain Committee, Vermont Agency of Natural Resources, Lake Champlain Sea Grant / UVM Extension, and the Smart Waterways Regional Stormwater Education Program. In addition, the Vermont Agency of Agriculture is creating public service announcements that will air on local television stations.

In Chittenden County, a University of Vermont study found that 75% of established lawns already had enough phosphorus. A study of St. Albans lawns also indicated that soils there had high to excessive levels of phosphorus. Similar results for New York State have been reported by researchers at Cornell University.

“In most studies, established northern lawns actually need no additional phosphorus to stay healthy. Many lawns will benefit from one annual application of nitrogen around Labor Day, however,” said Amy Ivy of Cornell Cooperative Extension. “Starter fertilizer that contains phosphorus should only be used once when the lawn is first grown from seed.”

By law, all lawn and garden fertilizers bags must display their nutrient analysis. The series of three numbers on fertilizer bags indicate the levels of nitrogen (N), phosphorus or phosphate (P) and potassium (K).

“The decision to stop applying additional phosphorus on one’s own property is a step every homeowner can take to help protect water quality,” noted Lori Fisher of the Lake Champlain Committee. “Look for ‘P-free’ fertilizers with a middle number of ‘zero’ when buying fertilizer.”

Although “P-free” fertilizer products can be hard to find, more companies are offering them in response to phosphorus fertilizer bans to protect water quality in Minnesota, Maine and several municipalities across the nation. In 2006, the Chesapeake Bay Program signed an agreement with the Scotts Corporation to reduce phosphorus in fertilizers. The “Don’t P on Your Lawn” campaign partners have asked fertilizer retailers in Vermont and the New York portion of the Champlain watershed to voluntarily stock “P-free” products. Area businesses that do are listed on the “Don’t P” website, www.lawntolake.org.

“The St. Albans Area Watershed Association is also encouraging retailers in that area to carry ‘P-free’ fertilizer,” said Karen Bates of the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources. “So far the response has been positive; three St. Albans retailers will carry it this year. With the help of Vermont Clean and Clear funds, the Association is also offering \$5 rebates towards the purchase of P-free fertilizer to encourage homeowners to make the switch.”

The website, www.lawntolake.org, also lists other easy tips for “Green Lawns, not Green Lakes” and explains the phosphorus-algae problem. These tips include sweeping up fertilizer from sidewalks and driveways; not fertilizing before heavy rain; mowing to maintain a height of 3 to 4 inches; and fertilizing only once annually, preferably around Labor Day. One application of nitrogen in the fall sets up the lawn for the winter and reduces the need for spring fertilizer. These tips can also help local residents create lawns that are more resistant to weeds and pests, thereby reducing the need for pesticides and herbicides.

For more information and contacts, visit www.lawntolake.org or contact the Lake Champlain Basin Program at 802-372-3213 or the Lake Champlain Committee at 802-658-1414.

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