# PHOSPHORUS CAN CAUSE SERIOUS PROBLEMS

**Excess phosphorus in freshwater lakes and ponds can cause algae overgrowth, with serious impacts to the environment and public health:**

- Heavy mats of algae deplete the water of oxygen that fish need to survive.
- Algae overgrowth makes water recreation unpleasant and potentially harmful.
- Algae growth may cause carcinogens to form in drinking water during chlorination.
- Phosphorus feeds blooms of toxic algae, creating health risks to people and animals.

## Does the law apply to...?

- *Pesticide/fertilizer combination products ("weed and feed")* – **YES, when these products contain over 0.67% phosphorus**
- *Organic phosphorus fertilizer (such as bone meal)* – **YES**
- *Agricultural fertilizer* – **no**
- *Fertilizer for trees, shrubs or gardens* – **no**
- *Compost* – **no**

## For more information:

**General information on the nutrient runoff law:**
www.dec.ny.gov/chemical/67239.html

**Frequently asked questions about lawn fertilizer:**
www.dec.ny.gov/chemical/74885.html

**Green lawns and gardens:**
www.dec.ny.gov/public/44290.html

**Blue-green harmful algal blooms:**
www.dec.ny.gov/chemical/77118.html

**Local Cornell Cooperative Extension offices:**
http://cce.cornell.edu/learnabout/pages/local_offices.aspx

## Contact Information

New York State Department
of Environmental Conservation
Division of Water
625 Broadway, Albany, NY 12233-3508
518-402-8086
DOWinformation@dec.ny.gov

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www.dec.ny.gov

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# Buying Fertilizer?

# LOOK FOR THE ZERO

## Protect Your Waters

# ZERO IN THE MIDDLE

## means phosphorus-free and that means...

### Zero pollution –

Phosphorus is one of the leading causes of water pollution. Even if you live far from a water body, excess phosphorus from your lawn can wash off and pollute lakes and streams, harming fish and ruining boating and swimming. More than 100 water bodies in the state cannot be used for drinking, fishing or swimming because they contain too much phosphorus.

### Zero waste –

Why pay for a chemical your lawn doesn't need? Generally, only newly established lawns or those with poor soil need phosphorus. Phosphorus applied to a lawn that doesn't need it won't be used and can cause water pollution. Do a soil test if you are unsure.

### Zero hassle –

It's against the law to use phosphorus on lawns that don't need it. (New York State Environmental Conservation Law, article 17, title 21 and Agriculture and Markets Law § 146-g) Check local laws, too–some municipalities have stricter laws about selling and using lawn fertilizers.


## Fertilizing Your Lawn...

### DO NOT:

- Use lawn fertilizer that contains phosphorus unless you are establishing a new lawn, or a soil test shows that your lawn does not have enough phosphorus.
- Apply any lawn fertilizer December 1 - April 1.
- Apply fertilizer on sidewalks, driveways or other impervious surfaces. If fertilizer spills onto these surfaces, you MUST sweep it up to prevent it from washing into drains or waterways. Do not hose it off.
- Apply lawn fertilizer within 20 feet of any water body unless...
  - there is at least a 10-foot buffer of shrubs, trees, or other plants between the area you are fertilizing and the water,

  **OR**

  - fertilizer can be applied no closer than 3 feet from the water using a device with a spreader guard, deflector shield or drop spreader.

## ...the Right Way

### Look for the zero!

Before buying, check the fertilizer bag for a set of three numbers showing the percentage of nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium. Buy a bag with a "0" in the middle.

### What should I see at the store?

Retailers who sell fertilizer must display phosphorus-containing fertilizer separately from phosphorus-free fertilizers and post a sign near the display.

### Test your soil

If you think your lawn might need extra phosphorus, test your soil. Tests cost $10-$20. There are several options:

- Have testing done through your local Cornell Cooperative Extension office.
- Find a commercial laboratory that tests soil.
- Use a home test kit. These tests tend to be less accurate and do not come with fertilizer recommendations.