



Maintaining Healthy Lakes: What You Can Do at Home

Presented by



The Green Team/Sustainable Ringwood

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Maintaining Healthy Lakes: *What You Can Do at Home*



If possible, leave the natural vegetation.

The trees, shrubs, bushes and ground covers between your home and the water are the lake's last line of defense. This area is often called the buffer because it "buffers" the lake from excess nutrients, sediment and stormwater. It also provides an essential habitat corridor for riparian animals. Whether you live by a lake, pond, river or stream – this area is crucial for maintaining water quality.

If you do landscaping, plant native and diverse vegetation.

Deep-rooted native plants and trees help absorb water and hold topsoil in place during rain events. As an added bonus, they will add beauty to your property and provide habitat for songbirds and butterflies. If you live by the shore of a lake stream or wetland, plant a bigger strip of native plants along the water.

- Best plants to help the lake – [Olbrich Botanical Gardens](#)



Plant a shrub border or 'island'.

If all you have between your home and the lake is grass or trampled sandy soil, then consider planting a shrub border or "island" to help soak up rainwater. After picking up speed on your driveway or roof, stormwater needs a place to slow down and get absorbed back into the ground. Low-growing, native woody shrubs hold back the earth and take up much more water than grass or bare ground. Using the proper plants which are suited to the area can also be easier to maintain than a lawn.



Create a rain garden.

Not only will rain gardens capture stormwater runoff and beautify your property, they also provide biodiversity that helps butterflies and bees survive.

- Learn how to [build a rain garden](#) from the Wisconsin DNR
- Rain garden [video tutorial](#)

Redirect downspouts.

This simple action allows you to redirect rainwater to your lawn or garden, while also reducing the amount of storm water that goes to streets and directly into the lakes via storm sewers.





Pick up pet waste and litter.

This simple act helps reduce the potential of *E. coli* pollution from washing into our lakes and closing our beaches after rain events. If you don't have a pet, simply pick up trash you may see on your walk to reduce pollution and make our community more beautiful for everyone!

- [More reasons to pick up pet waste](#)



Reduce salt use.

Winter salt runoff into our lakes can be toxic to aquatic plants and animals. Reducing [salt use](#) does not need to compromise public safety. By shoveling snow, using sand, and limiting salt use, you can be lake friendly and safe at the same time. In the winter, use less salt on your sidewalks and driveway.

Start home composting.

Turn your food trash and yard waste into valuable, nutrient-rich compost that reduces fertilizer use and provides you with a cost-saving solution for use in your garden, planters, or rain garden.



- [Create your own compost](#)
- Rutgers “Earth Day at Home” Webinar Series
<https://envirostewards.rutgers.edu/EarthDayatHome2020.html>
- Learn the difference between [compost](#), [topsoil](#), and [mulch](#)



Install a rain barrel.

By capturing rainwater from your roof, rain barrels reduce the amount of stormwater runoff that reaches the lakes. Rain barrels also provide you with stored water that can be used on gardens and lawns.

- Learn to [build a rain barrel](#)
- City of Madison – [build a rain barrel](#)

Plant home food gardens.

Planting a garden will provide food for you and your community. It also reduces transportation costs, provides a place for mulch and compost use and helps stormwater infiltration.

- [Vegetable garden layout ideas](#)
- Video tips for [planting a garden](#)



Stop fertilizing your lawn!

If you have a lawn, keep it small and don't use fertilizers and pesticides. Eighty percent of all soils tested by the University of Maine Cooperative Extension in the last five years did not need the excessive amount of phosphorus that is usually included in lawn care products. Still, phosphorus-laden lawn care products are routinely added to waterfront lawns. In Maine, for example, the use of lawn fertilizers in the last 15 years has skyrocketed and lakes are paying the price. Topical fertilizers easily wash into the lake and encourage superficial root growth, which makes grass more prone to drought. In addition to nutrients that harm both fresh and marine waters, lawn fertilizers are also often full of pesticides which are known to cause cancer. Is a green lawn worth that much? The safest way to a green and healthy lawn is by building up the soil. This can be done by adding good quality compost and natural fertilizers like alfalfa meal and corn gluten.



Rutgers New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station offered a webinar series “**Earth Day at Home**” which includes a program on Environmentally friendly lawncare. You can view the recording of this webinar by going to the following link and following the instructions:

<https://envirostewards.rutgers.edu/EarthDayatHome2020.html>

Learn how to reduce the need for fertilizers by leaving grass clippings on your lawn. Also learn how turf-grasses like fine fescues, watering in the early morning, keeping mowing height to 3 inches, dethatching and core aeration will reduce the need for pesticides and fertilizers. *This is essential for healthy lakes.*

Rake for leaf-free streets and never dump wastes into storm drains.

Leaves contain phosphorus. When left in the street, stormwater passes through leaves like a teabag and brings the phosphorus with it. Raking leaves from the street edge (three feet from the curb) and onto lawns will help fertilize the grass and reduce *cyanobacteria* (blue-green algae) blooms in our lakes. *Never dump wastes and soaps from car washing into a storm drain.* Storm sewers run directly to rivers and lakes.

- Learn about [leaf management](#)



Fix your path.

Paths are like little driveways, except they run all the way down to the lake. They channelize stormwater and wash soil right down into the water. However, they are often a lot easier to fix than driveways. Waterbars made from untreated logs or landscape timbers (remember pressure-treated wood is full of harmful chemicals) can redirect runoff into adjacent areas with vegetation. Steps that are back-filled with crushed stone can stabilize the walking surface while providing filtration. Filtration steps absorb rainwater and are stable even in heavy rains.

Mulch bare areas.

Heavily used areas frequently have compacted soils and little capacity to absorb runoff. These spots are often devoid of vegetation and have exposed tree roots protruding from the soil. Stormwater builds up on these areas and has the ability to wash out adjacent natural vegetation, loose gravel and sand. If you can't plant or – at a minimum – get grass to grow, consider top dressing with *superhumus* or erosion control mulch. These products are primarily made from ground-up stumps and bark and look similar to garden mulch but they are much less erosive.

They not only slow down and absorb water but also protect tree roots (and bare feet from tree roots). Always make sure not to cover existing plants when bringing in mulch.



Maintain your septic system and pump your tank.

If you have a septic system, make sure it functions properly and meets current standards. Although you don't see your septic system, it is there and it is very important to keep it well-maintained and functioning properly.

When septic tanks are not pumped regularly, sludge from the tank begins to flow out into the leach field, which is designed primarily to percolate water. The sludge can clog the bed and cause the system to fail.

Aside from being a threat to water quality, a failed system often means backed-up pipes with no ability to drain water. Replacing a leach bed also requires a substantial amount of excavation and can be quite expensive. To avoid these problems, have your tank inspected regularly and pumped when needed. Also, make sure your leach field is working properly.

Inspire a friend or neighbor.

Leading by example creates a large ripple effect! Can you inspire friends, family and neighbors to adopt these actions at their own homes?



Resources:

Clean Lakes Alliance

<https://www.cleanlakesalliance.org/top10/>

The Clean Lakes Alliance, Madison, Wisconsin collaborated with other community partners to reflect on what resiliency means for the environment and the community. They found that if everyone takes small actions at home, we can create a big impact for lakes, and countless other environmental causes.

The Freshwater Society and Minnesota Pollution Control Agency; 10 ways to keep lakes clean.

<https://freshwater.org/2009/09/25/10-ways-to-keep-lakes-clean-2/>

Lakes Environmental Association: Protecting Maine lakes since 1970

<https://mainelakes.org/lake-health/what-you-can-do/top-10-ways-to-protect-your-land-and-lake/>