

COLUMN

MAINE GARDENER

Of rain and runoff: Home gardeners may want to embrace new practices

TOM ATWELL

September 30, 2007

The Maine Board of Pesticides Control wants to make sure that when lawn-care companies put fertilizer on your lawn, it stays there and doesn't run off into any nearby water.

At a meeting Friday, the board is expected to approve a list of best-management-practices -- which are a step below actual regulations -- to control applicators.

"This is really a reaction to hundreds of applications a few companies did in the pouring rain, during a week when it rained 7 inches," said Gary Fish, an environmental specialist with the board.

With it raining that hard and the soil already saturated, all of the fertilizer and pesticides washed away, ending up in nearby bodies of water.

"The main way we found out about this," Fish said, "is that a couple of people who work for TruGreen Chemlawn called me and said, 'It seems like we shouldn't be doing this,' and I agreed."

As a result, TruGreen Chemlawn was fined \$7,500, and another company with fewer violations, Lawn Dog, was fined \$400.

Although the best-management practices apply to commercial applicators, home gardeners should be interested for a couple of reasons. First, if they do the work themselves instead of hiring it, they will have some guidelines. And if homeowners hire professionals, they will know that the contractors are doing the right thing.

Fish said the rules on weed and insect killers would be fairly complicated for the laymen, involving using the best possible product for the specific problem.

But the basics are to use spot treatments where there is a problem rather than treating the entire lawn, using the least toxic product possible to do the job and using a product that is selective in what it kills.

The board is developing a list of all of the turf products that are likely to be used by commercial applicators and putting them in a spreadsheet so they can compare one product with another, and choose the one that has the least potential for leaching or runoff and the least damage to people and other organisms that are not being targeted. Specifically, the proposal says that it is the intent to protect bees.

"The guides on fertilizer are some of the soundest of all," Fish said, "and we are hoping that people will look at them and decide they make a lot of sense. We know that fertilizer, especially nitrogen, is moving an awful lot from where it is put down. That is a concern for Friends of Casco Bay because nitrogen is what causes algae problems in the ocean."

Fish said the fertilizer rules are quite similar to the YardScaping program that promotes environmentally friendly landscapes. And while this document is for professionals, the board intends to work on one for homeowners, as well.

The proposal recommends that people use slow-release fertilizers, and to use no more than 1 pound of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet. If using quick-release fertilizer, use no more than a half a pound of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet.

People are not supposed to apply phosphorous, which causes algae to develop in fresh-water lakes and ponds, unless a soil test says phosphorous is specifically needed, or if starting a new lawn from seed.

Fertilizer and pesticides should not be applied if the soil is saturated or there is standing water, or if the ground is frozen, until the grass naturally greens up in the spring, normally when the soil is 50 to 55 degrees.

A big part of the draft is on customer and neighbor relations, involving notification of when applications will occur and what will be applied. The draft also includes guidelines on initial assessment of the site, procedures that should be taken near wells and streams and how the products should be applied.

The entire proposal can be read at http://www.maine.gov/agriculture/pesticides/turf_bmps/index.htm

Comments can be made before Friday's meeting by calling 287-2731 or e-mailing pesticides@maine.gov.

TOM'S TIP

WHILE THE STATE'S best-management practices will make using chemicals safer, there are those who oppose using nonorganic treatments at all.

PAUL TUKEY, A Mainer and founder of People Places & Plants magazine, has had a busy year since his book "The Organic Lawn Care Manual" was published by Storey last winter. He has traveled to 32 states promoting organic lawn care and been written up in many publications, including the Philadelphia Inquirer and Washington Post just this month.

THE INQUIRER REPORTED: "With the National Park Service's blessing, Tukey's crew will start to rip up, replant, and organically maintain one-third of the lawns at the National Mall in Washington. It's a two-year experiment. 'We're very confident it'll go well,' Tukey said."

IF YOU PREFER organic, check out Tukey's book.

GARDEN PLANNER

PARTS OF MAINE have had their first frost. If it hasn't hit your garden by the time this column appears, it will be coming soon.

It is the time to do a serious cutback of the perennials and annuals in your garden.

IF YOU WANT to have amaryllis and similar bulbs in bloom in time for the Christmas season, you should plant it now.

GET READY FOR your 2008 vegetable garden. Plant your garlic now.

Tom Atwell can be contacted at 791-6362 or see his blog at: www.pressherald.com

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Reader comments

Gary Fish of Wayne, ME

Oct 1, 2007 11:13 AM

If you want to talk to your neighbor about minimizing their use of lawn care chemicals try going to the Maine YardScaping Partnership web site www.yardscaping.org. We have tools there that you can download to help you approach your neighbor, or just contact us at yardscaping@maine.gov

Citizen of South Portland, ME

Sep 30, 2007 8:57 AM

How does one gently ask one's neighbors to change practices that result in unhealthy runoff? I live maybe 1000 yards from the water (though not the beach) in South Portland, and I am the only person on my street who doesn't hire a chemical company for their lawn. We are uphill from the water and I know where those chemicals are going. But my neighbors hate my yard because it's *not* chemicalized -- and is the source of dandelions -- so I don't have a lot of credibility when making any yard-related requests. Ideas?