Keeping Nutrients Where You Need Them

A green lawn, gorgeous landscaping, or that backyard garden usually means the application of fertilizer in one form or another. However, that fertilizer doesn't always stay on your property and if it gets into the watershed, this nitrogen and phosphorus can have a real, measurable impact on the surrounding waterbodies.

Every summer, the Mississippi River brings enough fertilizer and other nutrients to the Gulf of Mexico to cause the formation of a low oxygen area known as hypoxia, or more commonly, the "Dead Zone."

The Gulf of Mexico is a large-scale example, but even smaller watersheds can see impacts from excess nutrients in the form of fish kills, algae blooms, or waterbodies that are unsafe for human contact.

Every step taken to limit how much of these additional nutrients get into surrounding watersheds helps and it can start in your own backyard.

Test your soil. Knowing what the soil needs helps prevent over-application. Home tests for pH, nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium are available from garden centers. More detailed tests are available from Cooperative Extension Services at land grant universities. (USDA)

Apply fertilizer when plants most need it to decrease potential for unneeded cost in fertilizer application and to reduce nutrient runoff. (USGS)

Apply fertilizer around individual plants rather than broadcasting to keep it where it is needed. (USGS)

Use no-phosphorus fertilizer on lawns and gardens. Fertilizer formulas are written as nitrate-phosphorus-potassium, so look for one that has 0 in the middle such as 22-0-15. (Minnesota Pollution Control Agency)

Don't apply fertilizer during or before windy or rainy days.(EPA)

Avoid applying fertilizer close to waterways. (EPA)

Fill fertilizer spreaders on a hard surface so any spills can be easily swept up. (EPA)

Plant a rain garden of native plants that can reduce amount of fertilizer needed and help water be retained to soak into the ground which aids in nutrient removal. (EPA)

Use pavers for walkways to allow water to soak into the ground. (EPA)

Use filter or buffer strips of plants around the property to help provide a better filter for water running off the property. (EPA)

Septic systems can also be a source of nutrients. Have your septic system inspected yearly. (EPA)

Don't use septic system additives. There is no scientific evidence that additives aid in decomposition in septic tanks. (EPA)