

YRPC Weekly News

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How to Grow a Jaw Dropping Yard or Garden Safely

Arnie, last week the YRPC weekly news article: **Phosphorus, the Green Monster in Your Garden** made you aware that Phosphorus is the number one pollutant in Wisconsin Lakes and Rivers. At this point you may be wondering how you can have a great lawn and garden without using a phosphorus fertilizer.

You don't need to sacrifice your neighborhood bragging rights to save the local lakes and rivers. In fact, relying less on chemical phosphorus actually forces you to build a *healthier*, more resilient ecosystem right in your backyard.

Here is how you get that thick, vibrant carpet of green and a booming garden without feeding the algae monsters.

For the Ultimate Lawn

1. Master the "Mow High" Rule

Stop scalping your lawn! Set your lawnmower blade to **3 to 4 inches**.

- **Why it works:** Taller grass grows deeper, stronger roots that can reach nutrients buried deep in the soil. It also shades out weeds naturally, reducing your need for herbicides.

2. Mulch Your Clippings (Free Fertilizer!)

Ditch the mower bag and leave your grass clippings on the lawn.

- **Why it works:** Grass clippings are roughly 4% nitrogen, 0.5% phosphorus, and 2% potassium. As they decompose, they return these exact nutrients right back to the soil. It's a slow-release, perfectly balanced food that won't cause runoff.

3. Choose "N-P-K" Fertilizer Wisely

When shopping for fertilizer, you will always see three numbers on the bag (e.g., 24-0-4). These represent **Nitrogen (N)** for green growth, **Phosphorus (P)** for roots, and **Potassium (K)** for overall health.

- **The Rule:** Look for a **ZERO** as the middle number (e.g., 20-0-10 or 15-0-15).
- **Pro-Tip:** Opt for *Slow-Release Nitrogen*. It feeds the grass gradually over weeks rather than causing a sudden spike that washes away in the next rainstorm.

For a Booming Garden

Because vegetable gardens and flower beds do need *some* phosphorus to produce fruit and blooms, the goal here isn't necessarily absolute zero—it's **precision** and **containment**.

1. Get a Soil Test First

Don't guess, test! Your soil might already be packed with historical phosphorus that hasn't been used yet. A quick soil test from a local university extension office will tell you exactly what your dirt is missing so you don't add unnecessary chemicals.

2. Use Organic, Slow-Release Alternatives

Instead of synthetic chemical blasts like 10-10-10, use organic matter that binds tightly to the soil structure.

- **Compost & Manure:** Excellent for overall soil health and naturally low in readily-leachable phosphorus.
- **Bone Meal or Fish Bone Meal:** If a soil test proves you *actually* need phosphorus for your tomatoes or flowers, use bone meal. It breaks down incredibly slowly, meaning the plants actually eat it rather than the rain washing it into the street.

3. Mulch and Keep a "Buffer Zone"

Always cover bare garden soil with straw, wood chips, or shredded leaves. This prevents heavy rain from physically splashing your garden dirt into the driveway and down the storm drain. Shredded leaves are actually a great source of phosphorus. Better to have that phosphorus leach out and go directly into your garden soil than to go down a city storm drain and directly into a nearby river.

The Golden Rule: Keep It on the Grass

The absolute best practice has nothing to do with what you buy, but how you clean up.

Always sweep or blow any stray fertilizer granules, soil, or grass clippings **off the driveway and sidewalk and back onto the lawn**. Concrete acts like a highway straight to our rivers—if it lands on the pavement, it *will* end up in the water.

Arnie, since we are on the subject of Phosphorus, did you know that YRPC publishes phosphorus test results for the Yellow River? Yep, you have a front row seat to view these results as they come back from the Lab in Madison. Just go to the [YRPC Website](#), click on Stream Monitoring in the top Menu and then scroll down to the Nutrient Monitoring section. We just published May results for three of our test sites. More are on their way.

YRPC Website