

ASK YOUR ENVIRONMENTAL COMMISSIONER

How do my lawn and garden care choices affect the amount of jellyfish in the two rivers?

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As the summer months progress, many boaters and swimmers notice an increase in jellyfish in our local waters. While jellyfish have been around for hundreds of millions of years, they do not always proliferate so dramatically. Increased algae in the waters contribute to changes in the ecosystem that create advantageous odds for our stinging friends. Fish and jellyfish compete for the same resources and usually this balance keeps numbers of both at favorable levels. An increase in algae growth tilts the balance by depleting the oxygen in the waters. Fish die off, but jellyfish can survive in these low oxygen (hypoxic) waters and thrive with the remaining abundance of food and lack of predators.

What homeowners may not realize is that our planting and lawn care choices are contributing to the problem. Algal blooms are amplified by the combination of unusually warm weather and the misuse of fertilizers. Just as the fertilizers help grass, plants and crops flourish, they also find their way into local waters and promote the growth of algae. Algal blooms disrupt the ecosystem by choking out wildlife in local rivers and streams and lead to poor water quality, declining fish and shellfish populations, and an overabundance of jellyfish in our rivers, oceans and bays.

You can help by choosing the appropriate lawn care practices for your home or business. A healthy lawn does not require as much fertilizer as one that is stressed. Below are five ways you can alter your lawn care practices in support of healthier rivers.

- **Only fertilize your lawn if there is no rain in the forecast:** Fertilizer needs two days to properly absorb. Instead of soaking into the soil where it can nourish your lawn, the fertilizer is likely to simply wash away with the stormwater and find its way to local waterways if applied when rain is predicted.
- **Once established, only fertilize your lawn in the fall:** According to Rutgers Cooperative Research & Extension, "fertilizing your lawn late in the season (September through November) the previous year reduces or eliminates the need for fertilizer in the spring, reduces frequency of mowing, and improves drought resistance." Fertilizing in the fall allows the roots system to establish while spring fertilizing promotes top growth, which requires more frequent mowing and can actually stunt root growth, undermining resilience.
- **Be careful not to overwater your lawn:** Most New Jersey lawns only require a thorough watering once or maybe twice a week during the summer months. Anything more is excessive and can undermine the health of your lawn. *The most efficient time to water is between 10pm and 8am* when the heat of the day will not evaporate the water before it is allowed to penetrate through the soil to the root system. Sprinkler systems should be fitted with a rain censor to prevent your system from watering when it has just rained.
- **Proper mowing practices can help maintain a healthy lawn:** Maintaining a mowing height of 2 ½ to 3½ inches will help increase drought resistance and will decrease insects and disease damage. Allowing grass clippings (comprised mostly of water) to remain on your lawn after mowing is beneficial. The clippings decompose quickly and provide nutrients that will nourish the soil and root system.
- **Planting ground cover when possible will reduce your reliance on fertilizers:** Converting some of your unused lawn area to native ground cover will greatly reduce the need for fertilizers and irrigation and will provide a habitat for beneficial insects and wildlife. Planting a beautiful and hearty perennial border along the curb or riverbank can capture water and nutrients before they enter the stormwater system and local rivers.

Share these tips with your lawn maintenance provider. Unfortunately, fertilizers are cheap and easy to apply and many landscapers have no incentive to recommend better lawn care practices. Proper use of fertilizers, watering techniques, grass variety and ground cover will not only reduce our negative impact on our environment, it will promote a more healthy and beautiful lawn and garden. For a more detailed discussion see the guidelines recommended for New Jersey lawns by the Rutgers Cooperative Research & Extension found at <http://njaes.rutgers.edu/pubs/publication.asp?pid=FS102> and check our website <http://www.rumsonnj.gov/env>.

Kristen Rolfes Hall is the Chair of Rumson Environmental Commission, an all-volunteer commissions appointed by the Mayor and Township Council of Rumson to help the town identify and protect its natural resources and promote sustainable practices and land use within the community.