

Alternatives to fertilizers for your lawn and garden

Orleans is trying to ban their use in coming years

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Cape Cod Times USA TODAY NETWORK

If the town of Orleans prohibits fertilizers within the next two years, as its Select Board hopes to do, what can a homeowner do to maintain a lawn, grow tomatoes or cultivate roses?

Even if you don't live in Orleans reducing fertilizer protects water quality in bays, inlets and freshwater ponds and lakes.

So how may one break the fertilizer habit? Here are tips from experts:

Use the right seed mix for your lawn

"The real issue is turf," Andrew Gottlieb, executive director with the Association to Preserve Cape Cod, said. "As we work towards a regulatory solution hopefully we'll find a way to accommodate vegetable gardening to feed everyone. If you allow clover in a grass mix you can have a very robust green space typical of the character of Cape Cod over the decades."

Several years ago the Association to Preserve Cape Cod promoted an alternative lawn mix called "Harmony" by Colonial Seed Co., which they tested at a demonstration plot at the community garden in Brewster. It was a mix of sheep, hard and blue fescue with hairgrass, which is native to Cape Cod.

"It had a good result. It was a no-mow mix," said Kristin Andres, the association's associate director of education and communication.

The Harmony mix is still available at Agway, she said.

"Consider the type of turf you are planting," Jessica Thomas, co-owner of Agway of Cape Cod said. "There are so many types of turf available to the homeowner such as really durable fescues with two-foot root systems that can mine nutrients. Applying lime and having the ideal soil pH is what allows the roots to absorb nutrients."

Plant a 'Cape Cod' lawn

A Cape Cod lawn is essentially whatever is growing there naturally, mowed periodically — perhaps augmented with desired species.

"That's what everybody had," Andres said. "Nobody had a turf lawn requiring chemicals. We're trying to get back to the basics. With a Cape Cod lawn you can add clover, top dressing and reseeded."

Instead of fertilizer, use leaf compost

"That way your land is fed continually like in nature," Littlefield Landscapes owner Laura Kelley said. "If you have a bluegrass lawn and go to leaf compost it's not as happy as if it was a lawn of fescue and clover."

So ideally changing the turf mix would be combined with utilizing leaf compost. Kelley said pile up the leaves and chop them with a mower or weed whacker first. They'll break down easier. Then apply that to the lawn in the fall.

Don't mow as often or as low

"First let the grass grow beyond three or four inches," Kelley said. "Raise the blades on your mower. Mow every other week.

"This will allow the root system to grow deeper and for the roots to reach

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water and nutrients on their own rather than be dependent on you. .

Take care of your soil — i.e., use compost

"Feed your soil not your plants," Kelley said. "Feed microorganisms and worms. Worm poop is gold."

Don't use anything synthetic or from bag. "What lawn likes lobster shells?" Kelley asked referencing an available additive. "Use leaves in the fall. They'll break down over winter. Use grass clippings. Leave the clippings on the grass like nature does. Everything in nature is food. Natural vegetation is your friend through drought times.

"(Prohibiting fertilizer) will shift homeowners to adding native plants to their design because native needs less food, less water, less cost, less maintenance."

Use more native plants in plantings

Andres suggests homeowners reduce their lawn area and plant more native plants to benefit insects.

"A lot of native plants are drought tolerant," Andres said. "This summer, they've had an extreme challenge with drought. But a native plant is adapted to our soil and doesn't need fertilizer or amendments (like clay, peat moss manure)."

One favorite of Kelley's is *Clethra alnifolia* or, as it known on Cape Cod, sweet pepperbush.

"It grows naturally around ponds and smells so sweet. I would like it as perfume," Kelley said. "I put *Clethra* on all the properties. It's so much easier to work with nature. I see it as an opportunity. I wish this for all the towns of Cape Cod."

Andres has long advocated for native plants since she worked as a conservation agent in Chatham.

"Good drought-tolerant plants are goldenrods and asters," Andres said. "Pollinators need them. A dozen native bees depend on goldenrod alone for pollen. It is also a good source of nectar for monarch butterflies."

Native plants available at garden centers include inkberry and winterberry (both hollies), some viburnum species, meadowsweet (*Spirea*), steeplebush (another *Spirea*), rhododendron viscosum (swamp azalea) blueberry, beach plum, elderberry, mountain ash, shadbush and many more.

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This Nov. 11, 2013, photo shows arborist chips, a back to nature mulch. Like many other organic materials, the chips help maintain soil moisture, prevent weeds from sprouting and keeps soil temperatures relatively constant around plants. They can rob soil of nitrogen, however, and fertilizer should be added as a supplement. ASSOCIATED PRESS PHOTO



One of the streams filled with trout at Blue Stream Aquaculture in West Barnstable, which raises trout for derbies and for stocking ponds. The company also uses waste from the fish for a product line of soil conditioners and fertilizer. Netting covers the runs and solar panels are arrayed over the runs to provide shade, essential for the freshwater fish. DENISE COFFEY/CAPE COD TIMES

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