



Clean Yard, Clean Water?

How a tidy yard can help local water quality

Not in my backyard! The phrase has long been a rallying cry for communities concerned about factories, mines, and other polluters who impair local water quality. Many people are unaware, however, that a large part of the water pollution problem can be traced right back to their own backyards. Surface runoff, often called stormwater runoff, carries untreated sediments and toxins off lawns, gardens, and driveways directly into local watersheds.

Yard waste that sits around can easily wash into storm drains when it rains. Even if the waste doesn't contain chemicals such as herbicides and pesticides, the introduction of large quantities of sticks, leaves, and grass clippings can overwhelm waterways with unhealthy quantities of nutrients. Remember, even beneficial and necessary substances can be harmful if there's too much of them, and waterways can't handle the sudden inflow of mass quantities of organic matter washed down storm drains. It's almost impossible to eliminate this type of pollution, but there are some ways to help minimize it.

- 1** Contain composted yard wastes. Your compost should be contained in a bin or barrel--some municipalities provide these for free or at low cost--to prevent the materials from being washed away.
- 2** Use a mulching mower instead of bagging grass clippings. Mulching mowers add a natural layer of compost to your lawn, and you don't have to deal with disposal of grass clippings.
- 3** Dispose of yard and grass clippings properly. If you don't compost or have yard wastes that you can't compost, contact your local waste management or environmental protection agency to determine how to dispose of yard wastes. Many jurisdictions provide regularly schedule yard waste pickups, and others allow you to schedule separate pickups. In any case, bag or otherwise contain the material while you're waiting for pickup.
- 4** Contain disturbed soil. If your revamping your landscape or tearing out old sod, you can end up with big piles of dirt and organic matter. These are highly susceptible to being washed away in runoff and should therefore be covered or otherwise contained, even if they will only be there for a short time.
- 5** Pick up litter and properly dispose of trash. Litter isn't just unsightly; it can also contribute to water pollution. Just about every material--from paper to cigarette butts to aluminum cans and old appliances--contains chemicals that can leach out into the environment. Everybody knows that littering is a no-no, but it's important to understand that trash or junk sitting in your yard can be just as harmful as trash illegally dumped by the side of the road.
- 6** Clean up pet waste. Pet waste contains harmful bacteria and other pollutants. While a good rain storm may wash your dog or cat's poop away, it isn't really gone--it's in the water supply. Promptly pick up after your pet, and seal the waste in a plastic bag before throwing it in the trash.