

Healthy lawns and clean water secrets revealed

By Sam Bari

One of University of Rhode Island's master gardeners, Marion Gold, revealed the secrets to keeping lawns healthy without polluting surface water run-off at a May 22 workshop at Town Hall.

Gold told her small but enthusiastic audience not to believe the advertisements put out by companies selling fertilizer. "People apply a lot more stuff to keep their lawns healthy than is necessary," Gold said. "So don't fertilize too much. If the lawn looks healthy without fertilizer, then don't fertilize it.

"And whatever the directions recommend, start out with half the amount and see how the lawn responds. If half the amount achieves the desired results, then stop. If your lawn still looks like it needs help, then add a little more," she added.

The watchwords of the evening appeared to be "less is better." That meant less water as well as less fertilizer, according to Gold. "Give your lawn about an inch of water once a week," she said to the surprised audience. "There is no need to water every day."

Gold told her intimate audience they could ask questions whenever they wanted throughout her PowerPoint presentation. Sav Rebecchi asked if the water run-off from his roof was harmful to the grass because his lawn had brown spots about five feet in front of the downspouts.

"The water isn't polluted," Gold said. "It's just fine. But there's too much of it coming through the downspouts. Too much water is just as harmful as not enough," she emphasized. The less water rule was welcome news to the audience that was used to summertime water rationing.

Gold's presentation centered around seven easy tips to keeping lawns healthy and bay waters safe.

The tips included:

- Over seed new lawns. Use new, improved varieties. Buy the best seed you can afford. Fescues are best. Gold also suggested integrating clover to the grass seed mix.
- If an unfertilized lawn is considered acceptable, then don't fertilize it.
- Sweep chemicals (fertilizer) off hard services.
- Leave clippings on the lawn.
- Mow high - about 3-inches is best.
- Water wisely. One-inch of water per week once a week is best.
- Minimize pesticide use.

Gold's comprehensive program answered many questions that would have been asked. However, the audience still came up with a few that she readily fielded, sometimes with surprising answers.

"When is the best time to seed?" was one of them. "The ideal time is early fall," Gold said. "When should we fertilize?" was another. "Don't fertilize in the spring until the lawn is actively growing. Wait until the lawn is mowed three times," she said.

Gold also suggested using compost because it raises the pH value. She said that it was wise to "get your lawn tested. The pH should be around 6 to 7," she said.

She also gave tips for water conservation, recommending rain barrels with a screen to keep out insects, and using BTI for mosquito larva control. Drip irrigation and soaker hoses were also recommended to conserve water.

"Gardening is the country's number one hobby," Gold said. "In Rhode Island there is more acreage in turf (lawns) than any other land use," she added. "Plant problems are many and complex. Chemicals are not a good quick fix. The "Clean water starts at home" program initiated by URI is a statewide campaign to reduce storm water run-off pollution. Know where it goes," she said.

For more information, Gold recommended going to the URI website www.healthylandscapes.org. She also recommended calling the URI Master Gardener Hotline at 1-800-448-1011 and the URI Plant Protection Clinic at 874-2900.

Town environmental scientist Justin Jobin organized the event. He attended a URI workshop offered to all municipalities by the Department of Transportation, which was designed to educate and inform towns about how lawn care maintenance can affect storm water quality. Jobin invited Marion Gold, one of the instructors, to make her presentation to encourage and assist Jamestown residents to do their part in preserving our precious resources.