

Before You Buy That Bag of Fertilizer

Fertilizing your lawn is part of a great American past time just like watching the big game or barbequing on the weekends. However, unlike football and barbeque, improper fertilization of your lawn can cause negative environmental impacts to our water quality, plants, and animals. If we apply too much fertilizer, it can wash off our lawns and into our waterways causing nuisance plants to grow, harm fish and animals, and require water managers to apply costly chemicals to control aquatic plant growth. So before you buy that bag of fertilizer, consider the following misconceptions that many people have about fertilizing their lawns:

- Misconception #1: The higher the three numbers on the front of the bag, the better the fertilizer is for the lawn.
- Reality: The three numbers on the front of each bag of fertilizer represent its nutrient concentration in percentile form. For example, a bag of fertilizer that is labeled 20-5-25 means that it contains 20% Nitrogen, 5% Phosphorus, and 25% Potassium. Depending on the brand of fertilizer, the rest of the bag may contain some minor nutrients and filler material. Excessive nutrients have been shown to cause numerous water quality problems in our canals and ponds, problems that may ultimately find their way to the Everglades and our reefs. Phosphorus is found naturally in South Florida soils and your lawn really doesn't require additional amounts for growth. When purchasing a bag of fertilizer, take a look at the three numbers on the front of the bag. Then, focus on the middle number which is the phosphorus concentration and select a bag of fertilizer with a middle number of 2 or less. Always remember that when it comes to lawn fertilizer, 2% Phosphorus or less is best!
- Misconception #2: I should fertilize my lawn once per month.
- Reality: Lawns should only be fertilized as needed. Also, you should never apply fertilizer prior to a major rain event because the precipitation will wash the fertilizer past the root zone before it can be absorbed by the grass. Too often we fertilize our lawns based on the advice of friends, family members, and neighbors, while still others of us are influenced by advertising. Fertilizer manufacturers spend a significant amount of money on advertisements that promote frequent fertilizing. The most effective time to fertilize the lawn is prior to the rainy season which is between June and November. The months of March and October are ideal for fertilization because March is the beginning of the growing season and October fertilization allows for proper nutrition during our dry season.

These are just two of the many misconceptions about fertilization. Hopefully, this article has provided you with some useful information that will keep your lawns beautiful, help improve our water quality and the environment, and save you time_and money in the process! For more information about landscape best management practices, the Broward County Natural Resources Planning and Management Division at 954-519-1222.