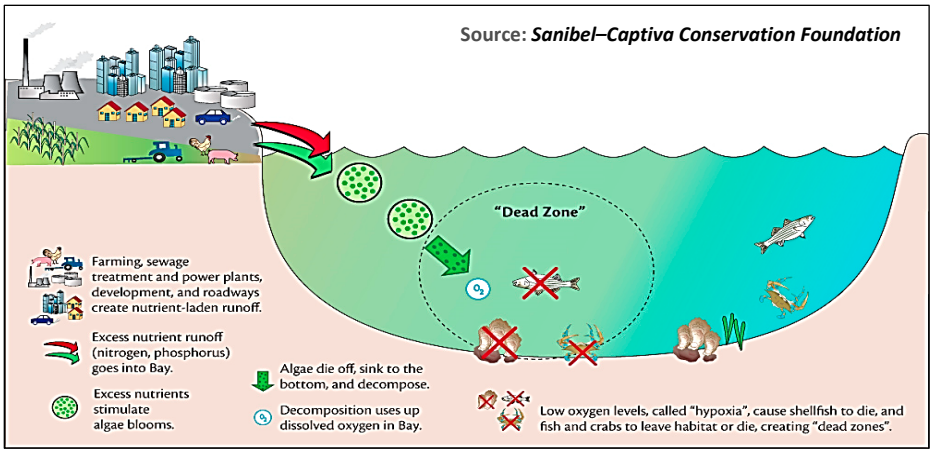
BE **P** FREE!

No, this is not an article about fewer bathroom trips. We are talking about the chemical phosphorous, a common component in fertilizer formulation sold for lawns. Fertilizing turfgrass lawns can be an important part of keeping them looking good, but before you waste time and money, please continue reading.

Americans spend A LOT of money keeping their lawns looking good. It is estimated that Amercans spent about $40 billion on lawn care in 2023. Those that opted for professional lawn care spent more than $500 per household last year. One lawn care step that most people implement is fertilizing their turfgrass. In Alabama, it is best to fertilize in March or April, after frost is no longer an issue and grass is already growing. Contrary to what you may have heard, going to a big box store and buying a large bag of 'balanced' fertilizer, commonly known as 10-10-10, is not what your Alabama lawn needs. That number in the middle - the amount of phosphorous, or **P**, in the formulation - can make all the difference in the success of your lawn, the hit to your pocketbook, and the water quality in Jefferson County.

Feeding your lawn exactly what it needs rather than what you think it needs can make the difference between a healthy, beautiful lawn and wasting your time and money.

While it's true that turfgrass and other plants need phosphorous to support photosynthesis, our soil in Alabama already has more than sufficient phosphorous to meet that need. Since our soil does not need more of this nutrient, any extra phosphorous that is added to home landscapes and agricultural sites through fertilizing is not absorbed by plants and remains in the soil. The excess phosphorous is washed off by stormwater which carries it to streams, rivers, lakes, and oceans. Excess phosphorous and other nutrients in water bodies create algae blooms that are toxic to humans, fish, and animals. These algae blooms also deplete oxygen concentrations in water to the point that it cannot support aquatic life.



Nutrients such as phosphorous washed by rain into waterbodies cause algae to overgrow, depleting oxygen in the water and killing aquatic animals.

This condition is called hypoxia. The EPA reports that Alabama currently has ten hypoxic ecosystems. Many states now have regulations limiting products such as fertilizers and detergent which contain phosphorous or phosphates in order to reduce this problem. In the meantime, your lawn, which does not need more **P**, still may not getting the proper nutrients it actually does need.

So let's get back to the 3 numbers on the fertilizer bag. Next time you plan to apply fertilizer to your lawn, first test your soil. Auburn University will analyze your soil sample and provide an analysis of exactly what you will need to add to the soil to optimize your turfgrass results. Once you know what your soil actually is lacking, purchase a formulation which only contains nutrients that your landscape needs and in the proper amounts.

Watch this short video to learn how to take and submit a soil sample.

When applying fertilizer or any other lawn treatment, be sure to read the directions on the bag or bottle before applying. Properly mix the chemicals and calibrate the spreader or sprayer that you will be using so that only the proper amount of treatment will be applied. When using a broadcast or rotary spreader,

pay attention to the width of the application area so that there is not a great deal of overlap between passes.

Too much fertilizer or other lawn treatment can harm your turfgrass; too little won't be effective, and you will not obtain the results that you want. When using a granular product, sweep up any excess that falls on paved areas to ensure that it will not be washed by rain into the stormdrain system and local creeks.

Never use a hose to wash off fertilizer or anything else from paved areas – always sweep up and properly dispose.

If you have questions about your lawn or other landscape plants, plant diseases, insects, or other landscape problems, the Alabama Cooperative Extension System website and the Plant Diagnostic Lab are helpful resources.