

Yard Habits

Fact Sheet



WATER POLLUTION

Sources of water pollution like industrial wastes from factories have been greatly reduced in recent years. Now, more than 60% of water pollution comes from things like runoff from homes, excess fertilizer, and pet waste. All these sources add up to a big pollution problem. So,

believe it or not, the biggest source of water pollution today is not industry – it is actually households like yours. But each of us can do small things to help clean up our water. And it starts with realizing that *our sewers and storm systems are separate – what goes into storm drains flows directly into the environment, untreated.*

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM WITH MY YARD HABITS?

We all live in a watershed. A watershed is a land area that drains into a waterbody, like a creek, river, or lake. Think of a watershed as a series of funnels nested inside each other. For example, when it rains, all the water from a watershed may travel to a creek or waterbody. From there, the creek will flow into a larger stream, which in turn collects water from a larger watershed. In Hamilton County, most of the water drains into the White River, which eventually flows to the Ohio River, the Mississippi River, and finally into the Gulf of Mexico. So if your yard habits are not environmentally-friendly, you are not just hurting yourself, but are potentially impacting millions of people downstream.

FACTS AND FIGURES

- During the summer months it is estimated that nearly 40% of household water is used for lawn and garden maintenance.
- Homeowners use ten times more chemicals per acre on lawns than farmers use on crops.
- If lawns were classified as a crop, it would rank as the fifth-largest in the country, based on area.
- Even the White House lawn is “going green.” Staff there are using gardening and landscaping practices designed to protect the environment and minimize polluted runoff.

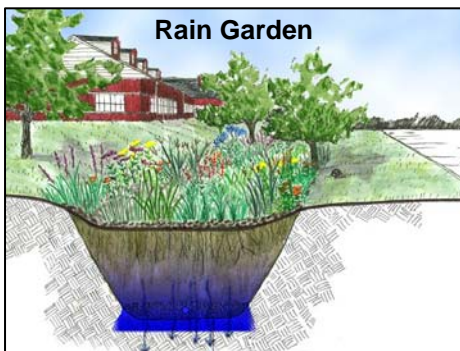
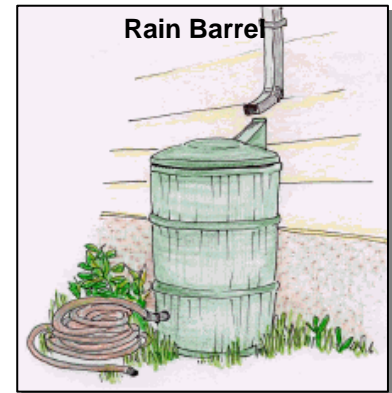
WHAT YOU CAN DO

How can you have a beautiful yard and help keep our waters clean? Follow these tips, which correspond to the picture above.

1. **Mowing** – Mow your grass at your mower's highest setting or at least 3-4". The roots of your lawn grow as deep as the grass grows tall, so taller grass has deeper, healthier roots, enabling your lawn to better tolerate hot, dry weather. Not spending extra time and money on watering and fertilizing makes your lawn easier and cheaper to maintain.
2. **Storm Drains** – Remember, storm drains lead directly to our waterways. Check streets and sidewalks after applying lawn products, and sweep any excess back onto the lawn. Use dry cleanup methods (sweep with a broom rather than spray with a hose), which prevents debris from entering storm drains.



3. **Bare Spots** – Vegetate bare spots in your yard. This helps prevent soil erosion and can beautify your land at the same time. Many people do not realize that the #1 water pollutant in central Indiana is sediment. And the best way to prevent erosion is by planting shrubs and plants to hold soil in place.
4. **Tree Cover** – Increase the amount of your yard in tree cover.
5. **Mower Blades** – Sharpen your mower blade at least once per summer.
6. **Compost** – Dispose of lawn waste in compost piles and use a mulching mower. Making compost results in a rich natural fertilizer for your plants or garden, productively reusing yard waste rather than throwing it away, and saving you money in the process. Go to www.compostguide.com for basic instructions.
7. **Impervious Surfaces** – Impervious surfaces prevent rainwater from soaking into the ground, causing runoff to pick up pollutants as it flows toward our waterways. So reduce the amount of impervious surfaces around your home. Alternatives such as paving blocks, gravel, cobbles, brick, and natural stone can replace asphalt and concrete in driveways, parking lots, and walkways.
8. **Native Plants** – Add native plants to your yard. They are low-maintenance, tolerate drought, and require no fertilizers or extra watering, thus conserving water and preventing unnecessary pollution. Go to www.prairienursery.com to find an ideal seed mix for your yard.
9. **Mulch** – Mulch circles beneath trees and around plant beds.
10. **Rain Barrel** – Install a rain barrel. A rain barrel is a system that collects and stores rainwater from your roof that would otherwise run off and be diverted to the storm system. It provides an ample supply of free “soft” water for watering plants, washing cars, topping off swimming pools, etc. Using rain barrels reduces runoff, conserves water, provides irrigation water during watering restrictions, and helps lower your water bill. You can buy prepackaged rain barrel systems. Or go to our [How-To Sheet](#) on our website for instructions on how to make one from scratch.



11. **Rain Garden** – Install a rain garden to capture runoff. Rain gardens typically absorb much more water than the same size area of lawn. They are drought-resistant, winter hardy, and less prone to destructive insects and diseases. Rain gardens create preferred habitats for birds, butterflies, and dragonflies. These specialty gardens are versatile. In addition to their aesthetic beauty, they help filter runoff, prevent flooding, and enhance groundwater recharge. Go to www.raingardens.org for instructions on how to build your own or contact the Hamilton County Soil and Water Conservation District for customized assistance.

12. **Pet Waste** – Pick up pet waste and throw it away or flush it down the toilet.
13. **Additional Ideas**
 - Direct downspouts away from paved surfaces. This allows runoff to soak into the lawn rather than running along the curb and picking up pollutants
 - Leave grass clippings and leaves on the lawn. Run over them with your lawn mower to cut them up more, and then leave them. They provide nutrients and are the best fertilizer for your lawn.
 - Map and measure your yard to determine correct application amounts (one adult pace = about 3 feet). Reduce use of lawn chemicals and apply according to directions.
 - Have your soil tested. A soil test is an inexpensive and informative way to determine the quality of your soil. The laboratory will test soil pH, nutrient content, and percentage of organic matter, so you can determine exactly what nutrients your lawn and garden need, and prevent unnecessary excesses.
 - Use a rain gauge or small tin can to track rainfall and avoid unnecessary over-watering.

When you apply these principles, it is a **Win-Win**. You end up with a beautiful yard and don't waste water, fertilizers, or pesticides, saving both time and money. At the same time, our area streams, rivers, and lakes as well as our wildlife are protected for generations to come.