

PRODUCTS FOR YOUR NATURAL LAWN

Fertilizers and amendments to improve soil health

A FACTSHEET FROM SAFER PEST CONTROL PROJECT

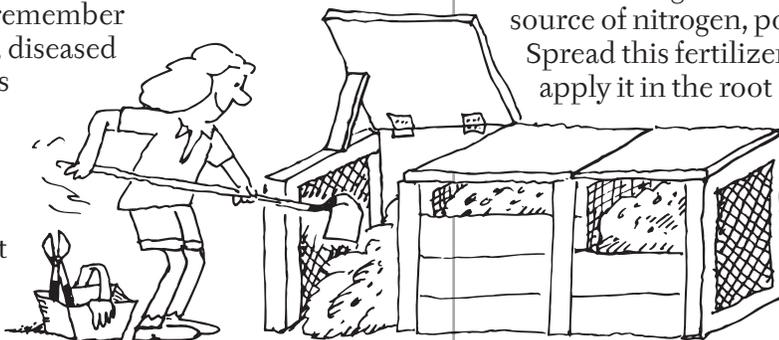


Congratulations! You have chosen to transition your lawn to Natural Lawn Care and are ready to get your hands dirty, but how should you begin? Start with a basic soil test to determine your soil's pH level (see our soil test fact sheet) and what nutrients your lawn requires. Many natural products are now widely available at local stores and over the internet, which will provide you with the tools needed to create a naturally healthy lawn. Below is a list of some of the more common things you will find in natural fertilizer products and soil conditioners that can be used to add nutrients and change the pH of your lawn.

COMPOST

Compost is the heart of natural lawn care because it increases organic material, delivers nutrients, improves water retention, balances pH, and creates an excellent bed for seeds. However, use caution when working with compost because not all composts are created equally. Compost should be well aged; therefore, it should not have a strong odor. Purchase compost from trustworthy sources or start your own compost pile. When making your own compost, remember that meat, bone, fish, diseased plants, roadside grass clippings, pet waste and other related materials do not belong in a compost pile. Spread compost between $\frac{1}{4}$ and 1 inch deep on your lawn.

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COMPOST TEA

Compost tea is a liquid form of compost and, like compost, it contains a lot of soil microbes. Microbes are an important part of soil because they activate nutrients in the soil. Unlike compost, this liquid solution begins working immediately to provide nutrients; whereas, compost is more of a slow release fertilizer. Use this brew as often as you like; even more frequently if your neighbors spray pesticides because pesticides kill many organisms, even good soil microbes. Compost tea can be either bought or home-made.

PLANT BY-PRODUCTS

Corn Gluten

A natural herbicide, corn gluten has been sold as a pre-emergent weed control and lawn fertilizer for almost 20 years. It is sold in three forms: powder, granules or pellets. Corn gluten is not a weed killer, it is a weed inhibitor. This product prevents weed growth by drying out seeds immediately after they crack open to sprout. Therefore, do not spread corn gluten in areas where you plan to grow grass seed. Wait at least 1 month after corn gluten application to plant grass seed.

Corn gluten is a good source of nitrogen and will feed the soil for about 3 to 4 months. Apply corn gluten in early spring, when the forsythia bloom, and again in late fall. After application, lightly water the area and allow it to dry. Be sure you purchase real corn gluten, not corn gluten feed or grain.

Alfalfa Meal

Often called 'green manure,' alfalfa meal is a great source of nitrogen, potassium and phosphorous.

Spread this fertilizer on soil surfaces, but do not apply it in the root zone – which is below the

soil's surface. Because alfalfa meal heats up the soil, only use it in small amounts to avoid plant burn. However, this 'heat' is not all bad; it indicates that the soil microbes are busy working to make your soil healthy.

Caution: some alfalfa meals may contain unwanted seeds. Alfalfa meal is commonly used as one part of a fertilizer mix.

Seaweed

Soil needs a healthy amount of nitrogen, potassium and phosphorous as inputs. Truly healthy soil, however, also needs trace elements and natural plant growth hormones. Seaweed can give your soil these often overlooked nutrients and hormones.

This 'ocean potion' not only reduces the stress level of grass, but it also improves the availability of naturally occurring minerals in the soil. Application times vary so read the instructions carefully.

PRODUCTS FOR YOUR NATURAL LAWN (cont.)



ANIMAL BY-PRODUCTS

Blood Meal

A by-product of animal processing, blood meal is an excellent source of nitrogen. Mix it with your compost to speed up the decomposition process. Do not mix blood meal with seedlings. Use it only in small amounts to avoid plant burn and be sure to activate the fertilizer with a basic watering.

Bone Meal

Bone meal is a top natural source of phosphorous. Unlike some fertilizers, bone meal works especially well with root systems. This is a slow release fertilizer that should be raked into the soil either at the start of the growing season or a few weeks before planting. Never use products high in phosphorus unless you are seeding a new lawn or responding to a soil test.

Fish Products

Fish products have historically been used for livestock feed and are a more recent addition to the natural soil fertilizers. Fish products come in a variety of forms, such as fish emulsion, fish meal, fish powder or liquidized fish. Some products are made from leftover fish processing waste, and other products come from fish farms that function just to produce fish meal. Nutrient release time depends on the type of fish fertilizer being used, but fish products are generally more available to plants than animal fertilizers.

Chicken Manure

Rich in potassium, nitrogen and phosphorus, chicken manure provides more nutrients than most other manures, such as cow or horse. Although considered safe, it is a good idea to handle any manure-based fertilizer with gloves.

Vermicasting

Vermicasting is essentially worm waste. Often called 'black gold,' this fertilizer comes directly from worms. Vermicasting is a unique fertilizer because it makes use of already present, but previously unavailable soil nutrients. Unlike other soil activators, vermicasting makes nutrients immediately available to plants after application.

MINERALS

Lime

Lawns, much like the human body, have an ideal pH level. Nutrients, in effect, are more available between the pH levels 6.3 through 6.8. Lime is especially useful in reaching and keeping a perfect pH level on overly acidic lawns that have a pH reading below this given range.

A soil test will determine the appropriate type and amount of lime to apply. Although lime can be applied any time of year, it works best when used in the fall because winter weather helps to drive lime into the ground. Caution: because lime is a respiratory irritant be sure to use lime pellets, not powder. The liming of lawns takes a number of applications and growing seasons before the pH level changes.

Sulfur

Like lime, this mineral also helps to balance pH levels. Unlike lime, sulfur should be used to lower an 'alkaline' pH soil reading that is over 7. Use this mineral after performing a soil test to determine the correct application amount. Adding sulfur to change the pH level will take a number of growing seasons and applications until the pH level changes.

Always read the label instructions or directions carefully before using any fertilizer, and be sure to connect your choice of fertilizer to recommendations provided by a soil test. Remember: transitioning your lawn can take time, so patience is the most valuable thing you can apply to your lawn.

Safer Pest Control Project is dedicated to reducing the health risks and environmental impacts of pesticides and promoting safer alternatives in Illinois.

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