



## Fertilizer and Pesticide Best Practices

Lakes Environmental Association  
Bridgton, ME

Before applying fertilizer, the landowner should get a soil test. Without a soil test, you don't know what the soil has or what the soil is lacking. Soil testing kits are available through the University of Maine Cooperative Extension <https://extension.umaine.edu/cumberland/horticulture/soil-test/> The kits are inexpensive and taking a sample is easy.

Unless a soil test indicates that phosphorus is sub-optimum, the landowner should use a non-phosphate fertilizer. Phosphorus is the nutrient that limits algae growth in lakes and it is found in very minute quantities in our lakes but is generally abundant in Maine Soils. It is easy for topical fertilizers to wash off the ground and into nearby ditches, streams or the lake and then those nutrients (particularly phosphorus) will feed the algae and lower water quality. Non-phosphate fertilizers are available at Paris Farmers Union, True Value, Aubuchon and most every store that sells fertilizer. Phosphorus is the middle number in the nutrient ratio on the product. For example, a bag of fertilizer with 10-0-10, has zero phosphorus. Thus, look for products where the middle number is zero. Again, lawns rarely need phosphorus. However, they are often low in organic matter, too acidic, or need nitrogen. A soil test can give you information on all this.

If you are going to use fertilizers, slow release fertilizers are generally better as they are less likely to wash off the soil and they will feed the soil over a longer period of time. When it comes to natural lawn care, I highly recommend Paul Tukeys' Organic Lawn Care Manual: <https://www.amazon.com/Organic-Lawn-Care-Manual-Low-Maintenance/dp/1580176496>

We strongly recommend keeping all fertilizers back at least 100 feet from any lakes, ponds, rivers, streams, brooks or wetlands. It is illegal to spread fertilizer within 25 feet of the water without a soil testing saying it is necessary.

Including clover in your grass seed after aerating in the spring will naturally provide nitrogen for your lawn without fertilizer. Maine soils typically contain plenty of other nutrients necessary, including phosphorus.

Regarding pesticides, these products can only be spread by licensed pesticide applicators or the landowner. It is illegal (and ineffective) to use any pesticide in a way that is not described on the product. Many are water soluble and can contaminate groundwater and lakes and many are designed to kill a broad range of insects, which includes beneficial insects. It is best to do ample research before applying any fertilizer and consult an expert first (forester for trees, farm service for agricultural products, the soil and water conservation district for lawns).

For more questions, contact [lauren@mainelakes.org](mailto:lauren@mainelakes.org) or call (207)647-8580