



Le développement durable :
Se prendre en main...
Aujourd'hui pour demain

Ecological Lawn Maintenance

As governments toughen pesticide legislation, conventional lawn maintenance methods grow more and more obsolete. Such methods are now often viewed as damaging to our health and the environment since they rely heavily on the use of pesticides. Is not our health more important than a lawn that looks like a golf green?

Saint-Lazare was one of the first cities in Québec to adopt a by-law banning the aesthetic use of pesticides. It is thus forbidden to use insecticides, herbicides, and fungicides on the territory at all times.

This does not mean that we must abandon our lawns, let bugs take over and weeds grow wild! We must adapt and adopt ecological lawn maintenance practices. Conventional lawn maintenance practices encourage you to wait for a problem and then react to it. Too many bugs? Spray some insecticide. Have weeds? Fog the lawn with herbicides. Ecological lawn maintenance aims to avoid problems by ensuring that plants grow healthy and strong.

GOOD LAWN MAINTENANCE PRACTICES

By adopting the following practices you will be creating an ecological lawn and you may never again need to resort to chemicals.

1 Replace existing lawn with ground covers, mulch, and plantings
Sure, a lawn is a nice thing but it is also a lot of trouble. It must be mowed, watered, fertilised, raked...it never ends. An average lawn requires 2,5 centimetres (1 inch) of water per week. A 2000 square foot lawn would guzzle up 5 cubic metres of water per week and 57 cubic metres per summer! Replacing grass with less thirsty perennial plantings, trees, shrubs, rocky footpaths and mulches will help you save time and water.

2 Top dress your existing lawn with endophytic seed annually
Endophytes¹ are microscopic fungi that, as the name indicates, live within the grass plant. They are especially useful as they are toxic to insects such as chinch bugs and sod webworms which feed on grass blades. Use endophytic seed yearly in the spring or fall whenever top dressing your lawn or sparse areas. Top dressing yearly also helps keep your lawn full and the weeds away.

3 Mow high
Keeping your lawn very short will attract all kinds of problems! Scarab beetles, the adult phase of grubs, prefer to lay their eggs in short grass. Weeds establish more efficiently in short grass. Letting the grass grow longer and mowing it to a height of 7 to 8 cm (3 in) will allow the root system to develop deeper. The lawn will thus become more resistant to drought, insects, and weeds. Remember, never mow your lawn during a dry spell.

4 Leave grass clippings
Grass clippings should be left on the lawn after mowing. The clippings quickly decompose thereby returning nitrogen to the soil and reducing the amount of fertiliser needed. A mulching blade creates the smallest clippings.

5 Spread compost
Spreading compost is a key step in ecological lawn maintenance. A thin layer of compost increases microbial activity, helps the soil retain water, improves the soil's structure, and adds important nutrients. Spread compost yearly in the fall after most weeds have germinated. Composting also helps reduce the amount of waste being managed and sent to dump sites. Brown gold for sure!

6 Apply natural-based fertilisers
Natural-based fertilisers are slow release fertilisers which means the nutrients are released slowly as opposed to chemical fertilisers. This helps curb nutrient leaching therefore reducing pollution to our ground water. Apply natural-based fertilisers in the spring and fall.

7 Aerate
Machines for aeration bring up plugs of earth thereby creating holes and breaking the root system of the lawn. This action encourages root development and renders the lawn thicker and more vigorous. Never aerate during a dry spell. Follow aeration with an application of compost.

8 Remove thatch
Thatch is the layer of dead grass roots found just above the soil. It is caused by a lack of microbial activity which would normally decompose the dead roots. Too much thatch can prevent the infiltration of water and nutrients into the soil as well as create a lovely hiding space for chinch bugs, the #1 lawn pest in Saint-Lazare. Remove thatch if the layer is thicker than 1 cm. Avoid removing thatch in early spring when the lawn is still soaked and never remove thatch during a dry spell.

9 Water deeply less often
On average, your lawn requires 2.5 cm (1 in) of water per week. Longer weekly watering will encourage the development of a deep root system thereby increasing your lawn's resistance to drought. To know how long your sprinklers must function in order to get 2.5 cm of water on your lawn, simply place an empty tuna can on the ground near the sprinkler and wait until it is full.

10 Adjust the pH
In general, the soils in Saint-Lazare are acidic. You may want to gather a soil sample and bring it to a garden centre to be tested. To adjust the pH of an acidic soil simply spread some lime. A pH between 6 and 7 is best for the growth of grass.

11 Manually remove weeds as you spot them
Since the use of herbicides is banned in Saint-Lazare, weeds must be removed manually. With the amount of gadgets available at garden centres weeding does not have to be back-breaking work. But weeders beware! You should always wear gloves when weeding out poison-ivy.

12 Inspect your lawn regularly
Although this step is often forgotten, it is the most important as it will help you to avoid serious lawn problems. A quick weekly inspection will allow you to single out potential problems and devise a way to remedy them before they become out of control. Treating a few larval chinch bugs is much simpler than waging an all out war against a full fledged infestation! Pulling out a few dandelions as they pop up is more enjoyable than spending an entire weekend on your hands and knees ripping them out!

Remember that an ecological lawn cannot look like a conventional lawn. It is longer, has more plant diversity and more insects but it is safe to play on and more environmentally sustainable.

Important!
Proper lawn maintenance will minimise the potential for infestation.
Pesticides are toxic and may be harmful.
We want to avoid using them.

Prevention is the best protection!

¹ Turf-type seed containing endophytes should not be used where horses and cattle graze. The endophytes in turf-type seed release toxins that can cause disease in grazing animals. Be sure to seed pastures with forage-type seed only.