Proper Care of Waterfront Lawns

Turf grass can be wonderful and lawns can be environmentally "correct". A recent UW Extension bulletin states that "healthy lawns are good for the environment, and healthy lawns need to be fertilized". So, should property owners be praised for covering their land with mowed grass? Well, yes, if their maintained turf areas provide recreational space that would otherwise be inaccessible to kids and adults, and would maybe be gravel, or hard surfaces, or maybe thinly vegetated and eroding away. Those green areas produce oxygen that we all breathe and they collect, hold, and stabilize pollution and dirt particles that would otherwise make their way into the air or waters that we depend upon. The standard first response to protect an exposed slope is to sow some sort of grass cover (although it may be a short-lived temporary type).

Lawns may NOT be appropriate for long slopes to the lake, or in largely wooded areas where they look out of place and too suburban. They really don't belong in the crucial wildlife corridors that should ring our lakes, run along our streams, and tie various terrain features together (not for us really, but for the other creatures that we share the Northwoods with).

So, let's assume that you live on one of our lakes and that your turf area is appropriately sized and located. Then we can also assume that your lawn will need some maintenance to keep it healthy and an asset to your home. Keep in mind that there are low to high maintenance scenarios out there - but not a single "no" maintenance if you want to keep the area in turf. Lawns will need mowing and fertilizing at some point. Maybe only once a year for each of those, but they will eventually need this. Lawns may also possibly need watering, raking, aerating or de-thatching, liming, or grub control as the need arises. The result of not taking care of your lawn will be an evolution back to natural woodlands. If that happens relatively quickly, we would say that this is a good thing. Most often this process of neglect involves a very long period of unsightly noxious weeds and often erosion concerns. If these poorly maintained areas are adjacent to the lake, they can actually contribute more to phosphorus loading and other water quality problems than an intelligently maintained lawn would.

Within 100 feet of the lake or stream we suggest "low maintenance" lawns with fescue type turf grasses and only covering areas needed to be used for foot travel. Other opened up areas should be replanted into native plants (especially woody plants), or if that is unacceptable seed and plant to create a "wildflower meadow". The effect of the meadow is usually more prairie-like than is natural here, but the more complex plant community is more bird and critter friendly than a flat lawn. There should be some sort of natural non-turf buffer area between the lawn and the lake. There are many good environmental reasons to have this, but one important one is as a last-ditch absorption area for those severe rain events when the grass blades just "lay down" and everything sheets off of the lawn and heads to the lake. Hard rains will not only dislodge soil and fertilizer particles, but will actually leach phosphorus from the grass blades themselves.

In over thirty years of looking at Northwoods soil samples, I have seen less than five percent that were actually deficient in phosphorus. And most of those were from vegetable gardens where the owner got carried away. Phosphorus, of course, is directly implicated with loss of water quality in many lakes. So if phosphorus is a problem and if our lawns don't need it - then just don't use phosphorus - right? Turf mostly needs nitrogen to get along. Well, usually this line of thinking is correct, and along the lakes most turf foods should have -0- as the middle number in the analysis. Some have complained of having a hard time finding zero-phosphorus fertilizer - but today that would just be an excuse, as many garden centers now carry it.

As with everything else though, it isn't always that simple. University of Wisconsin research long ago proved that the most important feeding of the year is in the fall, and that it should contain all three major nutrients - including at least some phosphorus. The fall (or "winterizer") feeding of the lawn goes to the roots and over-wintering crowns of the grass plants and is important to long-term health. The fall application is not a threat to the lake if done at least four weeks before the ground starts freezing hard, and especially if there is at least some sort of a natural buffer strip along the lake. Phosphorus loading in lakes, it seems to me, is most often a product of soil particles being washed into the water through soil erosion, and even from the natural process of rain-leaching it from plant foliage. Run-off of pollutants from hard surfaces (driveways, roads, etc.) is potentially a huge problem for waterways. Direct dislodging of fertilizer particles from a lawn into the lake should be rare with wise, judicious use of these products.

Get your lawn care advice from professionals or extension personnel who are knowledgeable about both lawn care and lake-care. None of us has all of the answers, but don't deal with anyone who has little knowledge or concern for the issues.