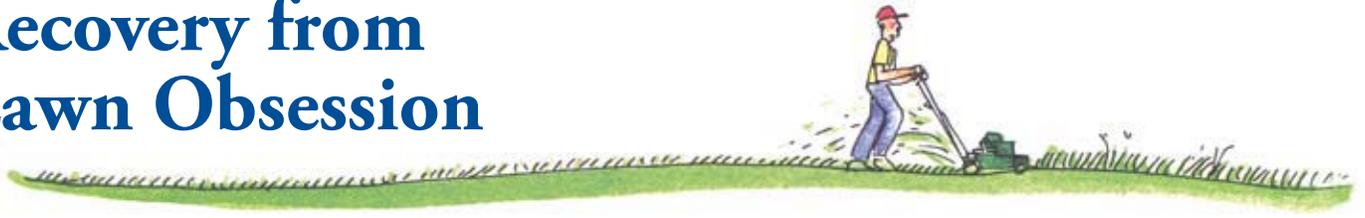


## Chapter 9

# Recovery from Lawn Obsession



Are you or someone you love addicted to a dream lawn? You are not alone...

The perfect suburban lawn has become an American obsession, turning us into lawn-chemical junkies who require increasing amounts of pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizers to satisfy our cravings for immaculate turf. Billions of dollars are spent on television advertising to convince us to buy the latest lawn care products and to look with alarm at stray dandelions or clover.

But there's a catch. **Dream lawns are not safe for people, pets, or the countless wild things that normally inhabit our yards.** Lawn chemicals poison our drinking water and contribute to the deteriorating health of our ponds and bays - artificially green lawns produce green waterways.

Right here on the Cape, there is an easy and inexpensive remedy for the American lawn habit: the traditional Cape yard, a natural habitat that includes a variety of indigenous grasses, mosses, lichens, and wildflowers. These native ground covers survive summer heat and drought without pampering, poisoning, or polluting. They also feed birds, bees, butterflies, and are safe for children and pets.

Remember that lawns, particularly turf lawns, do not belong next to waterbodies. If you already have an established lawn that is adjacent to a waterbody, the Cape Cod Cooperative Extension has determined that by creating, at a minimum a 10- to 20-foot wide buffer of native vegetation between the lawn and the water's edge, the effects of a fertilized lawn and managed landscape can be mitigated. This assumes that any fertilizer is applied at the correct rate and with proper application methods.<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup>Clark, Roberta A., *Selection and Maintenance of Plant Materials for Coastal Landscapes*.

## 12 Step Program for Dream Lawn Addicts

### Step 1 - Just Say "NO" to Pesticides and Herbicides

Make a firm commitment to protect your family, your pets, and your neighbors from lawn chemicals. The first step is to dispose of all your old pesticides, herbicides, and fungicides at the next local hazardous waste collection day. If you plan to use a professional lawn care company, hire one of the region's organic landscapers. If you decide to go cold turkey, get support for kicking the lawn chemical habit. Research the dangers of these substances or consider the following:

- By State law, all schools in our region now restrict pesticide use to protect children. It's up to you to protect them at home.
- The risk of canine malignant lymphoma doubles with the use of herbicide 2,4-D on a dog owner's lawn.
- Many Canadian municipalities have banned or severely restricted the use of common lawn-care pesticides including the herbicides 2,4-D and MCPP.
- So called "inert" ingredients in lawn chemicals can amount to 95% of the product and may be more toxic than active ingredients.
- Golf course maintenance crews working with toxic lawn chemicals face elevated risks of dying from brain cancer, lymphoma, prostate cancer, and large-intestine cancer.



*67 million pounds of pesticides are used on American lawns every year.*



*Lawn pesticides get carried indoors on shoes and paws and can persist for months in your home and the air or trapped in carpets, dust, toys, etc.*

## Step 2 - Be Patient, Poisoned Soils Need Time to Heal

The sooner you stop using toxic chemicals, the faster your soil will regain its natural health. Past use of lawn chemicals may have destroyed the microbiotic life that exists in healthy soil; it may take three years for your soil to recover its natural defenses. Meanwhile, there are nonpoisonous methods to treat for pests; consult the Resources listed in Chapter 13.

## Step 3 - Reduce the Size of Your Lawn

Reduce your grass area enough to allow hand-powered reel mowing. It will provide you with a good cardiovascular workout without gym fees or air and noise pollution. In surrounding yard areas, create a Cape Cod meadow for native grasses and wildflowers that will sustain butterflies, bees, and lightening bugs. The Conservation Commission can provide you with suggestions for meadow plant mixtures for your planting conditions and tell you where you can buy the seed. Mow your meadow only once a year, in early May, to eliminate encroaching woody plants. Replace other lawn areas with native bushes and trees, a vegetable garden, and fern and moss beds for shady places. Plant groundcovers on steep slopes where mowing is dangerous.



If the above steps seem too extreme for you, reduce your lawn gradually; simply mow fewer rows each year. For those homeowners that live adjacent to waterbodies, it is important to eliminate mowing within up to 50ft or more from the waterbody and let native grasses and woody growth overtake the lawn.

## Step 4 - Let the Clippings Fall Where They May

Keep mower blades sharp and mow to a height of 3 inches. Mow often enough so that no more than 1/3 of the grass height is removed with each cutting. Forget raking. If left on the ground, grass clippings provide more than a third of the nutrients your lawn needs. They decompose quickly thanks to earthworms and microorganisms. Clippings also conserve water by shading the soil from the sun and reducing moisture loss from evaporation. If you end up with extra grass clippings use them in the compost pile.

## Step 5 - Fertilize with Compost Only



The best and safest alternative for the Cape Cod lawn is no fertilizer. Approximately 15% of the nitrogen that washes into our bays is from residential fertilizer use. Native grasses and wildflowers have always done well on their own. If you enjoy working on your patch of grass, feed it compost made from your own kitchen and yard wastes. If you're still hooked on fertilizer from a bottle or a bag, go organic or *insist that your lawn company does*. Measure and calculate your lawn's square footage. Apply slow release insoluble organic fertilizer in spring and fall, adding no more than 1 pound of actual nitrogen per thousand square feet of lawn. The more you fertilize the more you mow.



*3 million tons of fertilizers are used annually on American lawns to keep them greener than normal or necessary.*

## Step 6 - Leave Watering to the Clouds

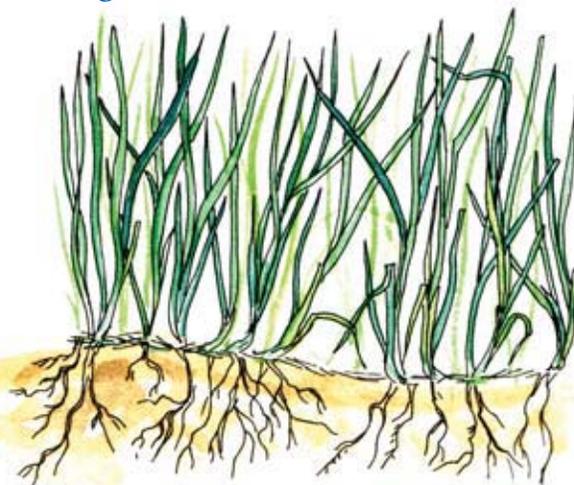
Summer dormancy is a natural rest period for your lawn. When hot dry weather turns your grass golden, don't fret; it will recover with autumn rains. Save summer watering for your favorite places in the yard and water early in the morning to cut down on evaporation.



*30% of the water consumed on the East Coast goes to watering lawns.*

## Step 7 - Mix Those Seeds

If you must have an all grass patch of lawn, use fescue, rye, and clover. These are hardier and more drought resistant than bluegrasses. Clover contains nitrogen-fixing bacteria that will naturally fertilize your lawn. Look for seed containing fungi that are repellent to certain lawn pests. Seed in the fall when cooler and wetter days provide ideal conditions for germination and deeper root growth.



## Step 8 - Forget the Lime

Cape soils are naturally acidic allowing a wide variety of mosses to thrive. Celebrate moss in your lawn as it stays green all summer and won't need mowing. For creative ways to landscape with moss see the Resources Chapter.



## Step 9 - Leave Thatch and Aerating Woes to the Microbes

Organically managed lawns are alive with earthworms and beneficial microbes that naturally recycle thatch and aerate your lawn. If you must toil over your grass, get down on your knees, break up and aerate compacted areas by hand, and apply compost before reseeding.

## Step 10 - Celebrate Diversity

Train your eye to appreciate variety in your lawn. As many as 50 species of plants may grow in a typical nonherbicide lawn. Daisies will naturally adjust to bloom below the height of a cutter bar; so will other wildflowers. Yellow wood sorrel adds texture and makes refreshing summer soups. You'll never have to mow patches of moss and lichens. As your dream-lawn addiction subsides, you will begin to appreciate additions of color and texture to your lawn. When weeding mania hits, do it by hand, or, if you must apply something, use "green" products for pre-emergent weed control.

## Step 11 - Take a Walk on the Wild Side

Feeling seduced by the perfect turf on TV? Suffering from lawn envy? Take a walk in any of the Cape's nature preserves and appreciate the beauty of diverse grasses, wildflowers, lichens, and mosses that support bees, butterflies, and wildlife of all kinds. Find a field full of fireflies and you know you're in the right place. Try replicating that environment in your own yard.

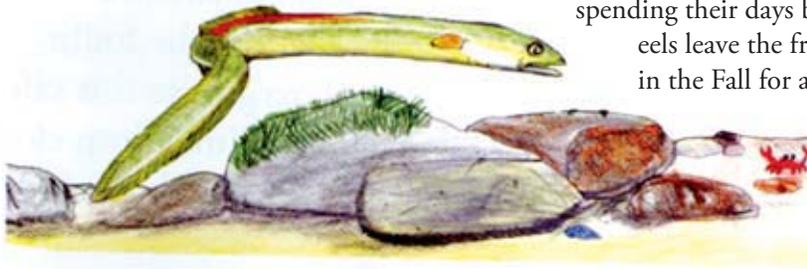
## Step 12 - Become an Advocate for the Cape Cod Lawn

How will you know when you and your lawn have completely recovered? You will be spreading the word and not the poison. Share the good news with dream-lawn addicts, landscapers who use lawn chemicals, or the stores that sell them. If you play golf, find out what chemicals are being used on your greens; alert the groundskeepers to their increased risk of cancer. Help monitor what goes into the lawns of local parks, businesses, schools, and municipal greens. We can all help keep the Cape environment healthy and beautiful, our water drinkable, and our shellfish beds thriving.

## Cape Cod Neighbor

### American Eel: A Well-Traveled Fish

The long, slimy animal you might encounter in Cape waters is the American eel (*Anguilla rostrata*) distributed from Greenland to Brazil. This fish has a narrow, streamlined body that helps it to swim rapidly. Eels are nocturnal, spending their days buried in mud.



Part-time residents, adult eels leave the fresh and brackish waters of our waterways in the Fall for a one way voyage to the Sargasso Sea, off the Bahamas, where they gather in great numbers with eels from around the Atlantic basin to reproduce and then die.

## Cape Cod Neighbor

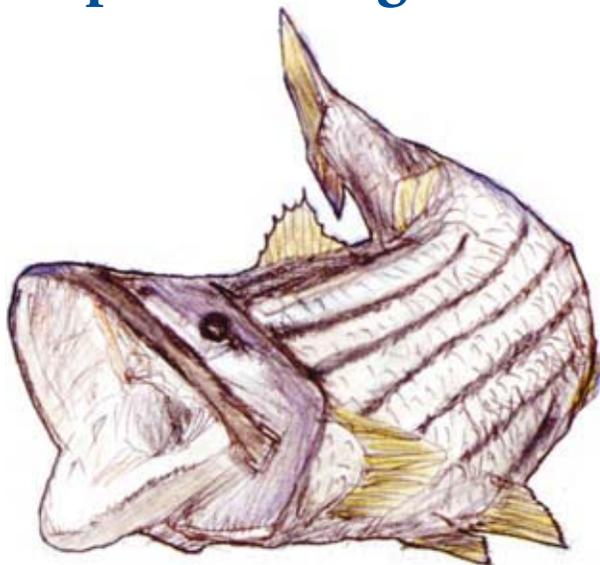
### Lobsters: Life on the Ledge



Once known as poor man's food, lobster has made a comeback at dinner tables. Nearly 90% of legal-sized adult inshore lobsters are harvested every season. The heart of the local lobster fleet is based in Chatham Harbor and Stage Harbor. Nocturnal scavengers, lobsters eat almost anything they can find by crushing and ripping food with their large claws. Most lobstering in New England occurs during the spring, summer, and fall.

## Cape Cod Neighbor

### Bluefish and Striped Bass: The Angler's Favorite



Bluefish and Striped Bass are the most sought-after Cape fishes providing great sport through catch and release fishing, and great eating when you catch a "keeper." Striped Bass is the largest fish available to the nearshore angler ranging from one to over 60 pounds. Bluefish are usually ravenous and will strike at just about anything you give them. Watch out for those teeth! Whatever your favorite fishing spot, remember that only healthy waters provide the ideal habitat for your future dinner.