



Why go natural?

Our yards are our outdoor homes: fun, beautiful, great spaces for relaxing. But in taking care of them, we often use water inefficiently, produce a lot of yard waste, and overuse chemicals that are bad for the environment and our families' health.

The good news is, by making some simple changes in how we care for our yards we can:

Save Money on water, waste disposal, and chemicals

Save Time – working with nature is easier, in the long run

Protect our families' health by reducing contact with chemicals

Protect the Environment

- Conserve our precious water supplies, and leave more in rivers for salmon
- Keep our streams and lakes clean by reducing the need for chemicals
- Recycle yard trimmings into free fertilizer



1

Build healthy soil with compost and mulch



Soil is alive, and soil life matters.

A teaspoonful of healthy soil contains about 4 billion organisms! This community of beneficial soil creatures keeps our landscapes healthy by:

- Creating a loose soil structure that allows air, water, and plant root growth into the soil
- Recycling nutrients and making them available to plants
- Storing water until plants need it
- Protecting plants from pests and diseases

Get to know your soil. Dig in and take a look.

Use a trowel or shovel to dig 8-12 inches deep. You may find sand (which doesn't hold water well), clay (which won't let water in or out), compacted layers, or light color (which indicates low organic matter and soil life). Compost improves all types of soil.



Feed your soil with compost.

Dig or rototill in 1-3 inches of compost (up to 20-25% compost in your soil mix) when you're making new beds or planting lawns. Compost works on any soil. It helps sandy soils hold nutrients and water, and loosens clay soils. Compost feeds the beneficial soil life, so it can feed and protect your plants.

Make compost at home, or buy it in bags or bulk.

Leaves, chopped stalks, flowers, and grass all make great compost in a pile or bin – just add water, keep it moist, and wait 6 months. Vegetable kitchen scraps also make good compost, but should be composted in a worm bin or other rodent-resistant container to prevent pest problems.



2 Plant right for your site



Get to know your yard.

Where is it sunny or shady at different seasons? Dig in a few places to see where your soil is sand or clay, soggy year 'round or bone dry. Look around – are there plants with problems? Where do you want play areas, vegetables, color, views, or privacy? How much lawn do you need, or want to maintain? What kind of plantings would fit your yard?

Choose the right plant for the right place.

Select plants that grow well in the Northwest and fit the sun, soil, and water available in your yard. Native plants are best near waterways, and also work well on many other sites. Think about how big a tree or shrub will be when mature (especially next to houses or under powerlines). Look around at neighbors' yards, nurseries, books, and demonstration gardens for plants that do well in sites similar to yours.



Waterwise Garden at the Bellevue Botanical Garden

Pick plants that resist pests and use less water.

Many pest and disease resistant varieties are available now – ask at nurseries or Master Gardener clinics. Choose plants that are “low water use” or “drought tolerant.” After they’re established (2-5 years) many will thrive just on our limited summer rainfall most years, saving you time and money on watering.

Group plants by their needs.

Put plants that need full sun, or shade, or rich soil, or regular irrigation together with those with similar needs. That way you don’t have to water the whole yard to reach one thirsty plant!

3 Practice smart watering for healthier plants



Too much of a good thing

Did you know that watering too much or too little is the cause of many common plant problems in our area? You can have healthier plants, save money on water bills, and conserve precious water by learning to give your lawn and garden just what they need, and no more.

Water deeply, but infrequently.

Most plants do best if the soil is allowed to partially dry out between waterings.

For lawns, a loss of shine or footprints showing indicate that it's time to water. Vegetables and other annuals should be watered at the first sign of wilting, but tougher perennials (plants that live several years) only need water if they stay droopy after it cools off in the evening. Trees and shrubs usually don't need any watering once their roots are fully established (2 to 5 years), except in very dry years.



Soaker hoses save water! Cover them with mulch to save even more.

Moisten the whole root zone.

Watering deeply builds deeper, healthier root systems. To see if you are watering deep enough to moisten the whole root zone, dig in with a trowel an hour after watering to check the depth.

Make every drop count.

Some easy ways to lower water bills and get more water to plants include:

- Build your soil with compost and mulch to hold water and prevent evaporation.
- Choose low water use plants. Once established they can often thrive just on rainfall.
- Use soaker hoses or drip irrigation on beds – they save 50% or more compared with sprinklers!
- Use a timer that screws onto the faucet (available at garden stores) to water just the right amount.
- Water lawns separately from other plantings. Make sure sprinklers aren't watering the pavement too.

4 Think twice before using pesticides



Scientists have found 23 pesticides (weed and bug killers) in our local streams, many at levels that may damage salmon and other wildlife. Overuse of these products can also damage soil and plant health. And studies find increased health risks among families that use lawn and garden pesticides, especially among pets and children. The good news is that we really don't need most of those chemicals.

Start with prevention.

- Build healthy soil with compost and mulch – soil organisms protect plants from many disease and insect pest problems.
- Select pest-resistant plants, and put them in the sun/shade and soil conditions they like.
- Clean up diseased plants, and compost dead plants in fall to reduce hiding places for insect pests.
- Pull weeds before they go to seed and spread.
- Use a variety of plants, so if pests attack one plant, others can fill its place.



Most bugs are good bugs.

Only about 5% of the bugs in your yard are pests. "Good bugs" like the ground beetle (above) and the green lacewing (below) help control pests.



Identify the problem before you spray, squash, or stomp.

The problem could really be incorrect mowing or pruning, improper watering, or other easily corrected practices. Or that scary bug could actually be a beneficial "good bug" that eats problem pests. Whether it's a bug, disease, or weed, you need to identify it to know how to effectively manage it.

Accept a little damage – give nature time to work.

Natural predators often bring pests under control, but they need time to work. Don't spray at the first sign of damage – nature may control it for you, or plants often just outgrow the damage.

5 Practice natural lawn care



It's easy to put all these steps to work in our lawns, where we often use the most pesticides, fertilizer, and water, produce the most waste, and work too hard!

Mow higher (1-2 inches), mow regularly, and leave the clippings.

"Grasscycling" or leaving the clippings on the lawn doesn't cause thatch build up. But it does make lawns healthier. Soil organisms recycle the clippings into free fertilizer, and you save all the work of bagging. Modern mulching lawn mowers make grasscycling even easier.



Use "natural organic" or "slow release" fertilizers.

Don't try for a deep blue-green color – healthy lawns in our region are a lighter meadow green.

- The best time to fertilize is September, when grass plants are building root reserves for the next year.
- If you want to fertilize in spring, wait until May, when grass growth slows.

*You can grasscycle with any mower. Push mowers (left) and conventional power mowers (right) leave clippings on the surface to break down. Electric and gas **mulching mowers** (center) blow chopped clippings down to the soil, leaving a clean lawn.*

Water deeply, to moisten the whole root zone, but less frequently.

Let the soil dry between waterings to prevent lawn disease and save water. Lawns only need about one inch of water a week in summer, including rain, to stay green. Or you can let areas of lawn that don't get heavy wear go brown and dormant – just water once a month, and they'll bounce back in the fall.

How much is one inch of water a week?

Scatter tuna cans or other straight-sided containers on your lawn, turn on the sprinkler, and check the time. When most cans have 1 inch of water in them, turn off the sprinkler and check how long it ran. Now you know how long to run your sprinkler each week in summer, if you want to keep your lawn green.

