

Natural Yard Care

5 steps to make your piece of the planet a *healthier place to live!*



Why go natural?

Our yards are our outdoor homes: fun, beautiful, and 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 our families' health and the environment.

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 because in the long run working with nature is easier.

Protect our families' health by reducing contact with chemicals.

Protect the environment by using these tips:

- Conserve our precious water supply
- Keep our streams and lakes clean by reducing the need for chemicals
- Recycle yard trimmings into free fertilizer



Make a healthy,
beautiful yard without
working too hard!

Put nature to work in your yard

Nature wastes nothing. In natural landscapes, soil life recycles dead plants into food for new plant growth. Plants are adapted to the water, sun, and soil available in their site.

A wide variety of plants, soil organisms, insects, and animals in your yard keeps most pests and diseases in check.

By working with nature in your yard, you can have a great looking landscape that's easier to care for and healthier for families, pets, wildlife, and our great Northwest environment.



How? It's easy...

Start with these 5 steps:



1. Build healthy soil



2. Plant right for your site

3. Practice smart watering



4. Consider eliminating pesticides and herbicides



5. Practice natural lawn care

1 Build healthy soil with compost and mulch

Soil is alive and soil life matters

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



- Creating a loose soil structure allowing 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

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 to 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.



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.

Mulch it!

Mulch is a layer of organic material like leaves, wood chips, compost, or grass clippings you spread around your plants. Mulch conserves water, prevents weeds, and feeds the soil for healthier plants. Keep mulch at least an inch away from stems.



Mulch stops weeds, conserves water, and builds healthy soil for healthier plants. Spread mulch several inches deep and 1 inch away from plant stems.

Mulch improves:

- Flower beds and vegetable gardens: Use 1–3 inches of leaves, compost, or grass clippings
- Trees, shrubs and woody perennials: Use 2–4 inches of woody mulches, like wood chips (get from a tree service) or bark. Fall leaves also work well
- Lawns: Mulch your lawn? Yes, you can grasscycle (leave the clippings) and spread compost on lawns—see Step 5

Need fertilizer? Go organic!

Overusing chemical pesticides and fertilizers can damage beneficial soil life, leading to soil compaction and unhealthy plants. Chemicals can also wash off your lawn and garden into streams and lakes, where they can harm fish and other wildlife.

Most trees and shrubs can get all the nutrients they need from the soil and mulching once a year. But annual plants, vegetable gardens, and lawns sometimes need extra nutrients.

When shopping for fertilizers, look for the words “**natural organic**” or “**slow release**” and follow the instructions on the bag. Unlike “quick release” fertilizers, natural organic fertilizers won’t wash off into streams so easily, and they’ll feed your plants slowly to keep them looking good longer.



Remember, healthy plants grow in healthy soil.

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 your neighbors' yards, nurseries, books, and demonstration gardens for plants doing well in sites similar to yours.



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 thrive on our limited summer rainfall, saving you time and money on watering.

Group plants by their needs

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

Lawns and vegetables are picky

They need several hours of full sun, level well-drained soil, and irrigation. Limit lawn areas to where you need them. Other plants are better for shade, soggy sites, or slopes, and require less maintenance.

Give plants a good start

Prepare the soil by mixing 20–25% compost into soil in planting beds. For trees and shrubs, mix compost into the whole planting bed, or just plant in native soil and mulch well. Don't add compost just to their planting holes—that can limit root growth. Spread out the roots, add water, and tamp soil back in for good root contact. Set plants so the soil level on the stem is at the same height as at the nursery to prevent problems. Mulch new plantings well and be sure to water even drought tolerant plants during their first few summers, until they build deep roots.



Dig a hole twice as wide and deep as the rootball. Spread the roots before planting.

Make space for wildlife

You can invite birds, butterflies, and other wildlife into your yard, protect shorelines and fish, and make a more attractive landscape.

- Plant trees and use native plants, especially ones with fruit and flowers
- Avoid exotic plants—check the list of invasive “noxious weeds” at www.clallam.net/weed/
- Plant in layers (ground cover, shrubs, and trees) so your landscape is like the forest
- Avoid using pesticides and chemical fertilizers—they can poison birds, beneficial insects, and fish when rain washes them into streams
- Provide a bird bath or other small water source
- Leave wild “buffer” areas of native plants along ravines, streams, shoreline, and fencelines



Need Help? Which plants grow best in Clallam County?
See a list of native trees and shrubs at www.clallamcd.org

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 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.

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.



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

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
- Catch roof runoff in a rain barrel for use on gardens.
- When soil is dry or compacted it won't absorb water quickly. If water puddles, stop watering a while and then restart, so the water has time to soak in
- Water in the early morning or evening — if you water at mid-day, some of the water just evaporates



Water in the early morning or evening to reduce evaporation.

Use automatic irrigation systems efficiently

Automatic systems can actually either waste water or be fairly efficient, depending on how you set and maintain them.

- Have a professional test, repair, and adjust your system annually
- Inspect your system while operating once a month—look for leaks or sprinkler heads plugged or misdirected
- Install a rain shutoff device (ask your irrigation expert where to find them)
- Adjust your watering schedule at least once a month through the season—plants need a lot less water in May and September than they do in July and August



Let the rain soak in

Winter rain rushes off roofs, pavement, and compacted soil. This causes flooding downstream, erodes stream banks, and muddies the water, which harms fish and other wildlife. You can help slow this winter runoff and help the soil hold the moisture plants need in summer.

- Direct downspouts onto lawns and beds or “dry wells”
- Use compost and mulch to reduce erosion and help rain soak in
- Use open pavers, gravel or other pavement options that let rain through and into the soil
- Plant dense strips of native trees, shrubs, and groundcovers next to streams, lakes, and ditches to stabilize the soil and to slow and filter runoff
- Build a rain garden to collect, absorb, and filter stormwater runoff. Get more information at www.cityofpa.us.

4 Consider eliminating pesticides and herbicides

Pesticides and herbicides may be washed into streams after heavy rains or over watering at levels harmful to fish and wildlife. Overuse of these products can also damage soil and plant health.



Studies find increased health risks among families using lawn and garden pesticides, especially among pets and children. The good news is, you really don't need most of those chemicals.

Start with prevention

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

Identify the problem before you spray, squash, or stomp

The problem could really be incorrect mowing or pruning, improper watering, or other easily corrected practice. 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.

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.



If a pest or weed problem develops, use the least toxic solution

- Physical controls like traps, barriers, fabric row covers, or repellants may work against pests
- Long handled weed pullers pop dandelions out easily
- Mulching once a year reduces weeds in beds
- Less toxic products like soaps, horticultural oils, and plant-based insecticides are now available
- Beneficial insects that prey on problem bugs are available for sale, or you can attract these “good bugs” by planting a variety of plants that provide pollen and nectar all year



Long handled weed pullers pop dandelions out easily.

Use chemical pesticides and herbicides as the last resort

If you must use a chemical, use the least toxic product and spot apply it—don’t spread it all over the yard to kill a few weeds or bugs.

It may be best to have a professional with all the protective gear do the application, but don’t use a service that spreads chemicals over the whole yard or sprays on a calendar schedule. Apply pesticides or herbicides only when and where you really have a problem. Follow label instructions exactly—more is not better. And be sure to keep children and pets out of application areas.



Replace problem plants with pest-resistant ones for a healthier, easier to care for yard

If a plant, even a tree, has pest or disease problems every year, it’s time to replace it with a more tolerant variety or another type of plant that doesn’t have these problems.



Roses are one example of plants we often use fungicides on to control disease. Ask your nursery for modern, pest and disease resistant varieties, to replace disease-prone plants.

5 Practice natural lawn care

It's easy to put all these steps to work on your lawn, where you 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. It makes lawns healthier! Soil organisms recycle the clippings into free fertilizer, and you save all the work of bagging. 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 the spring, wait until May when grass growth slows
- Follow manufacturer instructions.



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 infrequently

Let the soil dry between waterings to prevent lawn disease and save water. Lawns only need about one inch of water a week during the summer, including rain, to stay green. 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 during the summer.



Improve poor lawns with aeration, over-seeding, and top-dressing with compost

- Aerate in spring or fall to improve root development and water penetration
- Overseed thin areas with Northwest-adapted grass seed blends
- “Top-dress” by raking in 1/4” to 1/2” of compost to cover the seed and improve the soil
- Repeat these steps annually as needed to improve poor lawns



You can rent an aerator or get a yard service to aerate for you.

Consider not using “weed and feed” or other pesticide or herbicide

Accept a few weeds. Crowd out problem weeds by growing a dense, healthy lawn. Use a long handled weed puller to easily remove dandelions without bending over. Weeding is easiest when the soil is moist. If you want to use weed killer, don’t spread “weed and feed” all over, it gets into our streams. Just spot spray the problem weeds.



Honey, I shrunk the lawn!

Consider alternatives to lawns on steep slopes, shady areas, or near streams and lakes. Grass grows best on level, well-drained soil in full sun or part shade. It takes a lot of work (and sometimes chemicals) to maintain. Look for other plants better suited to soggy soil, slopes, or heavy shade.

Try to leave or plant a buffer of dense, native vegetation along streams and lakes. It will filter and slow runoff, shade and cool the water, provide homes for wildlife, and prevent bank erosion too.

Natural Yard Care



Spring
March – May



Summer
June – August

FLOWERS AND VEGETABLE GARDENS

- Prepare new planting beds and gardens by mixing in 1–3 inches of compost
- Pull weeds when they first start growing, while soil is moist, roots are short, and before they go to seed
- Buy plants that resist disease, and use less water.
- Identify problem pests.

- Mulch flower and vegetable beds with compost or grass clippings to conserve water and control weeds
- Use fabric row covers to keep pests off sensitive vegetables
- Identify bugs before you spray, squash, or stomp – they may be “good bugs” that eat pests.

TREES AND SHRUB BEDS

- Prepare new tree and shrub beds by mixing compost into the entire bed, not just planting holes
- Plant trees in native soil and mulch well

- Mulch shrub and tree beds with wood chips, leaves, or bark once a year to conserve water, reduce weeds, and feed the soil

LAWNS

- Mow about 2 inches high for most lawns, or 1 inch for bentgrass lawns. Grasscycle — leave the clippings for free fertilizer.
- Aerate, overseed, and top-dress with ½ inch of compost lawns in poor condition
- Fertilize lawns in May, if needed, with “natural organic” or “slow release” fertilizer

- Mow regularly and leave the clippings on the lawn
- Keep mower blades sharp to reduce lawn damage and brown tips
- Consider saving water by letting some lawn areas (ones that don’t get heavy traffic) go brown and dormant until fall

WATERING

- Prepare sprinkler systems by testing, adjusting sprinkler heads, and repairing leaks
- Lay out soaker hoses in beds and cover with mulch
- Check soil moisture at plant roots before watering – don’t water until they need it

- Start and re-check watering systems and adjust for weather. Don’t water when it rains.
- Water lawns 1 inch per week or let it go brown and dormant—water enough to moisten root zone once a month
- Water at dawn or in the evening to reduce evaporation

COMPOSTING

- Harvest compost from your bin
- Throw any uncomposted sticks or stalks back in for another cycle

- Add yard debris to compost pile
- Water compost pile to keep it moist
- Place compost pile in shade or cover it to hold moisture

Through the Seasons!



Fall

September – November

- Pull emerging weeds in beds when ground is moist and before they develop deep roots
- Mulch garden beds with leaves or compost to reduce winter weeds and feed the soil. Plant winter cover crops in open beds
- Prepare new planting areas by digging in compost



Winter

December – February

- Rake winter leaf mulch back onto beds if winds blow it off
- Weed beds once during winter to prevent weeds going to seed

- Mulch tree and shrub beds with leaves, wood chips, or bark
- Plant trees, shrubs, and many perennials in early fall to give them a good start

- Prune fruit trees and other woody trees and shrubs while they're dormant

- Improve thin areas of lawns September – October by aerating, overseeding, and top-dressing with compost
- Fertilize lawns with “natural organic” or “slow release” fertilizer in September to develop healthy roots and crowd out weeds
- Plant new lawns September 1 – October 15 to give them the best start before next summer

Winter is the time to plan for Spring!

- Tune up yard equipment; sharpen mower blades
- Plan drip irrigation or soaker hoses for beds and containers to conserve water
- Check storage areas for any unwanted chemicals and dispose of them safely. Call Clallam County Environmental Health 360-417-2258 for information on proper disposal and transport for information on proper disposal and transport.
- Plan to replace plants that have disease or pest problems
- Start planning for spring.

- Reduce watering for cooler weather
- Shut off and drain watering systems when rains come
- Put away exposed soaker hoses or re-cover with mulch if left out

- Clear out annual garden growth and compost it for spring
- Keep your compost pile as moist as a wrung-out sponge



Want to Know More?

Resources

- **WSU Extension, Clallam County**
<http://ext100.wsu.edu/clallam/>
360-417-2279
 - *Master Gardeners*
 - *Master Composters*
 - *Rain Garden Mentor Program*
- **Clallam Conservation District**
www.clallamcd.org
360-775-3747
 - *Workshops on sustainable landscaping*
 - *Native plant sales*
 - *Publications*
- **Clallam County Environmental Health**
Alternatives to toxic products
www.clallam.net/hhs/EnvironmentalHealth/
360-417-2258
- **City of Port Angeles Public Works and Utilities**
www.cityofpa.us
 - *Conservation*
Water conservation rebates
360-417-4715
 - *Stormwater*
Rain garden rebates
360-417-4830
 - *Waste Reduction/Recycling*
Backyard composting workshops
Compost sales
Publications
360-417-4874

When it comes to your yard, act naturally!

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