Oakland County’s 24-Hour Pollution Hotline: 248-858-0931
Call if you witness contamination in lakes, rivers or streams, discharges from pipes, sewage on the ground or in surface water, or a large number of dead fish in waterways.


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WRC
WATER RESOURCES COMMISSIONER
Jim Nash

For additional information, contact the WRC Environmental Team at 248-858-0958
We all live in a watershed—an area of land that drains to a common body of water, such as a lake, river or stream (and even groundwater). Movement of pollutants in a watershed travel from upstream to downstream areas, or at the junction between groundwater and surface water. Understanding the watershed concept is important because it allows us to comprehend that we can have an impact on water quality far beyond our own back door. As more and more land becomes altered or developed, especially along shorelines and streambanks, the amount of storm water runoff in the watershed increases, as well as the potential amount of pollutants that are contained in that runoff.

As a responsible waterfront property owner, practicing these Healthy Habits for Clean Water are especially important because you are directly at the water’s edge where runoff doesn’t have far to travel before reaching the water. Oakland County is home to the headwaters of five major river systems—the Clinton, Flint, Huron, Rouge and Shiawassee. With more than 1,400 lakes and five major river systems in Oakland County (encompassing a total of more than 900 miles of shoreline), riparian landowners have a significant opportunity to make a big difference in protecting our water quality!

For more information, go to www.oakgov.com/riparian
FOR MORE INFORMATION, GO TO WWW.OAKGOV.COM/RIPARIAN

Waterfront Wisdom — Healthy Habit #6: Properly Maintain Your Septic System

Challenge: Excess nutrients and harmful pathogens entering surface water and shallow groundwater supplies that can make us sick and degrade water quality.

Cause: Improperly maintained or failing septic systems. Signs of a failing septic system are odors, surface sewage, wet spots or lush vegetation on or near the drainfield, plumbing or septic tank backups, or gurgling sounds in the plumbing system.

Solution: Homeowners should properly operate and maintain their septic system to avoid failures. Regular pumping of the septic tank is the single most important maintenance requirement of a septic system.

What you can do

Get Pumped! Have your system inspected every 2-3 years by a reputable septic tank service contractor. When necessary, have your tank pumped out. Septic tanks should be pumped every 3-5 years, at a minimum.

Conserve Water: Minimize water inputs into your system by installing water-saving fixtures such as low-flow toilets, faucets and showerheads.

Redirect: Point downspouts away from the drainfield.

Minimize: Reduce the use of harsh chemicals that get washed down the drain and into your septic system. The chemicals can actually kill the beneficial bacteria necessary for the break down of the wastes entering your system.

Pitch In! Dispose of non-degradable items such as fat, grease and oil, hair, tampons and disposable diapers in the trash. These materials will not break down and can cause clogging and premature failure of your system.

Avoid Using a Garbage Disposal: Try composting kitchen scraps such as egg shells, coffee grounds, vegetable wastes and other organic kitchen wastes.

Site Right! Plant shrubs and trees an adequate distance from the drainfield and septic tank. The root systems can interfere with the infrastructure which can lead to premature system failures. Plant only grass over and near your septic system.

All Natural: Supplements and additives do not improve operation of your system. Some may actually harm your system by causing solids to be carried into the drainfield, which causes premature clogging. In addition, supplements containing organic solvents can cause groundwater contamination.

No Parking: Don’t drive or park vehicles on any part of your septic system. Doing so can compact the soil in your drainfield or damage the pipes, tank or other septic system components.


As a Waterfront Homeowner, You Have a Unique Opportunity to Contribute to the Health of Your Local Waterway

Look around you: How does your waterfront look? Is the streambank or shoreline eroded? Are tree roots exposed? What about the water itself? Are there algal blooms? Does the water look murky?

Do you store compost or mulch near the water? Do you mow your lawn down to the water’s edge? Do you use the correct type of fertilizer in the appropriate quantity?

Many activities we conduct near the waterfront, in our lawns and gardens and around our home, impact water quality. These activities are even more critical to riparian homeowners because runoff doesn’t have far to travel before reaching the water.

This contaminated runoff, known as non-point source pollution, flows without treatment into the nearest storm water drainage system. This may consist of simple drainage ditches and swales, or infrastructure such as enclosed pipes, catch basins and detention ponds. If you live on a river, lake or stream, this runoff travels directly into the adjacent waterway much more quickly.

Non-point source pollution comes from many different sources and is difficult to trace back to one source on the landscape. Groundwater resources also can be impacted if toxins in runoff leach through the soil. Groundwater is water that is stored underground in the spaces between soil particles and fractured rocks. Groundwater is a source of drinking water for approximately 35 percent of residents in Oakland County. Contaminants also can pass through surface water and into groundwater because these systems are interconnected. Pollutants can impact water quality by harming fish and wildlife, impairing recreation (fishing, boating and swimming) and contaminating drinking water supplies.

So, how do we prevent non-point source pollution from getting into the water? We can start by being aware that our actions DO impact water quality, especially if we live along the water’s edge. We can all make a difference by practicing Healthy Habits for Clean Water.

Common Sources of Pollution in Storm Water Runoff:
- Sediment - eroded soil from unprotected construction sites, eroding streambanks and shorelines and runoff from agricultural lands;
- Nutrients from natural sources (organic debris), fertilizers (either by leaching or through soil erosion, as well as runoff from product left on impervious surfaces), animal waste (pets, wildlife, and livestock) and sewage sources (failing septic systems or illegal discharges of sewage);
- Pesticides from residential and agricultural lands;
- Bacteria from animal waste or human sewage sources; and
- Grease, oil and other hazardous materials from motor vehicles, illegal dumping, or careless spills.
Waterfront Wisdom — Healthy Habit #1: Minimize Storm Water Runoff From Your Property

CHALLENGE: Excessive aquatic plant growth and algal blooms, decreased water clarity, low stream flows and flashy flows, degraded habitat and shoreline erosion.

CAUSE: Impervious surfaces (driveways, sidewalks, and rooftops) and loss of natural vegetation increase surface water runoff and reduce infiltration of water into the ground.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Let It Rain! Redirect downspouts away from hard, paved surfaces into vegetated areas, such as a rain garden, or into a rain barrel for later use in the garden. Rain gardens are growing in popularity because they look great and filter pollutants out of runoff allowing clean water to infiltrate and replenish groundwater supplies.

Harvest the Rain Water: Install a rain barrel which will collect runoff from rooftops when it rains or direct downspouts into garden areas. It’s free water for use in the garden!

Minimize Impervious Surfaces: Use porous landscaping materials, such as brick paving stones, sand or gravel beds and mulched areas, allowing spaces where water can infiltrate around and through the materials.

Waterfront Wisdom — Healthy Habit #5: Properly Manage Home, Yard and Animal Waste

CHALLENGE: Excess nutrients, chemicals and pathogens degrade water quality and harm wildlife, aquatic and human life!

CAUSE: Organic matter, such as leaves and grass, animal waste and harmful chemicals in runoff or seepage into groundwater from spills or improper disposal.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Mulch Please: Collect or mulch leaves soon after they fall to ensure that they don’t get carried into lakes and streams through storm drains or by getting blown directly into the water. Leaves add excess nutrients and use up valuable oxygen in the water as they decompose. Rather than spend the extra time and energy raking leaves into compost bags or to the street for curbside pickup, mulch the leaves into your lawn—it’s free fertilizer and adds organic matter to the soil!

No Smoking! Don’t burn yard waste adjacent to waterways—the ash contains phosphorus which can degrade water quality.

Bag It! Pick up pet waste promptly and dispose of it in the trash.

Clean Green! Utilize non-toxic cleaning alternatives whenever possible. Common household items such as white vinegar, baking soda and hydrogen peroxide can serve a multitude of cleaning functions.

Recycle! Take unused items to your local household hazardous waste (HHW) drop-off site. Information on HHW or recycling programs can be found at: www.oakgov.com/waste or call the Oakland County Waste Resource Management Division at 248-858-1352.

Properly Site Compost Piles: Keep compost piles away from the water’s edge to eliminate the chance of runoff from these piles contributing excess nutrients to the water.

Don’t Feed Waterfowl: They become dependent on the food from humans and tend to congregate in one place expecting more food. This can lead to the concentration of droppings which adds excess nutrients and harmful bacteria to waterways. Deter nuisance species, such as Canada Geese, from your property by maintaining a vegetative buffer planting of adequate height (at least 12 to 24 inches) between the water and your lawn.

Harvest the Rain Water: Install a rain barrel which will collect runoff from rooftops when it rains or direct downspouts into garden areas. It’s free water for use in the garden!

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Waterfront Wisdom — Healthy Habit #4:
Plant and Maintain a Naturalized Shoreline or Streambank Buffer

**Challenge:** Storm water runoff pollution, soil erosion and degraded habitat and water quality.

**Cause:** Turf grass moved to the water’s edge provides a conduit for pollutants to enter waterways and attract nuisance waterfowl, like Canada Geese. The lack of deeper root systems in turf grass and removal of the natural shoreline can lead to erosion at the water’s edge.

**Solution:** Maintain a vegetative barrier of trees, shrubs, taller grasses and wildflowers between the shoreline and upland area.

**What You Can Do**

**Start Simple:** Stop mowing to the water’s edge and allow a strip of grass, called a no-mow zone, to grow between the yard and the shoreline or streambank. Native plant seeds that have been dormant in the soil will germinate and valuable native plants will start to grow on their own.

**Go Native:** Landscaping with Michigan native plants is economical because they are adapted to local soil and climate conditions and once established will require less watering and fertilizing. Native plants also naturally resist pests and diseases, eliminating the need for harmful pesticides.

- Native plants will attract wildlife, such as butterflies, dragonflies and hummingbirds, and will discourage nuisance species, like Canada Geese.
- Native plants have extensive root systems that travel far into the soil which help to stabilize soils against erosion. They also promote infiltration of water, and filter pollutants and sediment from runoff. Native aquatic plants provide optimum feeding and spawning habitat for aquatic species.
- Reduce turf grass on your property: Cut as small a path as possible through your buffer to access your waterfront. This will save both money and time that otherwise would be spent on maintaining your lawn!
- Know your stuff: Be aware of Michigan’s most common invasive plants and the most appropriate methods to control or eliminate them. Make sure you don’t start pulling out areas infested with invasive aquatic plant species—it can actually make the problem worse by producing plant fragments which can root, or cause their seeds to disperse to other areas.
- Less is more: Minimize disturbance to ground cover when doing any type of land clearing work. Avoid mass-grading large areas which will allow more disturbed soil to be exposed and vulnerable to erosion from runoff after it rains or when snow melts. At the waterfront, leave as many aquatic plants in place as possible—they will hold bottom sediments in place and protect the shoreline from the erosive forces of wind and ice action.
- Keep it legal: Obtain required permits and install necessary soil erosion controls. Any earth-changing activity that will impact more than one acre of land, or is within 500 feet of a lake, stream or wetland requires a soil erosion control permit.
- Cover your bald spots: Vegetate bare soil as quickly as possible with an appropriate vegetative cover, such as sod or seed. Be sure to mulch the area with straw or other appropriate cover to prevent erosion until the seeds germinate.

**Do Not Disturb!** Minimize disturbance of existing submerged and emergent aquatic vegetation and try to keep cleared swimming areas as small as possible. Aquatic vegetation clarifies water, soaks up excess nutrients, helps stabilize the shoreline with its dense root systems and provides habitat for fish and other aquatic life.

**Buffer It:** Maintain a vegetative barrier around your property, especially adjacent to waterways, to filter pollutants from runoff exiting your property and to prevent erosion along the shoreline or streambank.

Before

After

Common Southeast Michigan Invasives:
- Phragmites or Common Reed (Phragmites australis)
- Eurasian Watermilfoil (Myriophyllum spicatum)
- Frijol (Hydrocharis morsus-ranae)
- Purple Loosestrife (Lythrum salicaria)
- Curly Leaf Pondweed (Potamogeton crispus)

For more information, go to www.oakgov.com/riparian
Mow High and Let it Lie:
Cutting turf too short can contribute up to 25 percent of a lawn’s seasonal fertilizer needs. The additional organic matter in the soil also will help it to retain moisture.
• Avoid mowing directly to the edge of lakes and streams. Grass clippings can get into the water and add excess nutrients as they break down. Having turf grass directly at the edge of a lake or stream also can exacerbate erosion problems. Long grass or other vegetation at the water’s edge will help to filter pollutants in runoff, prevent erosion and improve habitat for wildlife.

Get A Soil Test:
Have your soil tested to find out which nutrients it may be lacking. Most soils tested throughout Southeast Michigan show that high levels of phosphorus are already present in the soil. Soil testing should be performed about every 2-3 years, or at any site where the topsoil has been disturbed and landscape renovation is under way.

Fertilize Properly:
The key to minimizing off-site movement of fertilizers is to apply them at the proper rates, times and locations.

• To protect water quality, choose a fertilizer that meet these criteria:
  1) Slow-release nitrogen: Natural organic fertilizer or synthetic fertilizer with 40 percent or more water-insoluble nitrogen (WNJ).
  2) Understand fertilizer labels: The numbers on a bag of fertilizer refer to the percentage of primary nutrients found inside. Primary nutrients are: nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P), and potassium (K). The first number represents the percentage of nitrogen. The second number indicates the percentage of phosphorus. The last number represents the percentage of potassium. Fertilizers that protect water quality will have a middle number that is at, or close to, zero, or a formula where the N to P ratio is 5:1 or greater. For example, a fertilizer with an N-P-K ratio of 21-0-4 would qualify as an earth-friendly fertilizer.
  3) Avoid weed and feed products: Choose fertilizers free of all pesticides, including herbicides.

Sweep excess grass clippings off hard or paved surfaces and back onto the lawn.

Water Wisely:
Excess watering not only wastes money, but can create runoff from your property allowing more pollutants to get into area waterways through leaching or by soil erosion.
• Only give your lawn the amount of water it can actually use—which is the area limited to the root zone of the turf. Actively growing turf only needs about 0.5 to 1.5 inches of water per week. Use a rain gauge to help determine how much water your irrigation system distributes.

Pesticide Use Recommendations:
• Practice Integrated Pest Management (IPM). This approach utilizes a system of strategies to keep pests, including insects, weeds and diseases to acceptable levels (since you can’t realistically eliminate all pests). This approach minimizes disruption to the environment and promotes the reduced input of pesticides. Fundamental to IPM is the concept of “Know what the problem is before you apply pesticides.”

Mulch IT:
Spread mulch, such as compost, wood chips, shredded leaves, or shredded bark around trees and plants. Mulch helps to retain moisture in the soil by reducing evaporation. It also cuts down on weeds and moderates the temperature of the soil.

Diversify:
Incorporating a diversity of plants into your landscape will naturally inhibit disease and pests, and greatly improves habitat for wildlife. Try using a variety of native plant species—they attract beneficial insects that will keep away pests.

Challenge:
Excessive aquatic plant growth, nuisance algal blooms, decreased oxygen levels, decreased aesthetics and impacts to recreation.

Solution:
Proper fertilizing, moving, and watering practices will result in a high-quality turf that protects water quality by reducing storm water runoff, minimizing soil erosion and improving water infiltration into the soil.

Cause:
Excess nutrients from fertilizers and yard waste and pesticides from home lawn and garden activities can enter waterways in storm water runoff and from soil erosion.

Waterfront Wisdom — Healthy Habit #3: Maintain a Healthy Lawn and Garden

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