

NATURAL yard care

Natural Yard
Care Through
the Seasons



5 STEPS
to a Healthy &
Chemical-Free
Garden





5 STEPS to a HEALTHY & CHEMICAL-FREE Garden





Healthy landscapes protect people, pets, and Puget Sound – it is a win for everyone. You get beautiful gardens and delicious chemical-free food while helping to fight climate change, conserve water, protect water quality, and prevent waste. Best of all, natural yard care is easy to do, and it saves money and time.

1 Build Healthy Soil

Soil health matters. Healthy soil keeps plants healthy, grows nutritious food, holds more water and carbon, suppresses plant diseases through increased microbial activity, and can even filter and break down pollutants.



1. Add compost.

Mix 1-3 inches of compost into the soil when making new garden beds or planting a lawn. Compost loosens clayey and compacted soils, and it helps sandy soils hold more water and nutrients.

2. Use organic fertilizer.

Organic fertilizers release slowly into the soil, which helps plants use them throughout the growing season, rather than quick-release chemical fertilizers that often get wasted and cause damage when they wash into streams and lakes.

3. Mulch regularly.

Mulch is a top dressing of organic material, like leaves or wood chips, that you spread over the top of the soil. Mulch conserves water, regulates soil temperature, prevents weeds, and feeds the soil for healthier plants.



2 Choose the Right Plant for the Right Place



1. Know your site.

Before choosing plants, notice how sunny, shady, or windy your area is, and dig in the soil to see if it is soggy, dry, or somewhere in between; choose plants that like those conditions. Think about how big a plant will get when mature, especially under power lines and next to houses.

2. Find plants for the Pacific Northwest climate.

Choose plants that grow well in the Pacific Northwest and fit the sun, soil, and water available in your yard. Native plants work best to protect waterways and support wildlife.

3. Avoid invasive plants.

Invasive plants harm native plants and wildlife. Check the list of invasive “noxious weeds” at thurstoncountywa.gov/departments/public-works/noxious-weeds.



3 Water Wisely



1. Water deeply and infrequently.

Most plants are healthier when they develop deep roots, and roots grow deeper when the soil is watered slowly and deeply. Vegetables need consistently moist soil, but shrubs, trees, bulbs, and other perennials should be watered less frequently. Most trees and shrubs need deep watering about two times per week for the first 5 years after planting. Watering bags are the most efficient way to water young trees.

2. Water when it is cool.

Water in the early morning to help the water soak in deep. If you water at mid-day, up to half of the water might evaporate.

3. Water efficiently.

Use soaker hoses, drip irrigation, or watering bags; they can use up to 50% less water than standard sprinkler systems.



4 Avoid Pesticides and Herbicides



1. Start with prevention.

Build healthy soil, water properly, and select disease- and pest-resistant plants.

2. Pull weeds instead of spraying them.

Pull weeds before they go to seed and apply thick layers of mulch to prevent them.

3. Accept a little damage and give nature time to work.

Natural predators often bring pests under control.

4. Use the least toxic option.

Chemical pesticides (weed and bug killers) can cause serious harm to people, pets, wildlife, and water quality. Even natural and organic pesticides can harm beneficial insects like pollinators, so use them only if necessary. Handpicking and trapping pests can be very effective. Visit growsmartgrowsafe.org to learn about safer pesticide choices.

Safely store all pesticides in their original container and place those products in a second leakproof lidded container to prevent spillage. Keep pesticides out of reach of children and always follow the label directions. The label is the law! Dispose of unwanted pest and weed killers at HazoHouse located at 2420 Hogum Bay Road NE, Lacey, for free, safe disposal.



5 Practice Natural Lawn Care



1. Mow high and leave the clippings.

Grasses adapted to the Pacific Northwest do best with higher mowing (about 2 inches or 5 cm). This also helps shade out weed seeds. Leaving the clippings on the lawn feeds the soil with organic matter and free fertilizer; it does not cause thatch or fungal diseases.



2. Water deeply and infrequently.

Low and slow watering can help grass roots reach feet deep instead of inches deep, which helps them be more resilient between watering and improves soil health. Lawns need about 1 inch or 2.5 cm of water per week to stay green between May and August, and less than an inch when it rains.





3. Improve poor lawns with aeration, over-seeding, and compost.

At a time when the soil is not saturated, start by aerating in the spring or fall to improve root development and water and air penetration. Next, scatter Northwest-adapted grass seed over thin areas. Finally, rake in a thin layer of compost (about 1/3 inch or 1 cm) to cover the seed and improve the soil.



4. Use organic fertilizers.

The best time to fertilize a lawn is in September when grasses build root reserves for next year. Organic fertilizers provide sustained plant nutrition throughout the growing season. Visit growSMARTgrowsafe.org to learn about different fertilizers and soil amendments.



Natural Yard Care Through the Seasons



Flower & Vegetable Gardens

Trees & Shrubs

SPRING

(MARCH–MAY)

Prepare beds by mixing in 1 to 3 inches of compost every 2-3 years. Add organic fertilizer. Pull weeds when they start growing and the soil is moist.

Prepare garden beds by mixing 1 to 3 inches of compost into the entire bed (not just the planting holes), or plant trees in native soil and mulch well.

SUMMER

(JUNE–AUGUST)

Mulch flower and vegetable beds with compost, straw, or grass clippings to conserve water, regulate soil temperature, and prevent compaction. Use fabric row covers to keep pests off plants.

Mulch trees and shrubs with wood chips or fallen leaves once a year to conserve water, reduce weeds, and feed the soil. Keep mulch off plant stems and trunks to prevent rot.

FALL

(SEPTEMBER–NOVEMBER)

Pull weeds when the ground is moist and before they develop deep roots. Mulch garden beds with raked leaves, compost, or straw to feed the soil and prevent erosion and compaction.

Fall is the best time to plant trees and shrubs because their roots can develop while the soil is moist. Mulch with leaves or woodchips, but keep it a few inches away from stems and tree trunks.

WINTER

(DECEMBER–FEBRUARY)

Rake winter leaf mulch back onto garden beds after wind storms.

Prune dead or crossing branches while plants are dormant.



Lawns	Watering	Composting
<p>Start mowing about 2 inches high, and leave the clippings. For lawns in poor condition, aerate, overseed, and rake in ½ inch of compost. If needed, fertilize with organic fertilizer in May.</p>	<p>Prepare irrigation systems by testing zones and repairing leaks.</p> <p>Check soil moisture before watering. Do not water until plants need it.</p>	<p>Harvest compost from your bin. Throw any uncomposted sticks back in the pile for another cycle.</p>
<p>Mow regularly and high, and leave the clippings on the lawn.</p> <p>Consider saving water by letting unused areas go brown and dormant until fall.</p>	<p>Start and re-check watering systems, and adjust for the weather. Do not water when it rains. Water slowly and deeply at dawn or in the evening to reduce evaporation.</p>	<p>Add yard debris to the compost pile; water the pile to keep it moist. Place the pile in the shade, or cover it to hold moisture and to keep out heavy rain.</p>
<p>Improve struggling areas by aerating, overseeding, and top-dressing with compost. Fertilize with organic fertilizers if needed. Plant new lawns in September or October to allow roots to develop during the rainy months.</p>	<p>Turn off automatic irrigation systems, detach hoses from spigots, and store hoses for the winter. Consider placing a faucet cover over hose bibs to protect pipes from freezing.</p>	<p>Rake fallen leaves and use them to make new compost piles.</p>
<p>Sharpen lawn mower blades to make mowing easier and reduce lawn damage and brown tips.</p>	<p>Winter is the time to plan and clean up. Check storage areas for unwanted chemicals and dispose of them safely at HazoHouse located at the Thurston County Waste and Recovery Center, 2420 Hogum Bay Road NE, Lacey. Open daily 8 a.m. to 4:45 p.m. For more information, visit thurstoncountywa.gov/departments/public-works/solid-waste or call 360-867-2912.</p>	

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AT A GLANCE

PRACTICE NATURAL LAWN CARE

Leaving the **CLIPPINGS** on the lawn feeds the soil with organic matter and free fertilizer; it does not cause thatch or fungal diseases.

BUILD HEALTHY SOIL

COMPOST is decomposed organic matter that can be added to soil to help plants grow. Using food scraps and yard waste to make compost keeps these materials out of landfills where they take up space and release methane, a potent greenhouse gas.

AVOID PESTICIDES & HERBICIDES

START WITH PREVENTION by using mulch and choosing pest-resistant plants.

WATER WISELY

LOW AND SLOW. The best way to water deeply is to go “low and slow,” meaning you use a low water flow, for a long period of time.

CHOOSE THE RIGHT PLANT FOR THE RIGHT PLACE

NATIVE PLANTS are best for supporting wildlife and protecting waterways.

Properly dispose of unwanted pesticides at HazoHouse located at the Thurston County Waste and Recovery Center, 2420 Hogum Bay Road NE, Lacey. Open daily 8 a.m. to 4:45 p.m.

For more information, visit thurstoncountywa.gov/departments/public-works/solid-waste or call 360-867-2912.

QUESTIONS?

Contact the Thurston County Common Sense Gardening line at 360-867-2674 or visit thurstoncountywa.gov/phss/healthy-home-and-yard

Alternative Formats Available
Call 206-633-0224 or TTY: 711

LEARN MORE:

thurstoncommunitygardens.org

naturallyardcare.org

ecoprocified.org

thurstoncd.com

growsmartgrowsafe.org

Thank you to **Seattle Public Utilities** and **King County Hazardous Waste Management Program** for creating this guide and sharing it with neighboring communities in Washington.



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