Homeowner Frequently Asked Questions

Q. If I live outside of unincorporated County (like City of Largo etc) does the Fertilizer Ordinance apply to me?
A. Yes, the Ordinance is county-wide regardless of what city you live in. Some cities, like City of St. Petersburg have their own Fertilizer Ordinance and you can view it at www.stpete.org.

Q. I have reclaimed water. Should I use fertilizer?
A. Nutrient levels in reclaimed water are much higher than in other irrigation water sources; therefore, if irrigating with reclaimed water you may not need additional fertilizer. While reclaimed water offers many benefits, it also can lead to landscaping and pollution problems if not properly managed. Contact your reclaimed water supplier to get information on nutrient content. Visit the Pinellas County Utilities website for Frequently Asked Questions about reclaimed water: http://www.pinellascounty.org/utilities/faq-reclaimed.htm

Q. Is my grass going to turn brown without regular fertilizer application?
A. Not necessarily, not all lawns require nitrogen & phosphorous to be healthy. Nutrients such as iron can be used to green-up lawns without the excess growth nitrogen provides.

Q. How do I know which fertilizer to use at what time of the year?
A. Fertilizers with phosphorous (N-**P**-K) are not allowed unless you or your customer has obtained a soil test that indicates a phosphorous deficiency. The results of the soil test must be submitted to Pinellas County prior to phosphorous application. From October 1 – May 31 granular fertilizers must contain at least 50% slow release nitrogen. From June 1 - September 30 fertilizers with nitrogen or phosphorous are not allowed, this is the blackout period. During this period compost and micronutrient fertilizers (Fe, Mg, Mn, K) are allowed as needed.

Q. If the Fertilizer Ordinance says I cannot use fertilizer, why are the stores still selling it?
A. As of January 2011 fertilizers that are sold within Pinellas County must contain at least 50% slow release nitrogen. Slow release products can be applied less frequently because they last longer than "quick" release types of nitrogen. During the rainy season, June 1- September 30 of each year, fertilizers containing nitrogen or phosphorous cannot be used or sold. Fertilizers that can be used and sold during the rainy season include iron based products, compost products, and other micronutrient fertilizers like potassium and magnesium. Your local retail stores are making products available that comply with these restrictions.

Q. How do I know if my fertilizer is 50% slow release nitrogen?
A. Fertilizers are labeled N-P-K (nitrogen, phosphorous, potassium). The middle number must be zero unless you have a soil test that indicates a phosphorous deficiency. To determine if your fertilizer is at least 50% slow release nitrogen look at the guaranteed analysis label on the back of the bag. Find the percent (%) that is slowly available (other possible phrases include controlled release, timed release, slow release). Take this number and divide it by the first number on the front of the bag (N-P-K). If the result is 0.50 or higher, then your fertilizer is 50% or higher slow release nitrogen. EXAMPLE: on the back of the bag, the guaranteed analysis label says 7% of nitrogen is slowly available, and the numbers on the front of the bag are 14-0-6. Calculate 7÷14 equals 0.50, this bag is 50% slow release nitrogen and okay to use from October 1-May 31. Follow package instructions for the amount to apply.

Q. Does my landscaper know about the Fertilizer Ordinance?
A. They should but they may not. You should ask your landscaper if they know about the ordinance and refer them to this website for more information and Pinellas County Extension for training requirements.

Q. Can I be fined if my landscaper uses fertilizer that is not allowed?
A. Yes, both homeowners and landscapers may be fined if they violate the Fertilizer Ordinance.

Q. Why is the Fertilizer Ordinance only for nitrogen & phosphorous and not all fertilizers?
A. Nitrogen and phosphorous are the two nutrients that are most commonly found in excess in waterbodies contributing to algae blooms and fish kills. Fertilizers are labeled N-P-K (nitrogen, phosphorous, potassium). Make sure your fertilizer is in compliance with the ordinance.

Q. Why is there a blackout period?
A. The blackout period coincides with our rainy season. From June 1- September 30 our weather is unpredictable and rain is very frequent. The landscapes don't have enough time to absorb the nutrients before a shower washes them off your property and into the nearest waterbody contributing to algae blooms.

Q. I live in a neighborhood with many green lawns, how can I teach my neighbors that they may be using too much?
A. Pinellas County and the Tampa Bay Estuary Program have produced door hangers you can distribute through your community to help educate your neighbors and protect water resources. Please email watershed@pinellascounty.org or call (727) 893-2765

Q. Can I ask my landscaper what kind of fertilizer they use on my lawn?
A. Absolutely, your landscaper should be able and willing to tell you what components (N, P, K, etc) are in the fertilizer they use on your property. You should also ask your landscaper if they know about the ordinance and refer them to the Pinellas County Extension for training requirements.

Q. Does the Fertilizer Ordinance affect potted plants?
A. No, the Ordinance doesn't apply to potted plants.

Q. When is the best time to fertilize?
A. The best time is twice a year during spring (April/May) and fall (October/November). There is a blackout period in the summer from June 1- September 30 where fertilizers containing Nitrogen or Phosphorous cannot be used. This blackout period corresponds to the rainy season in Pinellas County and prevents fertilizers from being washed into waterways during afternoon showers. During the summer it is recommended to use iron to green up the lawn without getting the excess growth provided by nitrogen.

Q. Why is using a slow-release fertilizer better than a regular (fast-release) form?
A. A slow-release form controls the nitrogen's release, which lessens the chance of nutrients getting into the water resources (groundwater, lakes, bays, etc). Slow-release forms also need fewer applications because they release the nitrogen slowly over longer periods of time. Regular (quick-release) fertilizer is more likely to reach water resources as they release nitrogen very quickly and are more susceptible to runoff and leaching into groundwater.

Q. If I decide to use fertilizer, how can I use it without harming our water?
A. First, use fertilizers that do not violate the fertilizer ordinance, no phosphorous (N-**0**-K). Select the right type of fertilizer for your lawn and landscape. Consider that much of Florida's soil contains plenty of phosphorus so you may not need to add this nutrient. Second, apply fertilizer only when you really need it, if you need it at all. Make sure not to over-fertilize, as this can harm your lawn and cause runoff into local waters. Third, apply the fertilizer properly, being careful to avoid spills and avoid bodies of water.

Q. What would over-fertilization mean for my yard and water quality?
A. Using too much fertilizer and applying it improperly are the biggest problems with fertilizer and water quality. Too much fertilizer is more likely to find its way into local water sources or groundwater. Too much fertilizer can also harm your lawn and landscape by burning or wilting plants.

Q. How often does the Ordinance allow me to apply fertilizer?
A. Under the Ordinance, fertilizer may be applied at a rate not to exceed four pounds of nitrogen per 1000 square feet per year.

Q. What is the function of nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium?
A. Nitrogen, which helps with the development of chlorophyll, is what gives plants their green foliage. Phosphorus helps with bloom development. Potassium aids with photosynthesis and controls the exchange of carbon dioxide.

Q. What are organic fertilizers? Are they a better choice?
A. In organic fertilizers, the nutrients come from only the remains or by-product of an organism. Examples are blood meal, fish emulsion and manure. Organic fertilizers rely on soil organisms to break them down to release nutrients, and, usually, this occurs over a long period of time. Organic fertilizers typically have a much higher slow release rate than that of traditional quick release fertilizers. One possible drawback is that organic fertilizers might not release enough of a nutrient when needed. Lawns and landscapes grown with organic fertilizers can produce plants with a higher tolerance for drought, disease and insect resistance. Using organic fertilizers also costs less and takes up less time.