

# Natural Yard Care and Healthy Soils

The way we care for our yards makes a difference, and **natural yard care** can save money and time, protect our health, and benefit the environment. This section of the MRC manual briefly outlines the five key steps of natural yard care and healthy soil building, and provides many resources for your further study. The five steps were compiled in collaboration with Seattle and other cities in King County and have become a consistent method of teaching residents that yard care can be done in a natural way and need not be about chemical use, overwatering or raking, bagging and disposing of grass clippings.

1. **Build healthy soil** – Nourish soil with compost and mulch.
2. **Plant right for your site** – Choose the right plants for beauty and low maintenance.
3. **Practice smart watering** – Use water efficiently and grow healthy plants.
4. **Think twice before using pesticides** – Prevent pests and reduce chemical use.
5. **Practice natural lawn care** – Leave grass clippings on the lawn and use water and fertilizer wisely.

## Making Connections

*When you practice the five steps of natural yard care, you are also making links to other practices important to being an MRC.*

- Composting **recycles** food scraps, yard waste, or both.
- Reducing or eliminating pesticide and fertilizer use helps foster a **healthier home** environment.
- Conserving water **reduces resource use**, benefits salmon, and is an important element of **green building**.

## 1. Build Healthy Soil

Soil consists of mineral matter (rock, sand or clay), organic matter (plants, animals and microorganisms) and “pore space” the gaps between organic and mineral matter where air and water can circulate.

Glaciers deposited most of the soil in the Puget Sound region, and our soils tend to be very thin, and are either rocky, sandy or dense and claylike. The organic content is often relatively low, and can benefit from adding organic materials.

**Adding compost** and other organic materials to the soil is the most important thing you can do for your plants. You can buy compost in bags or bulk, or you can make your own. Composting is nature’s recycling system, in which the natural processes of decomposition break down organic matter into a dark, earthy, nutrient-rich material. Four of the seven materials targeted under King County’s Zero Waste of Resources (ZWR) policy are compostable. **Food scraps, yard waste, paper, and wood** can all be a part of the composting process – at home or in a composting facility. Clean paper and cardboard should be recycled, but food-soiled paper and other non-recyclable paper are best suited for composting. Lumber may be reusable, while woody yard waste is often suitable for composting.

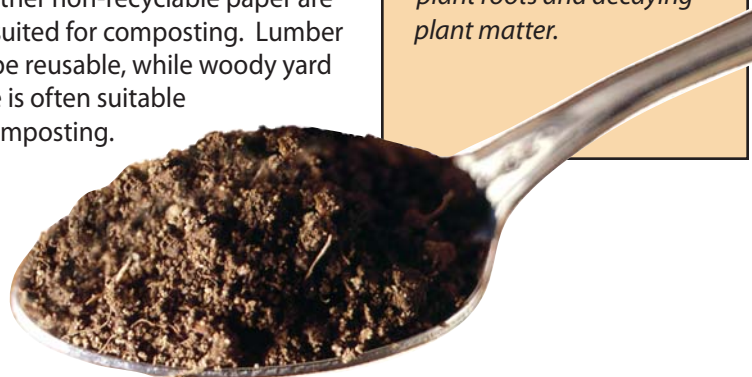


### Did You Know?

*A teaspoon of healthy soil can hold 4 billion organisms – more than the human populations of China and India combined!*

*These life forms commonly found in healthy soil include*

- *bacteria.*
- *fungi.*
- *protozoa (microscopic animals).*
- *earthworms (segmented worms).*
- *nematodes (non-segmented worms).*
- *arthropods (spiders, centipedes, mites, and more).*
- *plant roots and decaying plant matter.*



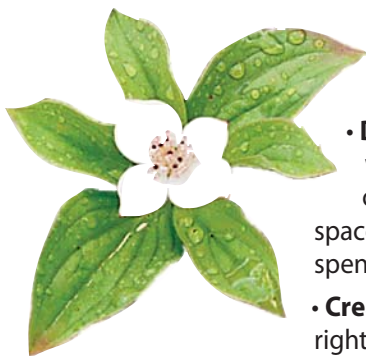
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To improve your soil and boost its health

- **enrich the soil before planting.** Mix compost well throughout garden beds. Put on a layer of one to three inches of compost in new beds and lawns.
- **mulch your plants.** Add compost, leaves, grass clippings, or woody material as mulch on the surface around your existing plantings and when planting new trees and shrubs. The mulch will help suppress weeds and also save water.
- **mulch your lawn** by using a mulch mower that leaves the cuttings on the lawn where they provide moisture and natural fertilizer that builds up the soil.
- **fertilize moderately and responsibly.** Use natural organic and slow-release fertilizers when you need to feed plants.

## 2. Plant Right for Your Site



- **Get to know your site.** Start by making a simple map of your garden, noting microclimates and landscape conditions, such as sunny, hot areas and shady, wet areas.
- **Dream a garden.** Decide what you want from your landscape – such as color, fresh food, privacy, and play spaces – and how much time you want to spend working on it.
- **Create a plan to fit your site.** Choose the right plants for each location, and plan for easy maintenance and efficient irrigation with pest-resistant, disease-resistant, and drought-tolerant varieties (or moisture-loving ones for wet sites). Leave room to grow, and consider the future when placing your plants. Repeated pruning of large plants to fit small spots generates unnecessary yard waste, but planning ahead can prevent such problems.

- **Give plants a good start.** Build healthy soil (see step 1), use proper planting techniques, apply mulch and water wisely.

\* **Call for help!** The Lawn and Garden Hotline is available for your gardening and planting questions – (206) 633-0224 or [help@gardenhotline.org](http://help@gardenhotline.org).

## 3. Practice Smart Watering



- **How your garden grows depends on where your water goes.** Group plants according to their watering needs, in healthy well-draining soil, and select the right watering system, such as drip irrigation and soaker hoses.
- **Make every drop count.** Watering deeply but less often promotes deep roots and helps prevent disease, especially with lawns.
- **Water where the roots grow.** Know and watch for signs that it's time to water, and check the soil often.

## 4. Think Twice before Using Pesticides

Start with prevention and try using some of these natural control methods to create a healthy, diverse garden:

- **Know what to do if a pest problem develops.** Try using physical controls first, such as removal of pests and diseased leaves, traps for slugs and moths, and barriers to keep pests away from plants.



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- **Use least-toxic pesticides when physical controls don't work.** If removal, traps, and barriers are not enough, try controls with low toxicity or ones that break down quickly: soaps, oils, and minerals; plant-derived insecticides (botanicals); or biological controls such as beneficial nematodes or ladybugs.
- **Use synthetic pesticides only as a last resort.** If physical and least-toxic controls are insufficient, consider whether your pest problem is the result of poor plant placement and if it is likely to recur. Weigh the risks, and if you must use chemicals, select the least toxic one and target it for your pest. Buy and use only the amount you need, and follow the label instructions carefully.

- **Water deeply, but infrequently, to moisten the root zone.** Water about one inch per week in July and August, or consider letting your lawn go dormant in the summer.
- **Improve poor lawns with aeration and over seeding, or consider improving the soil and replanting.** Aerating soils improves root growth, and over seeding with a rye/fescue grass seed mix designed for the Northwest can improve turf appearance and health.
- **Think twice before using "weed-and-feed" or other pesticides.** Healthy turf helps control weeds, and some "weeds" like clover are actually beneficial to soil and plant health. Weed-and-feed products include pesticides that kill not only the targeted weed but other beneficial vegetation and soil life as well. Most weed-and-feed products also include quick-release fertilizers that are likely to wash off into local waterways.

## 5. Practice Natural Lawn Care

- **Mow high, mow often, and leave the clippings.** Grasscycling (keeping clippings on the lawn), also called mulch mowing, returns nutrients to the soil every time you mow, helping lawns grow greener and denser without thatch buildup.
- **Fertilize moderately in May and September with a natural organic, slow-release fertilizer.** Healthy lawns are a medium green color. Over fertilized lawns are prone to disease, thatch buildup, and drought damage.



- **Consider alternatives to lawns for steep slopes, shady areas, or near streams and lakes.** Grass grows best on well-drained soil in full or partial sun; leaving a buffer of natural vegetation along streams and lakes helps filter pollutants and keeps water clean.



Chapter Four

# Natural Yard Care and Healthy Soils



## Resources for learning more about natural yard care

### Books and Booklets

*Perfect Plant, Perfect Place*, Roy Lancaster, Dorling Kindersley Limited, 2002

*Natural Yard Care* booklet, fourth edition 2008

*Composting at Home* booklet, Seattle Public Utilities, January 2002

*Choosing the Right Plants for a Beautiful, Trouble-free Garden* booklet, Seattle Public Utilities, Spring 2002

*King County Noxious Weed List*, King County Water and Land Resources Division, 2009

*Natural Pest, Weed & Disease Control* booklet, Seattle Public Utilities, Spring 2002

*Worms Eat My Garbage*, Mary Appelhof, 1997

*Maritime Northwest Garden Guide*, Carl Elliott and Rob Peterson, Seattle Tilth Association, 1998

*Sunset Western Garden Book*, Kathleen Norris Brenzel (ed.), Sunset Books, 2007

*Ann Lovejoy's Organic Garden Design School*, Ann Lovejoy, Rodale, 2004

*Rodale's Pest and Disease Problem Solver, A Chemical Free Guide to Keeping Your Garden Healthy*, Linda Gilkeson et al., Rodale Press, 2000

### Web sites

Local Hazardous Waste Management Program in King County Natural Yard Care, [www.govlink.org/hazwaste/house/yard/problems](http://www.govlink.org/hazwaste/house/yard/problems)

King County Northwest Yard and Garden Topics, <http://www.kingcounty.gov/environment/stewardship/nw-yard-and-garden.aspx>

Northwest Coalition for Alternatives to Pesticides factsheets, [www.pesticide.org/factsheets.html](http://www.pesticide.org/factsheets.html)

Washington State Pest Resource Services, [www.wsprs.wsu.edu](http://www.wsprs.wsu.edu)

Build Healthy Soil, [www.your.kingcounty.gov/soils](http://www.your.kingcounty.gov/soils)

Gardening in Western Washington, [www.gardening.wsu.edu](http://www.gardening.wsu.edu)

Washington Native Plant Society, [www.wnps.org](http://www.wnps.org)

Great Plant Picks for the Pacific Northwest, [www.greatplantpicks.org](http://www.greatplantpicks.org)

Plant Amnesty, [www.plantamnesty.org](http://www.plantamnesty.org)

Saving Water Partnership, [www.savingwater.org](http://www.savingwater.org)

Local Hazardous Waste Management Program in King County, [www.govlink.org/hazwaste/index.cfm](http://www.govlink.org/hazwaste/index.cfm)

The Garden Hotline, [www.seattletilth.org/learn/hotline](http://www.seattletilth.org/learn/hotline)

Master Gardener Program, [www.mastergardener.wsu.edu](http://www.mastergardener.wsu.edu)

Elisabeth C. Miller Library, [www.depts.washington.edu/hortlib](http://www.depts.washington.edu/hortlib)

