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## Healthy Yards

With the lack of water and high temperatures our plants are in stress. The heat of late summer can do as much or more damage to plants as winter ice. How can we better prepare our lawns and plants to withstand severe weather conditions?

Soil tests are a great way to begin a healthy relationship with your yard and garden. Tests will indicate if you have proper pH, if your nutrients are in balance and let you know if you need more organic matter. Proper pH allows plants to best utilize the nutrients available in soil, giving them a healthy boost during extreme weather. Organic matter will allow soil to hold the proper amount of moisture for a longer period of time and gives plenty of space for roots to expand so that they may better utilize water. Soil tests should be done every three years unless there is an imbalance in which case you should check it again in one year.

Three things that can be done to help the health of your yard include the number one cultural maintenance for turf, mow higher. Mowing your grass at the proper height for the species you have is the best way to improve the health of your grass. Proper mow height conserves moisture, produces deeper roots and results in 80% fewer weeds. By allowing grass clippings to remain on the lawn you are returning nitrogen and potassium back to the soil. Consider having a lawn that is beautiful, not necessarily golf course perfect.

If grass becomes sparse then it should be reseeded in the fall or spring to help compete against weeds. A healthy soil and dense lawn will reduce the amount of weeds that invade your yard. If grass needs to be dethatched then do so to remove areas that can harbor disease. Aerate to promote root growth and the movement of water and fertilizer into and through soil. This will help to create a lush, dense stand of turf that will better hold up against extreme weather.

When watering grass, plants and gardens, water deep for a longer period of time. Irrigating for short periods of time every day produces shallow root systems. Scheduling irrigation for longer durations and fewer times over the week will result in deeper rooted plants that are better able to handle drought and cold freezes that affect surface roots. Use mulch in landscape beds and on gardens to further retain moisture. While the surface of mulch may be dry, one or two inches below will often

stay moist. Always check soil moisture before watering so that you are not applying too much water.

Remember to use the right plant in the correct place in your yard. Some examples of this practice include using fescue grass on a lawn that is shaded. Shade loving ornamentals should be used in the shade. If your yard is in the sun then grow sun loving types of grass and stay away from shade loving annuals, perennials and woody plants. The sun will cook shade lovers. Weak plants that grow poorly can contribute to the spread of disease to healthy plants.

Do not plant large trees next to houses where they can become safety hazards. Never plant trees that will reach a height taller than 15 feet under power lines. Electric companies will eventually cut these trees severely which will result in tremendous stress on the tree and eventual death. You are better off using shrubs or smaller ornamental trees under power lines.

Native plants can be a fantastic choice for any area of Missouri. Native plants are adapted to our climate and soils, need little or no irrigation and seldom require fertilizer. Once established, they are able to beautify the yard without the added cost of fertilizer and water. This is a win, win situation. Native plants come in many colors and bloom throughout the year so there is a species for everyone.

Always keep your equipment at peak condition and sanitized. If you sanitize your pruners with bleach or alcohol after each use then you will not be guilty of contaminating other healthy plants in your yard from one unknown diseased plant. We often don't recognize that plants are diseased until months after they have been infected. Keep mowers and pruners sharpened so that they make cleaner cuts when used. A clean cut stem or grass blade is better able to heal, reducing the possibility of disease contamination into the plant.

*Helpful Publication: Native Plants for your Landscape. Missouri Department of Conservation. May 2008; Healthy Yards for Clear Streams. University of Missouri.*  
[http://extension.missouri.edu/cole/Programs/ag/healthy\\_yards.htm](http://extension.missouri.edu/cole/Programs/ag/healthy_yards.htm)

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