

Lawn Care that Protects Water Quality

“Most people are happy to do the right thing,” says Bill Beals of Greenworld Landscaping based in Alden. “I try to build my lawncare and landscaping business around educating homeowners about using common sense to protect water quality.”



Eighty percent of Beals' clients are lakefront homeowners on Torch Lake, Lake Bellaire, Elk Lake and other lakes in Antrim County's Chain of Lakes area. With more than 30 years of landscaping experience in the region, Beals says he encourages his customers to use no phosphorus fertilizers. “My advice has been the same for many years--I urge them: the less chemicals, the better.”

Beals says eco-friendly fertilizers are available at local nurseries and hardware stores, including Pine Hill Nursery, Torch River Hardware, and McGough's in Traverse City. Lake experts say phosphorus and other chemicals degrade water quality by creating harmful algae and plant growth, which harm native fish and encourage invasive species to thrive.

“More customers are now starting to wonder and ask what is being put on their lawn. I think it is important for me to educate them about the different options now available,” Beals says. “In most cases we advise leaving many existing natural features alone and tell them not to do too much. Often we hope to catch new customers and get them to do the right thing as well. We urge them to keep the ‘up north’ feel. Sometimes people often regret what they did with landscaping and want us to change it.”

With more than 100 customers, Beals says, “Nature has a plant for every niche, and we try to find a balance between natural and heavily maintained.” He advises lakefront property owners not to strive for a suburban style lawn in northern Michigan. “If we make changes to what is naturally growing, it will create added maintenance expenses along with more lawn to mow.” A recent study confirms natural vegetation costs 48 percent less to maintain than traditional landscaping.

Another bit of advice from Beals is to keep lawn height at 2 ½ to 3 inches and to have soil tested. This is easy and inexpensive; contact the MSU Extension Service Office in Bellaire. Soil tests will confirm the condition of the soil. They are cheap and efficient, and cost around \$10.

Beals also encourages lakefront owners to plant shoreline buffers along the edge of the water. He said lilies, juniper, perennials and groundcovers will allow a beautiful view of the lake without compromising water quality.

Vegetative buffers not only help stabilize the shoreline and prevent erosion, but also keep many nutrients from flowing to the lake. “We often recommend flowering shrubs or dwarf lilacs and leaving as much of the natural vegetation alone,” he says.