

# Soil Health and Your Lawn



## Healthy Soils, Healthy Streams

Turf grass in Iowa's communities makes up a significant land area. The soils beneath the turf, especially in newer, developed areas is highly disturbed and most often very unhealthy. As a result, many lawns are over fertilized and generate a lot of runoff that goes directly to local streams and carries fertilizers with it. When it comes to lawn care, the focus is usually on how green and thick the grass is above ground with little focus on the soils beneath the turf grass. Healthy soils will result in healthier turf grass with less runoff and water pollution.

## What is Soil Health?

Soil health or soil quality, is the ability of soil to function as a vital living ecosystem that sustains plants, animals, and humans. It is also directly connected to local stream quality. Soil isn't dead and it is not just "dirt"! It has billions of living and breathing bacteria, fungi, and other microbes that are part of a dynamic symbiotic ecosystem. Only "living" things can have health, so viewing soil as a living ecosystem reflects a fundamental shift in the way we care for our nation's soils. Healthy, functional soils provide nutrients for turf grass and plants, they absorb and hold rainwater for use during dry periods, they filter and buffer potential pollutants from lawns, and provide habitat for soil microbes to flourish to sustain the ecosystem.



## What are Characteristics of Good Soil Health?

**Good Structure:** Healthy soils have good structure, which is the arrangement of the solid parts of the soil and the pore space between them. Loose granular soils have large and small pores that allow for rapid infiltration of rainfall. Most urban soils beneath turf grass are highly compacted which results in loss of structure and pores and results in more rainfall running off the lawn than soaking into it.



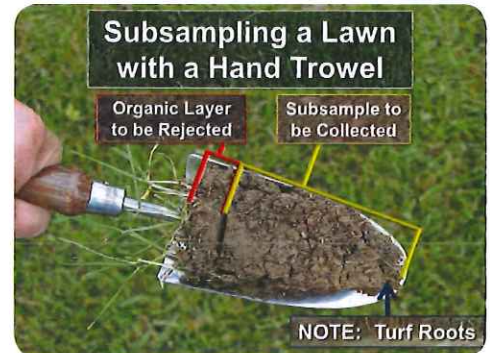
**Adequate Organic Matter:** This is one of the most important components, thus an indicator, of a healthy soil. It is the tiny fraction of soil composed of decomposed matter. Organic matter: provides carbon as an energy source for soil microbes; holds soil particles together; supplies, stores, and retains nutrients including nitrogen and phosphorus; improves the soil's ability to store water and make it available to turf grass; contributes to less compaction; reduces rainfall runoff and helps with turf grass root development.

**Soil Fertility:** Fertility is the ability of soils to provide essential nutrients and water for turf grass growth and reproduction. Healthy soils will have good fertility which is usually assessed through soil chemical analyses for such nutrients as nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium, to name a few.

### Soil Management

Management choices affect soil health and soil structure, amount of organic matter, fertility including water and nutrient holding capacity and soil depth. An assessment of soil health can be the starting point. Choose management methods that will foster soil function for the future. Following are recommended practices:

1. When building a new home, make sure that there is adequate topsoil, at least 4 inches and that the subsoils and topsoil are decompacted before seeding or sodding. Topsoil can be amended with compost to increase organic matter.
2. On existing lawns, sample lawn soils before fertilizing for nutrients, pH, organic matter. Fertilize based on sample results and recommendations. Improve soil quality in the spring or fall by doing soil quality restoration, aerate the lawn, then topdress with a thin layer, 1/4-1/2" of compost. Reseed over the top using existing turf grass species.
3. Use "P-Free" fertilizers to reduce the amount of phosphorus applied to your lawn and reduce the amount of phosphorus in runoff to storm sewers that discharge to local streams.



<https://ohioline.osu.edu/factsheet/hyg-1132>



TahoeBMP.com  
LakeCountyIL.gov

**More information:** <https://iowastormwater.org/basics/healthy-soils-healthy-streams/>

### Other Stormwater Pollution Prevention Tips:

- Sweep up excess fertilizers from sidewalks or driveways
- Don't apply fertilizers and herbicides right before a rainfall event
- Blow grass clippings back onto the lawn after mowing
- Spot spray herbicides rather than spraying the entire lawn