When you buy lawn fertilizer this spring, you will notice that the turf fertilizer products sold at retail will no longer contain phosphorus or P.

Beginning April 1, 2010, new state regulations restrict the use, sale and display of turf fertilizer that is labeled as containing phosphorus or available phosphate. This type of fertilizer cannot be applied to lawns or turf in Wisconsin unless the fertilizer application qualifies under certain exemptions.

Homeowners, renters and others who do their own lawn care will have to follow the new law. In addition, there are restrictions that professional lawn and landscape businesses must follow as well as sales and product display requirements for businesses that sell lawn or turf fertilizer.

Background

Phosphorus is an essential plant nutrient. Plants only absorb the amount of phosphorus they can use. Extra phosphorus can wash into lakes, rivers and streams which can lead to algae blooms and declining water quality. The law's intent is to provide protection to Wisconsin's water resources from phosphorus run-off.

Reading a Fertilizer Label

Fertilizer labels carry a series of three numbers that indicate the amount of total nitrogen (N), available phosphate (P) and soluble potash (K) in the package, also referred to as N-P-K.

In the picture, the product contains 24 percent nitrogen, 0 percent phosphate and 12 percent potash.

Fertilizers that also contain pesticides, sometimes called "weed and feed," will also carry the three numbers for nitrogen, phosphate and potash.

Use Restrictions

Under the new law, turf fertilizer that is labeled as containing phosphorus or available phosphate cannot be applied to residential lawns. There are some exceptions to this.

Exemptions

- **New Lawns:** Fertilizer labeled as containing phosphorus or available phosphate can be used for new lawns (seed or sod) during the growing season in which the grass is established.
- **Phosphorus Deficient**: Fertilizer that is labeled as containing phosphorus or available phosphate can be used if the soil is deficient in phosphorus, as shown by a soil test performed no more 36 months (three years) before the fertilizer is applied. The soil test must be performed by a soil testing laboratory.
- **Non-turf Use:** Fertilizer labeled as containing phosphorus or available phosphate can be applied to pastures, land used to grow grass for sod or any other land used for agricultural production or for home gardens.

Purchasing Turf Fertilizer with Phosphorus

Fertilizer retailers cannot *display* turf fertilizer that is labeled as containing phosphorus or available phosphate.

However, retailers can post a sign indicating if fertilizer containing phosphorus is available for purchase.

If you need to purchase fertilizer because of one the exceptions listed above, you should ask your retailer if fertilizer with phosphorus is available.

Please note that finished sewage sludge, manipulated animal manure

(such as composted manure) or vegetable manure are exempt from the display restriction even if the products are labeled as containing phosphorus.

Other Use Restrictions

Frozen Ground:

- No one may apply any fertilizer (no matter if it contains phosphorus or not), manipulated animal or vegetable manure, or finished sewage sludge product to turf when the ground is frozen.
- Ground is generally considered unfrozen when you can dig down six to eight inches. Snow is not a good indicator. Depending on winter weather conditions, the ground under the snow could be frozen or unfrozen.

Impervious Surfaces:

- No one may apply (no matter if the application is intentional or accidental) turf fertilizer (it doesn't matter if it contains phosphorus or not), manipulated animal or vegetable manure or finished sewage sludge product to an impervious surface such as sidewalks or driveways.
- Immediately remove any fertilizers that fall or come into contact with an impervious surface.
- Removal means sweeping up granules and disposing of them in the trash or adding them back into a bag of fertilizer, sweeping them into the grass or using a leaf blower to blow them into the grass.
- Do not hose granules into the street or into storm drains.
- Fertilizer granules may be hosed into the grass.

Also, you cannot use any turf fertilizer on icy or snow covered sidewalks or driveways as a substitute for ice-melting products.

Penalties

Any one who violates regulations on the use of fertilizer containing phosphorus or available phosphate may be required to pay a penalty of not more than $50 for a first violation and not less than $200 nor more than $500 for a second or subsequent violation.

For More Information

For more information, contact Charlene Khazae, fertilizer program manager, 608-224-4541 or email charlene.khazae@wisconsin.gov.

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What Happened to the Phosphorus?

Homeowner Information on New Turf Fertilizer Restrictions

Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection