Healthy Lakes Landscaping Initiative

By Kyle Williams, Conservation Technician/Healthy Lakes Landscaping Coordinator

Summer is here in northern Michigan and that means our campgrounds are overflowing, boaters are flocking back to the lakes, and our part-time residents are making their way back up for the season. There is no doubt that our exceptional waters bring a great economic impact as they provide boundless opportunities for recreation and leisure. There is a responsibility that comes along with enjoying our waters, one that every one of our residents should feel accountable for: keeping our waters clean.

Shoreline homeowners share the greatest responsibility in protecting our lakes; every 100’ matters. There are a host of challenges they face, and the ACD is here to help them find ways to protect their property and keep our shared waters clean. Record high waters the past few years have hammered the banks of the lakes, causing accelerated erosion, washing away precious property. Ice heaves ravage the exposed banks thereby creating mounds of soil and further destabilizing the banks. This damage has a cost, both to the property owners and to the lakes.

Many of the homes around our lakes have shifted to a more suburban aesthetic. We see lush green grass extending from the house all the way to the shoreline, with fertilizers and herbicides applied several times a year to keep that perfectly kempt lawn. This style of landscaping has appeal for some riparian homeowners as it provides unobstructed views of the lake and open areas for play. It also gives the sense of a “well cared for” home and property. However, this urban practice can severely impact the quality our waters.

The Grand Traverse Bay Watershed Protection Plan identifies sedimentation and nutrient loading from stormwater runoff as the top priority pollutants of our lakes. Grasses used for these manicured, chemically rich lawns have very shallow roots and do a poor job of holding soils in place. Maintaining soil strength around the shoreline is critical, especially along the vulnerable banks as the lack of protection will lead to accelerated erosion and sedimentation. Fertilizers and herbicides applied to the lawn can run off into the lake when it rains. This dumps excess nutrients and pollutants into the water.

To protect our lakes, we need to change the vision of what an ideal lakefront landscape looks like. We need to shift away from the suburban “well maintained lawn” to a more natural frontage with trees, shrubs, and other native plants that help the banks stay strong. We need to focus on controlling the stormwater from the heavy storms we are experiencing more and more frequently to keep excess nutrients and pollutants out of our lakes.

Fortunately, there are some relatively easy ways to achieve this goal, and every homeowner can make a difference. To start, reducing or eliminating the use of fertilizers and herbicides is an easy way to make an impact without costing anything, in fact eliminating these chemicals can save homeowners money. **According to the State of Michigan, no chemical application should be done within 25 feet of the water and any fertilizer must be phosphorous free**.

Another way to make an important difference is to plant native trees, shrubs, and other plants along the shoreline. Native plants are well adapted to our environment and require less maintenance. Native flora typically have expansive root systems that do a much better job of holding soils in place and this can have a drastic impact on the stability of the shoreline. Depending on the desired look, these buffer strips can be as clean, organized, and fancy, or as “wild and wooly” as you want. The important part of these native plant buffers is that they are planted in a way that allows them to slow and capture the stormwater runoff moving down the property.

Installing buffer strips, or greenbelts (vegetated areas between the lawn and the lake) helps to protect the lake by slowing and absorbing stormwater runoff. Slowing down the runoff allows the water to infiltrate into the ground filtering out sediments and excess nutrients. Shoreline plants benefit from the nutrients in the runoff instead of allowing it to flow directly into the lake where it feeds the growing algae cover.

Over the years algae growth in the lakes has increased dramatically. Local lake organizations have organized campaigns, such as the Three Lakes Association’s “Be Wise, Don’t Fertilize”, and Torch Lake Protection Alliance’s “Keep Torch Blue, Don’t Fertilize”, aimed at reducing fertilizer flow into the lake to help keep the lakes clean. Keeping the lakes clean also makes an impact on the wildlife found near the shoreline and in the water. Increased algal growth, and the subsequent decomposition negatively impacts aquatic habitat, which in turn affects fish and other animals. Everyone is affected by our lakes’ health.

Please check out our website, [www.AntrimCD.com](http://www.AntrimCD.com) for more information on the Healthy Lakes Landscaping program and for the date for our Fall Native Plant Sale at the ACD building. Remember the Antrim Conservation District is here to help you with planning and implementing your healthy lakes landscaping practices!

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