

Conservation Matters

A monthly column focused on conservation education, as the result of collaboration among several area conservation commissions and organizations. If your town's commission or conservation organization would like to contribute articles, please contact Jessica Tabolt Halm jesshalm78@gmail.com

Title: April Brings More Than Just Showers

Submitted by: Steve Whitman, Alexandria Conservation Commission

April is a busy and special month here in New Hampshire; the days are longer and warmer; sugaring season is in full swing; the animals are emerging from their dens; shrubbery and flower beds are being cleaned up after the long winter; gardens are being readied; and lawns raked, thatched, and fertilized in preparation for the warmer weather. Each of these events impacts our environment in its own unique way, and each is deserving of individual attention and discussion. However, I'm going to highlight just some of the conservation concerns each present.

Animals are emerging from hibernation. Although there are many species that are less active during the winter months, bears are often the first animals people think about when hibernation is mentioned. Ironically, bears aren't true hibernators. They are more like light hibernators. Instead of a deep sleep emblematic of hibernating, bears go into a state of lethargy, which is called a torpor. The main difference between a torpor state and hibernation is that during a torpor, the animal is easily awakened. So, tread lightly near bear dens; you could wake them up. As the weather warms, they emerge from their dens and begin searching for food. Food is still relatively scarce this time of the year, and bears are attracted to bird feeders and unsecured garbage cans. Avoid damage to your property by taking in your bird feeders and be sure that your garbage cans are covered tightly and ideally inside a secure area. Do not intentionally feed the bears, as this impedes their ability to forage for themselves, makes them dependent on humans, and is dangerous. If you come upon a bear cub, assume that its mother is near and will protect her cub at all costs.

Cleaning up your flowerbeds, and turning over the vegetable garden are a traditional rite of spring here in New Hampshire. The material cleaned from your beds can be added to your compost pile. If you don't have a compost pile, now is a good time to start one. Once your beds have been cleaned, adding new mulch will help control weeds, help prevent erosion, and enhance the soil. Mulches you may wish to consider are: **Small Stone** – stones absorb more heat than organic materials, do not retain moisture, and do nothing to enrich the soil. This option should be reserved for cool-climate flower gardens as reflective heat off the stones can spell disaster for some plants. **Cocoa Hulls** – these shells are full of nutrients that help build up your soil. Cocoa hulls have a pleasant brown hue that darkens over time. They help retain moisture but do tend to grow a harmless mold in humid areas. **CAUTION;** cocoa hulls [like chocolate] are toxic to dogs if ingested. **Shredded Bark & Wood Chips** – these materials comes in a variety of colors and have a coarse, stringy texture that helps keep it from washing off steeper banks and breaking down too quickly. Generally, this type of mulch is preferred for use around shrubs

and trees rather than in perennial flower or vegetable gardens. Wood chips tend to turn grey over time. **Compost** – this is not as effective in preventing erosion or weeds as other mulches; however, it is an excellent way to build up nutrients in your soil. Compost is a good choice for flowerbeds and vegetables gardens.

Preparing your lawn for the season generally involves a good raking and fertilizing, and, in some cases, aerating and top dressing. There is one other thing that you should consider; having your soil tested by a local, independent lab at least every four years. Local laboratories are usually familiar with the area soils and can recommend a fertilization treatment plan that has proven effective in your area. The correct fertilizer in the correct amount, based on a soil analysis, will ensure the best results. Remember that fertilizer works its way into the soil, where chemicals are released; a small amount may be washed away by storm water before it can dissipate. To reduce the chances of this happening, gently water in the fertilizer after you spread it. Do not over fertilize. Over fertilization not only increases the cost but results in more chemicals than necessary and can damage sensitive plant root structures. The chemicals caught up in storm water run-off can find their way into lakes and streams causing pollution.

The New Hampshire Department of Environmental Services has a voluntary program Soak Up the Rain NH [SOAK], that helps property owners' control and reduce storm water run-off. SOAK is managed by the NHDES Watershed Assistance Section. For more information, including a video on constructing a 'water garden' to contain storm water, go to soaknh.org, or [facebook.com/SoakNH](https://www.facebook.com/SoakNH), or contact Lisa Loosigian at (603) 271-1190.

As a final note; April has two special days dedicated to promoting awareness of conservation issues: Arbor Day and Earth Day. Arbor Day was created by J. Sterling Morton, a Nebraskan who served as our 3rd Secretary of Agriculture under Grover Cleveland. He wanted to encourage people to plant trees in recognition of the importance trees play in our lives. For example: a single tree can absorb as much as 48 pounds of carbon dioxide per year and provide a day's supply of oxygen for up to four people. The first Arbor Day was held April 10, 1872; and is now recognized nationally and celebrated annually on the last Friday in April.

Earth Day, celebrated annually on April 22nd, was conceived by Senator Gaylord Nelson after witnessing the devastation caused by the massive oil spill in Santa Barbara, CA in 1969. With the help of Congressman Peter McCloskey, he convinced Denis Hayes, an environmental activist, to act as national coordinator to promote the conservation effort. Hayes created the "Earth Day Network" through which he promoted this grassroots conservation effort. As a result, the first Earth Day, April 22, 1970, 20 million Americans took to the streets in massive coast-to-coast rallies to demonstrate support for a healthy, sustainable environment, which led to the creation of the United States Environmental Protection Agency and the passage of the Clean Air, Clean Water, and Endangered Species Acts. The idea has spread to over 184 nations who actively support the protection and conservation our planet's natural resources.

To learn more about Earth Day visit: *Earth Day Network*.