

Homeowner's Guide to Protecting Ponds, Streams and Wetlands



Agawam has numerous ponds, streams and wetlands throughout town that provide habitat for numerous birds, fish, turtles, frogs and mammals. Ponds may be either naturally occurring or man-made by impoundment or excavation. Because these ponds are often shallow, controlling aquatic plants from over-taking them can be a challenge. Professionals can be hired to prepare and implement lake/pond management programs which often involve hand removal and/or chemical treatment to control nuisance or invasive aquatic plants. However, it is important for pond, stream and wetland abutters to know that they too directly affect the health of these waters and their water quality. This brochure lists several ways homeowners can help protect Agawam's streams, ponds and wetlands.

1. **Nature likes it messy.**

Some people want to “clean up” nature to create a park-like appearance. However, wildlife often needs thick tangles of undergrowth, leaf litter, and deadwood to survive. Aquatic plants are a vital part of any healthy pond and wetland ecosystem. Plants and algae provide many benefits to the pond (roots help to prevent muddy water by stabilizing the pond bottom and banks). Pond plants use nutrients that may be taken up by nuisance algae. The stems, roots and leaves of pond plants serve as important wildlife habitat for small pond animals such as dragonfly nymphs, tadpoles, and crayfish. If you are concerned that there are too many nuisance plants or algae growing in your pond, the law requires that you speak to the Conservation Commission prior to doing any vegetation removal or chemical treatments within or near the pond.

2. **Go green with your lawn.**

A super-green, lush carpet of grass that's the envy of your neighbors can cause big water quality problems. Because fertilizers and pesticides applied in excess are washed into streams, ponds and wetlands, limiting their use can make a big difference. Even better, convert manicured lawn to natural meadow, beds of native perennials and shrubs or forest.

Kill insects with kindness – Or at least keep them away with natural deterrents. There are many non-chemical, natural insect repellents available.

Fight weeds with eco-friendly herbicides – There are vinegar-based formulas for weeds on the market as well as nitrogen fertilizers made from corn gluten. Pour boiling water or white vinegar on smaller weeds (i.e. walkway cracks).

Go native – When landscaping your property, use native species (plants indigenous to Massachusetts) whenever possible. They require less water than grass does, because they have deeper roots and can store more water. Also, many of these species provide food and cover for local wildlife, providing a sanctuary from suburban sprawl. For more information, see: www.greenscapes.org and www.grownativemass.org.

3. **Protect ponds, streams and wetlands by planting and keeping native plants around them.**

If you live on the banks of a stream, pond or adjacent to a wetland, a vegetative buffer is particularly important to prevent runoff from going directly into these waters. Planting a strip of native plants next to water bodies and wetlands will help keep the water clean, provide habitat for wildlife, and help protect against flooding.

4. **Don't let those creatures go (info about invasive animals and plants).**

Although exotic animals can be great pets and ornamental plants can make beautiful decorations, many of these species are invasive. In fact, some of the characteristics that make these species desirable, like hardiness and rapid growth are the same characteristics that allow them to out-compete native plants and animals in the wild. So never release aquarium pets, Koi, or bait fish into the water.



5. **Plant a rain garden.**

Locate it in a natural low spot where it can intercept runoff from hard surfaces such as streets, driveways and walkways. Keep it at least 15 feet away from building foundations. For more information check out: www.raingardennetwork.com

6. **Compost Yard Waste.**

A lot of people think that because grass clippings, brush, and other yard waste are “natural”, it is ok to dump huge piles in the woods or wetlands. However, dumped yard waste destroys the underlying vegetation and wildlife habitat; and prohibits new trees and shrubs from growing. Leaf dumping near water bodies has resulted in flooding problems upstream. The Town of Agawam offers curbside pickup of yard waste eight times per year: twice in the spring, one late spring, one mid-summer, and four in the fall (check your route schedule for specific dates). Also, Agawam residents may bring their yard waste including grass, leaves and brush directly to the Bondi's Island Landfill off Route 5 (Monday through Friday 8:00 AM – 3:15 PM and Saturday 7:00 AM to Noon). You must obtain a yard waste pass at the DPW at 1000 Suffield Street.

7. **Scoop the poop.**

It's a dirty job, but if you don't do it, you're directly contributing to local water quality problems. Pet waste contains parasites that can cause human (and pet) health problems and be harmful to our wetlands and streams. Please pick up after your pet and never throw pet waste into a storm drain or waterway.

8. **Don't be a Drip.**

Oil, gasoline and antifreeze from cars, trucks, lawnmowers, and boats are highly toxic to wildlife. If you notice a leak, fix it immediately to keep these toxins from polluting our waterways.

9. **Drain swimming pools wisely.**

Never drain pool water or hot tub water directly into a body of water. The best option is to discharge chlorinated water over landscaping using the following steps: (1) shut off the chlorination system or stop adding chlorine one week before draining pool water; (2) make sure the pH level is between 6.5 and 8.5, the normal pH range of surface and ground waters; and (3) drain pool water where it will not flow directly into a street, gutter or a wetland, stream, or pond.

10. **Maintain your septic system.**

Choose commercial drain cleaners carefully as many may be harmful to the groundwater and to your leach field. When septic systems are not pumped routinely, the leach field may become clogged and added nutrients may reach streams, wetlands and ponds. Contact the Board of Health for more information about your septic system.

11. **Wetlands are wonderful!**

Wetlands are valuable because they reduce flooding, provide wildlife habitat filter polluted water. Wetlands may not be wet all the time. Low areas that flood in the spring may be wetlands. All kinds of wetlands are protected by the Massachusetts Wetlands Protection Act. Agawam not only has several ponds but also a large amount of wetlands and as such fall under the wetland regulations contained in the Act. Always contact the Conservation Commission before you conduct work (i.e. clearing, cutting, grading, and filling) near wetlands, ponds, streams and flood zones (413-726-8737).

