

SMALL ACTIONS ADD UP TO CLEANER WATER

April 22th is Earth Day. As in past years, individuals, community groups and businesses will be out en masse picking up litter and other visible debris from parks, vacant lots and busy roadways all across Central New York. This annual tradition reminds us that even small actions can make a big difference in the world around us.

It's relatively easy to be environmentally conscience on Earth Day. Educational reminders and opportunities to participate in organized activities are everywhere. The sun has returned and spring is in the air. We're anxious to get outside and enjoy the pleasantries of the changing season. We happily scoop, rake and bag the last dank and dirty reminders of winter away. We even welcome April's showers as a prerequisite to May's flowers. But what about those showers? Could they be quietly killing our lakes and streams? Are we inadvertently contributing to the degradation of local water quality as we busily go about our spring clean ups and landscaping projects?

Rain showers, otherwise known as stormwater, starts off clean and flows freely or through engineered channels and storm sewers, directly into our rivers, lakes and streams without any treatment or purification. Along the way, stormwater becomes contaminated as it runs over sidewalks, roads, parking lots, construction sites, lawns and gardens. By the time it reaches the nearest water body, stormwater often contains oil, antifreeze, gasoline, litter, fertilizers and pesticides. Even natural materials like leaves, soil, grass clippings and pet waste become pollutants when they are transported into our waterways by stormwater runoff. These pollutants kill fish and aquatic plants, destroy habitat, impact drinking water supplies and close beaches. It's estimated that more than one-half of all the pollution in our nation's waterways is the result of contaminated stormwater runoff.

Stormwater runoff cannot be treated using the same end-of-pipe controls appropriate for single point sources, such as wastewater treatment plants. The best way to improve stormwater quality is to treat the source – don't let runoff get polluted in the first place. By practicing the following healthy household habits this spring and summer, homeowners can help keep the spirit of Earth Day alive throughout the year by keeping common pollutants like fertilizer, pesticide, pet waste and grass clippings off the ground and out of stormwater runoff. The amount of pollution that you stop may seem small, but together it all adds up to cleaner water for everyone.

1. Cover piles of soil, sand and mulch being used in landscaping projects to stop them from washing off your yard into nearby water bodies. Plant grass where soil is exposed.
2. Sweep your sidewalks and driveways rather than hosing them down.
3. Compost leaves and grass clippings or spread them on the garden or lawn to recycle nutrients.
4. Have the soil in your lawn tested before applying fertilizers that you might not need. When needed, use only the type and amount of fertilizer indicated and clean up any excess that falls on paved surfaces during application.
5. Divert roof water to lawns or gardens where it can safely soak in.

6. Clean up pet waste by burying it or flushing it down the toilet.

Although not as dramatic as the trash and debris revealed when the last snows of winter melt away, contaminated stormwater runoff is the single greatest threat to clean water that we are facing today. Locally, twenty-eight municipalities in Onondaga, Madison and Oswego Counties are working together to help raise awareness and combat stormwater contamination in our area. For more information, and to learn how you can become part of the stormwater pollution solution, visit the Syracuse Urbanized Area Stormwater webpage on the Central New York Regional Planning & Development Board's website at www.cnyrpdb.org/storwmater-phase2.