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As I drive around the coast this time of year, I love to see all of the colorful flowers and the lovely green lawns. But behind many of these lawns lies a dirty secret polluting our waterways: overuse of fertilizer.

The adage of “more is better” doesn’t apply to the application of lawn fertilizer. Not only does over-application waste the user’s money, it pollutes local waterbodies when the excess washes off the many yards in Mobile and Baldwin counties during our frequent afternoon thunderstorms. This stormwater eventually ends up in Mobile Bay.

Plants are not the only things that have chlorophyll, the thing that makes them green and fertilizer makes greener. Algae also has chlorophyll, as does aquatic plants. Fertilizer-laden stormwater increases the algae and plant growth in a water body, which can block sunlight into the water. After the overbloom, the plants and algae eventually die, and decompose. The process of decomposition uses oxygen available in the water, creating a deficit that can lead to oxygen stress for fish and shellfish, and can even lead to fish kills in certain situations.

Of course, just using fertilizer is not a bad thing. Be sure to read the instructions printed on the bag, and use only the amount recommended. Using time-release fertilizer not only decreases polluted runoff, but saves time by eliminated multiple applications. Contact your county Extension office to inquire about soil testing, which will determine the types and frequency of fertilization your yard needs.