

3-23-12 We and They Can Equal Us

Last Thursday, March 15, at the Halifax Town Hall, people from many walks of life and several towns met to talk about the many causes of and the many actions needed to stem the tide of the terrible algal blooms in the Monponsett Ponds. I was expecting to be reminded of a quote by Rudyard Kipling, “All the people like us are we, and everyone else is They.”

There were people from Halifax, Hanson, Pembroke, Brockton, and Kingston. Among them were residents, town and city officials, two State officials from Mass. Department of Environmental Protection (MA DEP), environmental activists, people living near the ponds and who have recently spent large sums of money to repair their septic systems and there were cranberry growers. The title of the presentation reflected the audience well: Monponsett Ponds Watershed: We All Have A Stake in It.

The presentation provided an overview of how phosphate is the main nutrient feeding the algae plaguing so many of our country’s water bodies and the fact that there are many sources of these nutrients, including stormwater runoff, sediment building up on the bottom of shallow ponds, fertilizers from agriculture and fertilizers from lawn run-off, among the most common.

Maps and satellite images showed the bigger picture of how ground water flows in watersheds, with most of Halifax flowing from the northeast down toward the southwest to the Taunton River. Mankind has interfered with the natural flow, however, and that is something that has been happening for centuries. Once the impediments are in place, it is not an easy matter to undo them. Think of the dams built for power that ran our mills, providing goods and jobs. Some people want the dams down and others want them to stay but maybe rebuild the fish ladders that used to be there. It’s complicated, with more than one viewpoint.

Several times during the discussion, the image of the West Monponsett Pond was shown so that people could see how large the pond is compared to the narrow twisted outlet, Snake River. Some people came to a better understanding of the City of Brockton’s use of Halifax’s water, via diversion to Kingston’s Silver Lake, as permitted by an act of legislature in 1964. Making sure the Brockton dam is maintained and widening the now-clogged Snake River, so that water could drain more naturally within the Taunton River Watershed, rose near the top of some people’s wish list for the health of the water bodies.

Reducing nutrient sources was at the top of the to-do list. We admitted that we needed some help from DEP to sample and test the water and in various locations so that we could address the problems in an appropriate way. In time, they will establish TMDL’s (Total Maximum Daily Loads) for agriculture, for catch basins emptying into the water and for septic systems in the groundwater. The running theme, however, was to be proactive and do what we can to reduce the phosphates before we are told what we must do and by when.

Halifax already has several proactive measures in place to protect the ponds: covenant cases for septic systems near the pond with a passing a Title V inspection are required to have the system inspected each spring and the adjacent pond water tested each fall. All systems within fifty feet of the Monponsett Ponds are in the Wastewater Management District and have function reports submitted every time the system is pumped. Halifax also has Animal Waste Abatement regulations (aka Pooper Scooper regs.). Residents have come a long way on that topic. Ten years ago it was rare to see someone cleaning up from their dog; now it is common place.

Next, I’ll be working with residents and businesses to use phosphate-free fertilizers; they are readily available. In fact, I’ve read time again that New England soils typically have

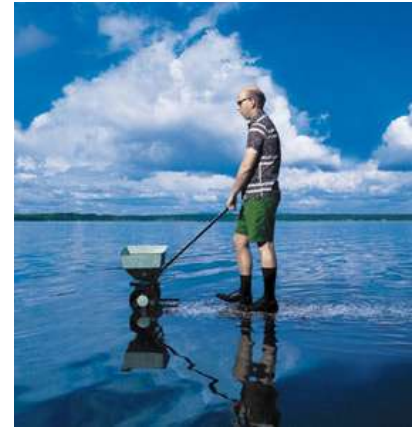
sufficient phosphorous and don't usually need more, especially for lawns. But how can you know for sure? Contact the U. Mass. Extension Services. For only ten dollars they will test your soil for Ph and nutrients. They give instructions at their website for how to prepare, sample and dry the one cup of soil to send them:

<http://extension.umass.edu/agriculture/index.php/services/soil-tissue-testing-lab>

Plymouth, MN is so motivated to reduce the phosphate from fertilizers entering their waters, they have ordinances against it and they publish this image to make a point:

You see? We are not alone.

And that message was also clear last Thursday. There are multiple causes for the algae and it will take the efforts of many to win the battle against it. A woman from Pembroke's Watershed Alliance was kind enough to attend and urge us all to move forward with this plan. We applauded her words of encouragement!



I know some people arrived at that meeting thinking it was us against them and weren't sure of who and how many were on each side. I think by the time we left, most of us at least, had begun to see there was a lot of common ground and there was a "we" who could do it.

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Image credit goes to A Tale of Two Cities' Lawn Care Practices. June 2002. by Marie Zhuikov
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