

3 Life at the Water's Edge

three in a series of six fact sheets on stream management

Don't Mow in the Buffer Zone!

A stream's *Buffer Zone* (also called the *Riparian Buffer Area*) is the strip of natural vegetation along the banks that separates the stream from developed areas (lawns, buildings, driveways, etc.).

Mowing right to the stream edge may look nice and neat, but it's actually creating disaster, faster! You may be able to get away with it for awhile, but it will catch up with you. If you eliminate a Buffer Zone's natural plants and shrubs, you lose the valuable root systems that hold the soil in place. The result: the banks erode faster, they de-stabilize, they crumble and cave in, and you'll soon be living with this! Just think of all that valuable land just washing away.



CUYAHOGA SOIL & WATER CONSERVATION DISTRICT

Water can move mountains! Consider that the Appalachian mountains were once higher than the Rockies! Maintaining a healthy buffer along your section of the stream is **insurance** protecting you from changes in the watershed upstream of your property.



USDA/ARS

Unfortunately, in urban areas these recommended buffer widths often exceed the entire width of our properties! One rule of thumb that is often used in identifying a recommended buffer width is 3 x the width of your stream. Otherwise, the following guidelines are helpful:

For existing urban backyards, a 10 to 25-foot buffer is essential.

For mid-sized streams in larger backyards, a minimum buffer of 50 feet is recommended.

For very large streams, a 150 to 300-foot buffer is not only ideal, it's smart!

Want to find the ideal width for your buffer zone? Contact your local Soil and Water Conservation District for information on determining the belt width of your stream.

Simple Solutions

- ☛ Keep your stream's Buffer Zones "mower-free"!
- ☛ If your Buffer Zones are healthy...**MAINTAIN THEM!**
- ☛ If your Buffer Zones are degrading...**IMPROVE THEM!**

How big should a healthy buffer zone be?

Ideally, a healthy buffer zone should be large enough to accommodate a naturally meandering stream for many years to come, regardless of upstream changes in the watershed. Streams tend to meander within a predictable width, otherwise known as their "belt width". The size of the belt width is related to the size of the watershed draining to your stream.

What Healthy Buffer Zones Do:

- ☛ Stabilize stream banks
- ☛ Reduce erosion
- ☛ Provide wildlife habitat
- ☛ Increase beauty
- ☛ Reduce sediment and chemicals from rainwater runoff
- ☛ Provide shade to keep the stream at cooler temperatures for healthy aquatic communities
- ☛ Increase property value



Backyard

Habitat

Improvement

Ideas

Supplemental Shelter for Wildlife

Bats are the single most important controller of night-flying insects, including mosquitoes, moths and beetles. One little brown bat can eat more than 600 mosquitoes in an hour! A bat house provides critical roosting habitat. Bat houses should be installed on a pole at least 15 feet high in a spot that receives sun at least 4 to 6 hours a day. Trees are generally not a good location for bat boxes due to lack of sunlight.

Make or buy birdhouses that will attract the type of birds you want in your yard. The size of the entrance hole is critical for successful nesting. Other considerations include box size, height above the ground, direction the entrance hole faces, and amount of sunlight. Also, make sure your birdhouses can be easily opened and cleaned annually with a mild bleach solution to reduce the spread of bird diseases. Birdhouses may need baffles to limit access by cats and other predators.

For more information about birdhouses and wildlife habitat, contact your local Soil and Water Conservation District, or check out your local library. Also, search the web for the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service Backyard Conservation Program for additional information.

Returning our urban areas to a more natural environment

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