

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.

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.



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



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