Make a Difference

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IMPROVING YOUR LANDSCAPE WITH BEST MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

Conservation is the care and protection of natural resources, including our water, biodiversity, native plants, wildlife, pollinators, farm and forestland, air, and energy. Our everyday human activities can unintentionally damage our natural resources. Conservation practices identify those damaging activities and implement changes to reduce the impacts of our actions.

At Whidbey Island Conservation District (WICD), we use the term Best Management Practices or BMPs (we like acronyms) to describe the conservation strategies and activities landowners can use on their properties to conserve, preserve, and improve soil, water, and other natural resources.

BMPs cover all natural resource management areas, from storm water and water quality to farming and ranching to wildfire protection. Examples of BMPs include composting facilities, weed management, cover cropping, storm water diversion, hedgerows, and fire safety fuel breaks.

WICD's natural resource planners go out in the field on site visits and provide free, voluntary assessments of a farm or property's natural resource management. Farms and small acreage properties with livestock may take the next step and have the natural resource planner prepare a farm plan outlining BMPs the landowner or farmer can take to conserve the natural resources on their property and the surrounding area.

Two of WICD's farm plan cooperators shared with us their current conservation projects and what it takes to achieve them. Home gardeners and backyard chicken owners can use the same BMPs described here, just on a smaller scale, to enhance their yards and conserve soil and water resources.

Filter Strips

The Eckholms own a farm in the Penn Cove watershed. They recently completed a farm plan with WICD planner, Gwendolyn Hannam, and have started implementing some of the recommended BMPs on their property. The farm plan outlines recommended activities, but the Eckholms plan and decide which activities they'll work on, and when.

One of the BMPs they are currently implementing is filter strips. Filter strips are areas of grass or other permanent vegetation used to reduce sediment, organics, nutrients, pesticides, and other contaminants from runoff and to maintain or improve water quality. The Eckholms' farm plan notes their property has a high water table and locates areas where filter strips can be placed to catch nutrients that are leaching from the soil in heavy winter rains, and slow the run-off of storm water that will eventually drain into Penn Cove.

Installing the filter strips begins with preparing the ground. On a warm June day, Linda Eckholm has measured out a filter strip directly below one of their orchards and is digging up the sod with a shovel. It's no easy job to remove well established pasture grass!

Once the sod is removed and the soil is amended with compost, the strip will be planted with a mix of wildflowers and cover crop. The Eckholms have started different mixes in their barn under grow lights, repurposing old gutters to use as planters. Each gutter has a different mix of soil and seed so they can find the best combination to plant. Once the strips are prepped, they will plant the healthiest growing starts in the filter strip and monitor their growth. In the fall, they'll add some larger native shrubs to the filter strip to provide anchor plants.

Over the next few years, the filter strip will need watering and weeding to help the native plants and wildflowers get established. Changes to the plantings may be needed depending on how well the plants grow in their new home.

Mud Management

Another BMP recommended in the Eckholms' farm plan is managing the mud and manure in their chicken run. Chickens quickly remove all vegetation from the heavy use areas of their pens, leaving bare soil that is susceptible to erosion. Winter rains sweep through the exposed ground, carrying bacteria from the chicken's manure into our waterways. Protecting soil in heavy use areas and creating rotating pasture areas for chickens are two mud management BMPs to reduce soil erosion and manure run-off.

This past winter, the Eckholms added a thick layer of hog fuel to the main chicken run area. The hog fuel prevents standing water from building up in high traffic zones of the chicken run, keeping the chickens' feet drier, and protecting the soil structure from damage.

The Eckholms have also fenced off an area of their chicken pasture, removed a diabolical patch of thistle, and planted a pasture grass mix. As the grass is established, they will rotate the chickens on parts of it, so each area has a chance to be grazed and a chance to recover, reducing the amount of bare soil in the chicken pen. The grass is also intended to outcompete weeds, which is a goal for the Eckholms with their thistle infestation.

Cover Cropping

Cover crops can reduce soil erosion, build soil health, improve water quality, provide weed control, and increase biodiversity. When managed well, cover crops can provide so many benefits to farmers and home gardeners.

Orchard Farm and Kitchen, a farm and restaurant in Langley, completed a farm plan with natural resource planner Kelsi Mottet. They use the BMP cover cropping to protect and improve the health of their soil. Last season they were able to keep more than 90 percent of their soil covered throughout the year.

"We use cover cropping as a conservation practice to keep our soil protected as opposed to leaving a field bare until the next crop is planted, which can be months later," said Savannah Reid, head farmer. "This prevents soil erosion from wind and rain and helps increase our soil's organic matter by incorporating the cover crop into the soil in the spring."

Orchard Farm seeds a winter cover crop of rye, vetch and fava beans. The rye grass grows well in winter, the vetch and fava beans fix nitrogen into the soil, and the fava beans provide fresh greens in late winter, when local greens are scarce.

Other benefits of the fava bean cover crop, said Reid, are they "do well on our farm in fields with wetter, heavier soils and are a good indicator of areas of low fertility." Areas where the winter fava crop doesn't grow as well may need extra attention in the spring.

Orchard farm also uses quick growing cover crops in the summer, such as buckwheat, which matures quickly and keeps weeds down in fields that wait 10 weeks between plantings. They also use silage tarps to cover their new fields, accelerating the decomposition of plant material, suppressing weeds, and preventing soil erosion.

Conservation Assistance for All

Any landowner can schedule a site visit with WICD, no matter how small their yard. If you're a homeowner without a farm or livestock, we can provide BMPs for natural yard care, native plant landscaping, forest stewardship, and wildfire risk reduction.

When the farmers featured here - and any landowner on the island - practices conservation BMPs on their property, we all share the benefits of healthy water, soil, and natural habitat. Conservation is a community activity.

Make a Difference is coordinated by the Whidbey Island Conservation District. For more information about our services, visit www.whidbeycd.org.