

Mowing Guidelines

An integral part of turf management.



Following sensible mowing practices can really make the difference between merely a good lawn and a superb lawn. The type of mower, height of cut, frequency of cut, timing of mowing and clipping removal all factor into the mix.

Type of mower. Rotary mowers are used almost exclusively on home lawns these days. Reel mowers can be used on small and absolutely level lawns but are not practical on most urban properties. Mulching mowers are becoming increasingly more popular. The mulching mower blade cuts the leaf blade in several locations and then forces the clippings in a vertical circular motion so that they are cut many more times before they are ultimately discharged uniformly on the lawn's surface. Regardless, it is of paramount importance that mower blades be kept sharp. Dulled blades will shred the turf leaf tip ultimately giving the entire lawn a brownish cast. Frayed leaf tips can also provide a catch-all environment for disease mycelium.

Height of cut. Height of cut plays an important role in lawn maintenance. Higher cutting heights in general promote healthier turf. There is a direct correlation between cutting height and rooting depth. Shallower mowing heights promote shallower root systems. Deep root systems have more access to soil nutrient and water reserves. Short cutting heights also promote the incidence of annual lawn grasses like crabgrass and *Poa annua* sp. and native bentgrass. Higher cutting heights also allow the turf to form a dense canopy, a canopy that prevents light from getting down to the ground level where weeds have the potential to germinate thereby reducing the need for other control measures. Although every turf species has an optimum cutting height, the accepted range for most lawn mixed stands is between 2 ½ (6.35cm) and 3 ½ inches (8.9cm). Simply place the mower on a level concrete pad and measure the distance between the surface and the bottom of the deck and set the wheels accordingly.

Cutting frequency. There is no hard fast rule for cutting frequency. A lawn must be mowed when it needs it. Obviously, turf grows much faster in the spring and can be cut 2 or 3 times a week. In mid-summer, mowing frequency can be reduced to as little as once every 2 weeks. To avoid undue stress at any time of year, no more than 1/3 the total leaf surface should be removed at any one time. Frequent cutting on Kentucky Bluegrass lawns encourages rhizome production and tillering thereby thickening the lawn. Mowing too infrequently damages the lawn by removing too much of the plant at once. Cutting too short or scalping removes too many chlorophyll producing leaves forcing the plant to access valuable carbohydrate reserves. The end result is a stressed and weakened grass plant. The long clippings would have to be raked as well.

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Mowing timing. Mowing should ideally be performed in early morning or evening when the turf is dry. Mid day cutting when the lawn is already under stress from the sun is not a consideration. Try to vary the direction of cut by 90 degrees each mowing. This will relieve compaction from a repetitive pattern.

To bag or not to bag clippings. With the advent of improved mulching mowers, returning the clippings to the lawn is quite plausible. Grass clippings which contain 80 to 85 percent water do not significantly contribute to the detrimental thatch layer in a lawn. Mulched clippings readily break down and return some nutrient to the soil after three to five years. Clippings contain 4% nitrogen, 3% potassium and 1% phosphorus. They also serve as a food source for the beneficial soil bacteria. Grass must be mowed often enough with a sharp mulching blade so that no more than 1/3 of the vertical plant height is removed with each cutting. In certain situations clippings should not be returned to the lawn. When the lawn is heavily diseased or the turf is excessively wet, the clippings should be collected and disposed.

Points to remember. In extended mid-summer drought periods raising the cutting height by an inch (2.5 cm) will improve the lawns ability to tolerate heat and wind stress .

Continue to mow throughout the fall until growth stops. Under no circumstance reduce the cutting height going into late fall. This would only remove valuable stored carbohydrate and weaken the plant.