

## Yard and Garden – 07-18-09 – Ted Griess / Extension Horticulture Assistant

When I get a haircut, the first thing I do is remove my glasses. After my barber finishes cutting my hair, she usually asks, “How does it look?” While squinting and staring at my blurred image in the mirror, my usual response is, “Great!” Then, as I put on my glasses, I often say to



her, “You know, the difference between a good haircut and a bad haircut is about two weeks!”

Although such a comment may sound a bit sarcastic, I mean it in a good-natured way, and fortunately Trudy, my barber, has a great sense of humor. In actuality, if ever I were to receive a bad haircut, after two to three weeks the bad haircut would no longer be noticeable. It would correct itself.

Such is not the case when it comes to giving one's lawn a bad haircut. It takes good cutting practices to achieve and maintain a quality lawn. Especially now, during periods of high temperature and minimal precipitation, there is a big difference between a good mowing and a bad mowing. Improper mowing practices are detrimental to turfgrass, often causing severe damage that certainly won't correct itself in a couple weeks.

UNL turf specialists are promoting the concept *Set and Forget*. They are recommending that one start out the season mowing a bluegrass lawn at 3 to 3 ½ inches in height and keeping it there throughout the entire growing season. Previously the recommendation for Kentucky bluegrass was to cut it shorter in the spring and fall then raise the mower height to 3 or 3 1/2 inches during the summer months.

A number of important reasons exist for maintaining taller grass throughout the growing season. First, the additional height provides more food-producing foliage which in turn develops a stronger and deeper root system — one that is more capable of thriving during the heat of summer. Furthermore, the extra length shades the soil, thus reducing the opportunity for weeds to grow. Also, while the added height shades, it also cools the crowns of the turfgrass plants.

Unlike a bad haircut that will self-correct in a couple weeks, a bad mowing job creates extended problems. During hot weather, the temperature near the crown area of short-mowed turfgrass may be 20 ° F or more above the air temperature. These extremely high temperatures

can easily kill the plants. Secondly, shorter grass dries out more quickly calling for more water. Also, with more sunlight reaching the soil's surface, weed seeds have a greater opportunity to germinate. Short, weakened grass also results in short, weakened, root structures.

When mowing the lawn, never remove more than one-third of the total leaf area at any one time. Removing more than one-third of the leaf area severely stresses the turfgrass and reduces its ability to withstand additional environmental problems. If possible, one should cut in the cool of the morning or evening. Mowing midday causes additional stress on the turf as well as the individual mowing the lawn.

Maintaining a sharp blade is another important mowing practice. A dull blade tears the leaf tips. The torn, frayed edges of the grass undergo greater water loss to the atmosphere, and the turf takes on a whitish, unsightly appearance. A mower blade doesn't have to be razor sharp; rather, a properly sharpened blade has no nicks, is smooth on the bottom, and is ground to a 30 to 45 degree bevel toward the top of the blade.

Finally, change the mowing direction or pattern each time the lawn is mowed. Different mowing patterns reduce soil compaction from the mower wheels and repetitive foot traffic. Also, mowing the lawn repeatedly in the same direction bends the grass over rather than cutting it cleanly.

After what I've just written, when I stop by the barbershop for my next haircut, I won't blame Trudy if she purposely gives me a bad one (even though she never does). This time, as I'm putting my glasses on, she will simply stand there with a big grin and say, "Remember, Ted, it will look better in two weeks!"

