



Become a Lawn Master – 5 Tips for Improving Your Lawn

Are you the lawn manager at your house? Here are a few tips to make your job easier and your lawn healthier during the hot summer months.

Bagging vs. Mulching

Fertilization replaces depleted nutrients turfgrass needs to grow well, but many homeowners don't realize bagging grass clippings is one significant source of nutrient loss. A major benefit of returning clippings to the lawn by mulch-mowing is returning nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium to the soil.

Turf research has shown fertilizer application rates can be reduced by as much as 50% when clippings are returned. One study by Bill Kreuser, Nebraska Extension Turf Specialist, showed 2-3.5 lbs. Nitrogen/1,000 sq.ft. were removed from turf under different mowing regimens. Homeowners returning their clippings over the course of a summer can reduce fertilizer applications by at least 1-2 lb. Nitrogen/1,000 sq.ft. This replaces at least one or two fertilizer applications, allowing you to reduce the money you spend on turf fertilizers.

Mow Often

Traditional thinking is that cool season grasses, like Kentucky bluegrass and tall fescue, don't grow well during the middle of summer. They evolved under the cooler temperatures of northern Europe, so we expect them to slow their growth in July and August. But this summer's high temperatures and above normal rain have created the perfect conditions for soil microbes to break down soil organic matter into available nitrogen. This has mimicked the application of fertilizer and resulted in faster than normal grass growth in recent weeks.



With increased summer growth, be sure to mow often enough that you're removing no more than one-third of the grass plant's height at one time. For example, if a turf is normally mowed at a height of 3 inches, it should be mowed when the canopy reaches no more than 4.3 inches. In this case, removing 1.3 inches is equal to one-third of the grass canopy's total height. Clippings do not contribute to thatch development when the lawn is mowed following the 1/3 rule.

However, if you must mow a lawn that has gotten too tall, if for instance you left on vacation for a few days, after returning raise the height of your mower to remove only one-third of the grasses' present height. Then after 2-3 days, mow again, lowering the height to your normal level.

Mow High

Adjusting the height on your lawn mower is one chore where you can "set it and forget it" for the entire summer (unless you go away on vacation!). Ideally, use a height of 3 inches for Kentucky bluegrass and 3-3.5 inches for tall fescue lawns. Mowing grass high creates a taller canopy which shades plant crowns and keeps them cooler. All new growth originates from the crown so it is wise to protect this area and keep it as healthy as possible.

And remember - mowing height is an important long-term strategy to manage your lawn's weed problems. Research at the University of Nebraska Turfgrass Research Facility has shown raising your mowing height from 1.5 inches to 2.5 inches in Kentucky bluegrass decreased crabgrass infestation from 80% to less than 15% respectively. This is one of the primary reasons why a mowing height of 3 inches season-long is recommended on all lawns in Nebraska.

No Scalping!

Scalping occurs when more than one-third of the turf's foliage is removed at one time, often cutting plants down to the lower stems. Scalping causes plant stress and even death of plants, resulting in turf thinning.

Removal of 50% or more of the turf canopy results in severe defoliation. At this point, existing root and rhizome growth stops, and the initiation of new tillers, roots and rhizomes stops. The plant's energy reserves are redirected to development of new leaf or shoot growth, at the expense of the root development.

Development and maintenance of a deep, healthy root system, creating better turf disease and drought resistance during the hot summer months of July and August, is the goal of all turf managers and anything that slows root development should be avoided.

Keep it Sharp

Finally, maintain your mower blade with a mid-summer sharpening. Sharply cut leaf blades increase turf health by improving recovery, decreasing water loss, and increasing photosynthesis. Lawns mown with a dull mower blade have poor aesthetics, heal more slowly and have greater water loss.



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Sharpen your mower blade at least twice a year. Or, to make this task easier, buy two sets of mower blades and sharpen both sets each winter. Put a sharpened blade on before the first mowing and then switch when you notice that the leaf blades are becoming ragged in appearance as this is an indicator of a dull mower blade.

Your Suggestions are Welcome!

Is there a lawn and gardening topic you would like to learn more about? Sarah Browning is an Extension Educator with Nebraska Extension and can be contacted by phone 402 441-7180, by mail at 444 Cherrycreek Road, Lincoln, NE 68528: or by e-mail sarah.browning@unl.edu.

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