

Turn Mowing Pains Into Healthy Gains!

While most of us love being outdoors in the summer sun, we usually don't consider the countless hours spent sweating behind a lawn mower as quality outdoor time. We love our lawns, yet dread the time spent cutting the grass to keep them looking nice. It seems to be the revolving door of outdoor chores... just when we tucked the mower in after a hard day's work, we find ourselves pulling it back out to start the mowing marathon all over again. It is estimated that mowing comprises about 95 percent of lawn care duties. For most of us frantically juggling life's endless list of demands, "mowing the lawn" will never rate as a rewarding way to spend our valuable time.



Habits That Can Help

A German proverb states that an old error is always more popular than a new truth. This is certainly the case with lawn care. For so many things in life, we develop habits. Looking both ways before crossing the street is a habit that almost all of us have acquired. Not all of our habits may be good or productive, but they are indeed comfortable, familiar routines that we've developed over time. And so it is with tending to our lawns... much of what we do is an acquired behavior pattern that through repetition becomes automatic, habitual, and almost involuntary. By examining the lawn care behavior and habits we have developed over time, we can identify what we are doing right and what we need to change. Making simple changes will help us free up more time, grow a greener, healthier lawn, and reduce nutrient pollution in our waters.

Managing Our Lawn Mowing Behavior

Let's start with mowing behavior. A very common misconception is that shaving our grass will save us time! With the mistaken hope of mowing less often, many of us drop the mower blade to the lowest setting and scalp our lawn. But in doing so we are actually creating an unhealthy lawn environment that allows weeds to creep in and the moisture in the topsoil to evaporate. In an attempt to remedy our sickly lawn, we turn to synthetic fertilizers and chemicals which provide quick, short-term growth yet eliminate critical soil organisms, decrease soil health, increase the buildup of thatch, and over time create a chemical dependent, stressed out lawn. Ultimately, we are creating *more* lawn work instead of less!

Avoid Short Cuts

A close-up photograph showing a person's hand adjusting the cutting height of a lawnmower. The hand is pulling a lever on the side of the mower, which is positioned on a lawn with tall grass.

If this scenario sounds familiar, it is time to turn over a new leaf (of grass) and begin to mow high! It is critical to cut at the correct height for our grass type. Most of us have cool-season grasses such as bluegrass, fescue, rye, or a blend. These grasses are more adapted for our cold winters and stay greener for longer periods of the year than warm-season grasses. In general, cool-season grasses should not be cut below three inches and, in fact, by the end of June the cutting deck height should be raised to four inches. In general your grass should be kept at three to four inches. While this height is generally taller than those traditionally used, it is for good reason. Taller grass will develop proportionally deeper, healthier roots that can resist drought, heat, and weed germination. Studies show that mowing your lawn to a height of four inches prevents crabgrass. Also by maintaining the grass at this height, you will prevent the lawn from drying out, browning, and going into early dormancy. Throughout the summer remember the following: Never cut more than 1/3 of the total height of your grass, change your mowing pattern, and keep your mower blade sharp for clean-cut, disease-resistant, and overall healthy blades of grass.

Grasscycling

If you find yourself spending more time with your mower than your family and friends, now is the time to make "grasscycling" a new healthy lawn habit! Grasscycling simply means grass recycling or leaving the grass clippings on the lawn as you mow. An obvious reason to grasscycle is because it saves a significant amount of time. By eliminating raking, emptying your mower bag, and trips to the curb or container, you can actually reduce your mowing time by at least 30%. Not only is that good for you, but it is good for your lawn.

By using a mulching mower or leaving the clippings, you are effectively feeding your lawn rich, organic matter and recycling important nutrients back into the soil. Grass clippings are 90% water so they decompose quickly and add nitrogen to the soil. Contrary to popular belief, leaving grass clippings on your lawn will not cause thatch. Thatch is actually a layer of organic material made up of grass roots, not mown grass blades. Studies show that allowing grass clippings to recycle into your lawn can save about 25% of annual fertilizer cost. In fact, every garbage bag full of grass clippings contains up to one quarter pound of useable nitrogen. Why not put those free nutrients back into your lawn and soil?

Mow High, Let it Lie

If we mow high then let it lie, we reduce the need for chemical fertilizers and reduce the amount of nutrient pollution in our waters. Each of us can examine our lawn care habits and do our part to decrease the 80 million tons of synthetic fertilizers applied to lawns every year which contribute to Ohio's harmful algal bloom explosions. This summer is a great time to start making your life easier by turning mowing pains into healthy lawn gains!