

Trimming Time While Cutting Your Grass **The Easy Way to Maintain Your Lawn**

By Joe Provey

The amount of time and money you spend maintaining your lawn depends a lot on what your idea of a lawn should be – not necessarily what your lawn actually needs. Early lawns of the Middle Ages did not require much maintenance. That's because they were inspired by glades or grassy openings in the forest (not pictures in magazines or golf courses). These lawns were meadow-like mixtures of grasses and flowers that were planted amongst fruit trees, vines, flowers and herbs and enclosed by fences or courtyards. There was no mowing. Grass was kept from growing too tall by trampling it into a soft, woven mat-like surface. If you too can adjust your expectations to taller grass, a mix of other plants in your turf, such as clover, and mid-summer periods when your grass temporarily turns brown, you can achieve a low-maintenance lawn – and one that's closer to the original spirit of the lawn.

The Right Height

There are several reasons not to cut your grass too short. First, grass grows from the crown, not the blade tips. This trait makes grass ideal for lawns because they keep on growing despite the regular mowing off of their upper stem, leaf sheath and blades. This is also why it's important not to damage grass crowns by accidental scalping with the mower. No crown, no grass! Second, keeping grass on the longer side also allows it greater surface area to carry out photosynthesis. This in turn results in healthier plants. Third, taller grass grows slower than shorter grass. You can use this simple fact to eliminate up to 20 percent of the mowings you do annually. That's a savings of about 8 hours for the average lawn owner, not to mention a savings of gasoline and wear and tear on equipment. Finally, by keeping your grass at high end of its recommended mowing height, you can prevent 90 percent of all weeds from germinating – and thereby eliminate the need for herbicides.

When to Mow

Most cool season grasses should be cut when they reach heights of 3 to 3-1/2 inches – typically once a week. Warm season grasses should be mowed when it is 2 to 2-1/2 inches tall. Cut no more than 1/3 of the grass height at each mowing to avoid damage to plants. If the lawn grows too high for you to cut off 1/3 the height and have an acceptable length, cut off one third now and mow 1/3 off again in two or three days.

Cutting more than 1/3 the height will cause grass clippings to lay on top of the lawn and decompose more slowly and will give the grass a more open bristly appearance. In addition, short cutting will stunt or slow root growth and weaken the grass plants.

What to do with your lawn clippings

Today's advice, contrary to 20 or 30 years ago, is to leave clippings on the lawn. The old belief that clippings contribute to thatch build-up is false. Thatch is a build-up of roots and stems, not grass blades. Use a mulching mower and leave clippings where they fall. It not only saves the labor of collecting and composting them, it also reduces the need for adding fertilizer to your lawn and helps to conserve soil moisture. There are exceptions, however, to this advice. If you have neglected your mowing or must mow in wet conditions, the long clippings are likely to form heavy soggy clumps that cover the grass. In such cases, the clippings should be removed so they do not smother the grass.

The idea of leaving clippings on the lawn is not new. In 1859 Henry Winthrop Sargent, a garden book writer and editor, wrote that “except during May and June when the growth of grass is more rampant, and has to be gathered, we have removed our box for catching the grass as it falls from the rollers, and permit it to fly in a little shower all over the lawn as the cutting progresses. In this way, the lawn-top dresses itself, by returning all that it produces.”

Today's new mulching mowers, also called recycling mowers, makes it even easier to leave clippings where they fall. The deck and blade designs enable these mowers to cut each blade several times, producing a finely chopped clipping.

**Photography and captions that accompany this story are available by contacting Axiom Communications at lawnboy@axiomcom.com or calling 612.861.5230 ext. 14.*