

HOME GROUNDS FACT SHEET



Cornell University
Cooperative Extension
Nassau County

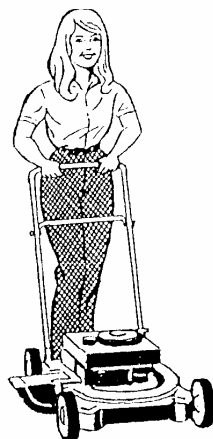


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Mowing Lawns and Utilizing Grass Clippings

We have all received a bad haircut. Such an event usually is followed by a hat and by wailing "it's too short!" to every captive audience. A too-short haircut is not life threatening, however, unless we're talking about your lawn!

For lawns, the closer the cut, the shorter the roots become due to reduced plant "food" manufacture and reserves. The shorter the roots, the more frequent application of water to preserve the life of your turf. The combination of shallow roots and nutrient reserve loss will make your turf more prone to insect and disease problems as well. This treacherous chain of events, fortunately, can be remedied by a simple adjustment to your lawn mower blade. Set your mower for 3" long and cut your grass when it is 4" long. The number of times that you need to mow your lawn with this new "longer" look will depend on the amount, kind and number of times you apply fertilizer. Lawns should be fertilized 2 to possibly 3 times a year depending on grass type and desired results. The optimum times to fertilize a lawn are late May (around Memorial Day) and early September (around Labor Day). Apply one (1) pound of actual nitrogen per thousand square feet per application for a total of two (2) pounds of actual nitrogen per thousand square feet per year. You will sometimes see the recommendation written as 1#N/1000sq.ft./application. Use a slow or controlled release fertilizer. Early spring applications at full rate are not usually recommended as this can result in excessive shoot growth at the expense of root growth. Over-fertilized spring fed lawns are more stressed going into hot, dry summers because their roots have grown less. On some occasions, spring fertilization is necessary, depending on the condition of the lawn after the winter, to promote increased turf density. An increase in turf density allows the grass to compete for space before summer weeds emerge.



You may need even less nitrogen if you adopt the practice of using grass clippings as a natural fertilizer. As long as clippings are less than an inch long they can be left right on the lawn to decompose, reducing fertilizer costs by as much as 25%. If clippings are

over an inch long, they can be added to a regular compost pile or as a weed reducing mulch, provided no herbicides were used on the lawn within the prior two months. If you have a landscaping service, ask them to leave the clippings on the lawn. No thatch build-up will result from this practice; in fact, using clippings as an organic amendment will improve the decomposition rate of thatch by stimulating soil microbes.

The most important factor to remember is safety for yourself and for the grass. A sharp mower blade will provide better "surgery" for the grass by producing a clean cut with less damage to grass tissue. Think in terms of a dull knife and a sharp knife used to slice a ripe tomato. Less damage to grass tissue results in better healing and less opportunity for disease and insects to become a problem. A sharp mower blade also reduces the chances of the blade becoming bound by extra-long grass or a stray vine, and thus reduces the chances of homeowner accidents while trying to free the blade.

Prior to any maintenance, always make sure the mower is off, cooled down and the spark plug disconnected. A regular preventative mower maintenance program in the fall and spring will preserve the life of lawn and lawnmower. Regular sharpening of mower blades (at least once a season) or having an alternate mower blade on hand will help make lawn care less of a chore.

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