Proper mowing height is the key to a healthy lawn

Accounts of well-maintained grassed areas around large estates and in public centers reach far back into history. But, the practice of mechanical mowing is less than 200 years old. Before the modern era of mechanical mowing, grassed areas were generally maintained by grazing animals.

While we now enjoy the benefits of modern mowers, it is important to understand that mowing is always a stress on our lawns. Mowing is, however, an essential part of lawn care and must be performed properly each time to ensure a healthy, less problem-prone lawn.

Why is mowing stressful on the grass? The removal of green tissue reduces the plant’s ability to undergo photosynthesis and produce the carbohydrates needed for growth and development. Turfgrass undergoes physiological stress with each mowing, particularly if too much tissue is removed. Effects of removing too much green tissue at one time (scalping), can produce long-term damage to the turf.

While many ornamental grass species would eventually die when consistently mowed at low heights, our warm-season turfgrasses (centipede, St. Augustine, bahia, bermuda, zoysia) have the ability to increase their density when properly mowed, thus offsetting the loss of carbohydrates through increased density.

There is, however, a limit to the ability of turfgrasses to compensate for the loss of tissue. In general, the lower the mowing height, the greater the stress. Grass under high stress is more susceptible to the diseases that attack turf.

Grass that is mowed too low is not as competitive with weeds. When all other management factors are equal, it is the turf with the lowest mowing height that will have the greatest weed population.

The height to which a lawn should be mowed depends on the type of grass, its growth habit and texture. Bahiagrass should be cut 3 to 4 inches high. Both carpetgrass and centipede grass can be maintained at 1 ½ to 2 inches high. St. Augustinegrass cultivars vary in the proper cutting height. Cutting height for Bitterblue, Palmetto, Floratam and Raleigh is 3 ½ to 4 inches. The semi-dwarfs Seville, Delmar and Jade may be mowed at less than 3 inches. Common bermudagrass can be mowed at 3/4 to 1 ½ inches while the hybrid bermudagrasses can be clipped as low as ½ inch.
Don’t depend on your mower settings to ensure that you are mowing at the correct height. Calibrate your mower by placing it on a flat surface. Using a ruler, measure the distance from the ground to the blade. Then make height adjustments as needed.

Mow often enough to maintain the recommended height without removing more than 1/3 of the aboveground tissue in a single mowing. Lowering the height of the grass too quickly can result in a condition called “scalping”. In stressful periods during the summer, scalping can seriously damage or even kill the turf.

Keep your mower blade sharp and clean. A dull blade will tear the grass blades giving the lawn an uneven, ragged appearance and often causes it to look gray or brown.

Remember that proper mowing is one of the most important factors contributing to an attractive lawn. Proper mowing means that the grass is cut at the optimum height and often enough to keep it healthy and attractive.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others. For additional information about all of the county extension services and other articles of interest go to: http://www.santarosa.fl.gov/extension