Proper Mowing is the Key to a Quality Lawn

Proper mowing practices can determine the success or failure of a lawn. Improper mowing can ruin a lawn in a hurry. Mowing correctly, however, can help you overcome many lawn problems. The two most important aspects of proper mowing are cutting height and frequency.

How high and how often you cut your grass is determined by the type of grass you have. A grass that naturally has a more horizontal growth habit can be mowed shorter than a naturally upright type. Grasses with narrow blades can generally be mowed shorter than grasses with wider blades. Bermudagrass, because of its numerous narrow leaf blades and low growth habit, can be mowed at a low height. On the other hand, bahiagrass should be mowed higher because of its upright growth habit.

Each time your grass is mowed, it endures a physiological stress. This is especially true if too much leaf blade is removed. Lawngrasses make their own food through a process called photosynthesis. To absorb needed sunlight for this process, a good healthy leaf surface is required. Mowing below the recommended height decreases the total leaf area and the plant’s ability to produce enough food to meet its needs. One of the leading causes of dead areas in lawns is mowing too low.

Mowing also directly influences the depth of grass roots; the higher the mowing height, the deeper the roots. A deep root system is vital to a healthy lawn. The advantages of a deep root system are greater tolerances to drought, insects, disease, temperature stress and traffic.

The recommended mowing height for centipedegrass is between 1½ to 2 inches. St. Augustinegrass and bahiagrass should be mowed between 3 to 4 inches. However, the new semi-dwarf varieties of St. Augustinegrass can be mowed lower with a recommended height of approximately 2½ inches.

During stressful conditions such as heat, drought or extensive shade raise your mowing height to the upper limit of the recommended range or even slightly higher.

How often you cut your grass is determined by the growth rate of the grass. In other words, the decision to mow should be based on the amount of growth since the last cutting rather than the number of days that have elapsed.
Mow often enough so that no more than one-third of the blade height is removed per mowing. It is important to always leave as much leaf surface as possible for photosynthesis to provide food for regrowth. For example, if your St. Augustinegrass lawn is regularly mowed to a height of three inches, the grass should be cut when it reaches 4 to 4 ½ inches.

One of the most damaging mowing practices is a sudden reduction in mowing height. If your lawn has been allowed to get too tall you should gradually lower its height with several mowings.

Should you bag or leave your clippings? On most lawns, it is not necessary to bag your grass clippings. Leaving the grass blades helps recycle nutrients to the soil. If your lawn is not overfertilized and is mowed frequently enough, the clippings will be beneficial. Contrary to popular belief, research has shown that clippings are usually quickly decomposed by soil microorganisms and do not contribute to thatch. Problems can occur if piles of clippings are left on the grass surface. If this happens, spread the clippings out by raking lightly or using a leaf blower to distribute them.

**Tip of the Week:** April roared in like a lion with record setting rainfall. Unfortunately, it came soon after many people had fertilized their lawns. Don’t automatically assume that you must refertilize. Remember, over fertilizing is much more harmful than under fertilizing. If you had fertilized roughly four to seven days before the rain, then you probably won’t need to refertilize. If you had fertilized closer to the rains, especially the day before, a lot of fertilizer would have been lost. If you do decide to refertilize, then apply at a reduced rate. Another option is to wait and see if your lawn shows signs of being fed. If your lawn is growing and greening up, then you may not need to reapply fertilizer at this time.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names 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.