

Greening up your yard

As spring arrives, it's time to think about getting out in the yard. Here are some easy ways to help the environment at large while you are beautifying your own little piece of nature.

Mow tall

The correct mowing height can reduce weeds and disease by 50-80%! The height of the cut is one of the most critical issues in keeping your lawn healthy. While each type of turfgrass has a recommended clipping height, you cannot go wrong mowing any turfgrass at a minimum of 2½" -3½" tall. There are many reasons why tall grass is healthier:

- 1) Tall grass grows more slowly and therefore needs less frequent cutting.
- 2) Tall grass reduces water needs.
- 3) Tall grass reduces fertilizer needs. Increasing grass height only 1/8 inch adds about 300 square feet more energy-collecting leaf surface for each 1,000 square feet of lawn. So, it has a greater ability to produce its own food and less need for supplementary nutrients.
- 4) Tall grass reduces weeds. The longer blades shade the soil, blocking the ever-present weed seeds from the sunlight they need to germinate.
- 5) Tall grass reduces disease and insect problems--Tall grass is healthy grass and healthy grass resists disease and insect problems. In addition, it harbors populations of beneficial insects that control pest insects for you.

Mow frequently with sharp blades

Take no more than 1/3 the length of the grass blade each time. Taking more than 1/3 of the blade at one cutting stresses grass plants. Cumulative stress leads to problems with insects, disease, and weeds. Dull mower blades bludgeon the leaf tips, causing them to become frayed and turn gray, then brown and provide a way for disease to infect grass plants.

Use an electric or reel mower

The EPA estimates that 5-10% of all air pollution comes from lawn equipment. To see how much pollution you could divert from our atmosphere use the Clean Lawn Calculator at www.cleanairlawncare.com. Electric equipment has come a long way, there are several manufacturers who offer cordless battery-powered mowers, some of which are strong enough to be used by commercial service providers. Reel mowers will give you a good work out while you save on air pollution.

Water slowly, deeply and less frequently

Proper watering will allow your grass to grow deeper roots making it less vulnerable to drought. Water early in the morning to avoid moisture loss through evaporation. No established lawn should require daily watering.

Choose the right grass type for your area

Grass that is well adapted for your area will grow better and resist local disease and pests better. There are new varieties of grass every year. To find the best grass for your area, contact your county extension agent: <http://www.csrees.usda.gov/Extension/>.

Develop healthy soil

Carry out preventative health care for your lawn, just as you would for your body. A healthy lawn can fend off attacks from most weeds and pests.

- 1) Improve the texture of your soil. Grass grows best in intermediate soils with a good mix of clay, silt and sand. Try using compost materials and/or mulching your grass clippings to improve soil texture and recycle nitrogen into the soil.
- 2) Aerate once a year. Aeration makes more space for grass roots to spread. It also increases the effectiveness of the lawn treatment by aiding in absorption. The fertilizer sits in the holes and is then absorbed through the soil as opposed to running off. Aeration may be necessary if you have high clay content in your soil or heavy traffic in your yard.
- 3) Many lawns need additional nitrogen, phosphorus or potassium. Use locally produced organic fertilizers as they are healthier for your pets, children and the waterways. Significantly fewer resources are used to produce local organic fertilizers. These products work within nature's cycles rather than altering them. If necessary, synthetic fertilizers can offer quick results while you start your program of organic fertilization which will lead to healthier grass over the long haul.
- 4) Make sure you have the right soil pH. Grass absorbs nutrients most efficiently in a slightly acid soil with a pH of 6.5 to 7.0. Lime can be added to soil that is too acidic or sulfur if the soil is not acidic enough. Inexpensive soil analysis kits can be purchased at lawn & garden stores.
- 5) Thatch is a layer of dead plant material between the grass and the soil. If thatch is deeper than ½ inch thick, it can prevent water and nutrients from reaching the soil and roots of your grass. Overuse of fertilizer can create a thick layer of thatch. Sprinkling a thin layer of compost or topsoil over the lawn or raking can reduce thatch.

Be cautious about using pesticides

Pesticides include insecticides, herbicides and fungicides. Before using any pesticides, realize that all pesticides are toxic to some degree and can harm your children, wildlife and your pets. Pesticides can also kill beneficial organisms including worms, disrupting the ecological balance in your yard. Pests may be due to any underlying problem in your yard, so make sure you understand the problem before applying a solution. Consider your options carefully; biological controls such as lady bugs to control aphids may be a good solution. If you feel pesticides are necessary, use spot treatment instead of blanket application to the entire yard.

Be realistic

Even a healthy lawn will have some weeds. If you kill off every single weed, you are also killing off beneficial insects and organisms that work to keep your lawn healthy. A lawn with 15% weeds can look practically weed free to the average observer.

Remember grass doesn't grow well everywhere

Don't waste your time fighting it if grass doesn't grow well in all spots of your yard. For example, under a spruce tree, decorative mulch or shade loving plants that are tolerant of acidic soils can be a better choice.

Think before you act

Cut out or pull weeds occasionally. If your lawn is overrun with weeds, look for underlying causes to come up with a long term solution related to your soil conditions, mowing or watering. Short term fixes such as pesticides, herbicides and synthetic fertilizers will only yield short term gains but can leave the environment with long-term problems.

Your yard may seem like a small plot, but the choices that you and your neighbors make have great impact on our environment as a whole. Each weekend about 54 million Americans mow their lawns; and the way we care for our lawns adds up. Try "greener" lawn care - for the health of your family and for the health of our environment.