Lessons from the Lawn

They say that the definition of middle-aged is when “your yard turns into a field.” While I get tired more quickly of mowing, I still look forward to the return of mowing season in the spring. Dad used to say that the best landscaping tool ever invented was the lawn mower and I have to agree. A nicely kept yard starts with a decent job cutting the grass.

For years, I fretted over a “putting green” lawn; I wanted it trimmed close without scalping. I waged war on dandelions in the spring and crabgrass in the late summer and fall. In between, I tried baggers, sweepers and even looked at a miniature hay rake to gather up the clipping from the weekly chop job.

A few years ago, my colleague Phil Blevins did some research on cutting heights and I quickly realized that just like Pogo Possum, I “had met the enemy and he is us!” My too low deck height selection was not only hurting my grass stand, it was adding to all my issues as well.

For the past few years, Andrea and I have been running our mowers at 4.25 inches and the results have really started to show up. Nothing kills weeds like a thick healthy stand of grass; mowing cool-season grasses at 4 inches or higher is the key to a healthy sod.

Many times as I travel around the county, I will notice lawns that have an almost white hue to them. They have all been cut so low that much of the green of the grass blades, the chlorophyll that converts sunlight into energy for the plant, has been hacked away.

This loss of “green” injures the grass so it does grow slower and you might be thinking “Yes, good. I don’t want my grass to grow fast so I can not have to mow as much.” The trouble is you do have to mow just as often because even if the good grasses are slowed, the broadleaf weeds and crab grass have the green light (so to speak) to surge ahead.

Since it is crabgrass season, you need to know that not only does mowing low injury the cool season grasses like fine-bladed fescue and bluegrass, it also improves the health of warm-season grasses. Since crabgrass is a warm-season grass, mowing too low helps it to thrive.

Conversely, letting warm season grasses get over three inches high greatly diminishes their health. A great example of this is right here is Smyth County…Chilhowie High School’s Bermuda-grass football field. Caretakers use a reel mower to mow the field about an inch high. The result is a lush sod that is unbelievably soft. I marvel at the grass each time I set foot on the playing surface; it is truly like walking on carpet.

The rest of campus is mowed with a conventional rotary mower at significantly higher deck settings. This keeps the Bermuda (an invasive grass, by the way) from encroaching on the rest of the school’s campus.

The next thing I have noticed lately about our higher cutting height is how much it has reduced the build up of clippings. Since we are just snipping the top of the grass blades, by volume, much less of the grass is left to dry and turn brown. A good rain simply puts the clippings right down on the surface of the sod to serve as compost for the next growth.

Third, since we aren’t mowing half or more of each grass blade away, the work on the mower is reduced. We burn a bit less fuel, but where we really save is in mower blade life. Raising the deck’s operational mowing height, results in much fewer rock and debris strikes. It also reduces the amount of dirt that is pulled up into contact with the blades.

Many people fail to appreciate how much soil can erode steel. Consider a disk blade or a plow share. Just by pulling them through the soil, any sign of rust is removed and, in its place, a highly polished piece of steel emerges.

If you are mowing too low, you aren’t just injuring the good grass that you want to promote, you also bring up a good amount of soil that serves as sandpaper to the metal under your lawn tractor. Soil not only helps to speed up the loss of mower blade edges, it also carves away ever so steadily on the air lift of the blade.

Ever notice the turned up back side of a mower blade? It serves am effective purpose if installed correctly. The air-lifts act as wings that draw the grass up evenly to be cut and then it helps expel clippings. If the deck is running to low, the air lift is not only drawing grass up to be cut too short, it also is drawing up huge amounts of dust, dirt and debris that run across the blades as well. This dirt acts as a grinding wheel, slowly eating away at your mower’s expensive blades.

Yes, converting over to mowing high is a tough call. The first few times mowing at elevated heights, the lawn may look ragged. Some of the more injured grass will have to go a full growing season to recover, if it recovers at all.

In the long run though, your lawn will be healthier, greener, and much easier to maintain.

Upcoming Events

Aug 23 VQA Calf Sale, Tri State Livestock Market 7 PM

Aug 29 VQA Steer Take Up 7 AM to Noon

Aug 31 VQA Heifer Take Up 7 AM to Noon

Sept 1 Southwest 4-H Tractor Club Meeting Call 276 780-9486 for details

Sept 12-17 Washington County Fair

Sept 23-25 Chilhowie Apple Festival

Sept 23-Oct 2 State Fair of Virginia

If you are a person with a disability and desire assistance or accommodation, please notify Andy Overbay or Pam Testerman at (276) 783-5175/TDD (800) 828-1120) during business hours of 8:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. to discuss accommodations 5 days prior to the event.

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