

Dos and don'ts of lawn care

By Michael J. Solender

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Americans spent more than \$40 billion on lawn care last season, but you don't need to drop a bundle of cash for good-looking grass.

Armed with a basic understanding of lawn maintenance principles, many homeowners can keep things looking good. Here's what you need to know.

Types of turf

The most common varieties of grass found in residential lawns here are cool season grass such as tall fescue and warm season grass such as zoysia. The proper grass for your environment is one key to a healthy lawn according to Grady Miller, professor and extension turf specialist in the Crop Science Department at N.C. State.

Shady areas call for a grass that performs better in cooler environments. Warm season grasses perform best in areas with greater sun exposure.

"Tall Fescue (varieties) provide some green color in the late fall and early spring," said Miller, "While the Zoysia grasses are greener during the summer months and have become more popular due to their drought tolerance. These are the two big players in the Carolinas though you'll see others such as Kentucky bluegrass, Centipede, and Bermuda which is more common in commercial applications such as golf courses and ball fields."

Miller is quick to point out that different grasses call for different mowing heights in order to be healthy and thrive. "Disease in turf is fungi related," said Miller who noted that over watering, improper mowing height and excess heat all contribute to stress which invites disease such as Brown patch.

"The mowing height sweet spot for cool weather grasses

- Best practices

Many homeowners are concerned about pesticide use and other chemical treatments for their lawn. N.C. State University Crop Science professor Miller suggests these options for a more natural approach to a healthy lawn:

- Mow as high as possible for tall fescue, e.g., 3.5 to 4.0 inches (and no less). This reduces weeds and promotes deeper rooting. This is not as important with warm-season grasses which are more competitive with weeds, but being on the high side promotes deeper rooting.
- Conservative irrigation practices will reduce disease and in some cases may reduce weeds. Keeping your lawn a bit on the dry side is preferable to over-watering.
- Use organic fertilizer.

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is three and one half inches,” Miller said. “For Zoysia and other warm season grasses, it is a bit lower at one and one half inches. The appropriate water level for most all grass is about one inch per week.”

To bag or not to bag?

A sharp blade, mulching mower and cross directional cutting are tips that top the list of advice from area experts on how to get a clean, stress free cut on your lawn.

Rob Colbenson is president of Grounds Guys of Concord, a franchise lawn care service. “We sharpen our blades daily and alternate cutting direction weekly,” said Colbenson. “We get the best cut this way. It provides a better aesthetic and promotes a healthier lawn.”



One organic way to feed your lawn is to never bag your clippings allowing them to naturally decay and provide valuable nutrients back into the soil. Miller says with a proper mowing schedule and mowing height, homeowners should never bag their clippings.

Kenny Harnach, co-owner of Park Seneca Lawnmower, a retail and repair outlet operating for decades in Charlotte was not in full agreement, noting bagging is a personal preference and for heavy cuts not bagging can lead to excess thatch.

Mower options

Features available in residential mowers that consumers should look for include: Electric start, self propelled walking mowers and riders with water cooled engines according to Harnach. Consumers can also look for “ninja blades,” two blades at different angles in the under carriage or “gator blades,” a specially fashioned mower blade with notches that clip and mulch the grass.

“One popular feature is a blade break clutch. This allows the operator to disengage the blade while keeping the engine running,” said Harnach. “It’s a safety feature for seniors especially who don’t wish to stop and restart their engine during pauses in mowing.”

Those with more compact lawns may prefer the convenience of a battery operated mower sometimes nicknamed “air mowers” for their quiet operation. Cordless and with capacity to run for 45 minutes to 60 minutes on a single charge, these mowers are meant for yards that are that are 1/4 acre or less.

Quiet and eco-friendly they offer the advantage of their owners never having to purchase gas or oil. On the down side, the short charge life and relatively less power compared to gas-powered machines make larger yards and longer cuts more of a chore.

The Neuton CE5 Battery-Powered Mower runs on a 24 volt battery and has a cutting width of 14 inches. It sells at retail for \$340, about midrange for this type of mower.

Harnach noted that consumers can purchase a new, name brand rotary mower for \$150 to \$650 depending upon the features. Riding mowers range from \$1000 to \$6000 and up.

Homeowners often look to riding mowers for tackling lots larger than 3/4 acre. Harnach said this is the size lot where he recommends a riding mower. With a lot smaller lot than this, he said, "People will spend more time trimming and manual cutting."

"Zero-turn" lawn tractors have a zero turning radius and are a great advantage for lots with lots of features to navigate around. Hustler Turf Equipment was one of the original developers of this technology and introduced their most updated model this year.

Their mowers reverse direction along fence lines and can circle a flag pole without the need for weed trimming. Their latest riding mower, the Raptor SD has 48, 54 and 60 inch steel welded decks. Additional upscale features include: power steering, automatic parking brake and electric power takeoff. Retail price starts at \$4,500. They make an entry level riding mower that retails for \$2,799.

The most important consideration regarding equipment is proper maintenance. "I recommend a blade sharpening and oil change for every 25 hours of operation," said Harnach. "With appropriate care, mowers can easily last ten seasons or more."

Time, cost and interest are the big three when it comes to deciding whether to mow your own lawn or turn to a service.

Colbenson said he provides a customized quote for every client depending on the service requested and the size of their lawn. For a "mow, blow and trim" service prices range from \$35 to \$60 and up per visit depending upon the lot size.

Fertilizer options

When looking to fertilize your lawn, be certain to first consider timing.

Late winter and early spring are the best times to fertilize, just in advance our prime grass growing season. A fertilizer containing 16 percent nitrogen, 4 percent phosphate and 8 percent potash is good for fescue according to the state Department of Agriculture Agronomic Division. 10-10-10 is a good rule of thumb for most other warm season grasses.

Established lawns can benefit from a late fall or early winter application of lime for a more lush lawn in the spring and summer months.

"Pre-emergence herbicides can control annual weeds such as crabgrass, but only before they emerge," says a recent state Department of Agriculture Lawn Care report. "The general rule in North Carolina is to apply these herbicides before the dogwood and forsythias bloom."



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