

Keeping your lawn strong

More and more, homeowners are taking better care of their lawns. Whether it's pride in their property or just the knowledge that a good-looking lawn increases a home's curb appeal when it comes time to sell, homeowners nationwide have made proper lawn care a priority.

For new homeowners or those just beginning to venture out into the vast wilderness known as the yard, there are a few ways to ensure your lawn maintains its appeal in the face of even the most harsh weather conditions.

*** Keep your grass tall:** Professional landscapers never cut grass too low. To the cynical, this is seen as a landscaper's way of staying relevant: the higher the grass gets, the more the landscaper will need to come back and keep mowing. However, taller grass is far more beneficial to your yard, as any landscaper worth his salt can tell you. Taller grass allows for roots to grow deeper. In addition, the shade created by taller grass makes it far more difficult for weeds to grow. For most lawns, it's best to keep grass at least three inches high.

*** Only mow under certain conditions and don't be overly concerned about**

clippings: When mowing, make sure the grass is dry. Also, avoid mowing during drought or in summer months when the temperatures are intense. In general, it's best to limit what you cut to no more than one-third the length of a grass blade. So while the ideal height for grass is three inches, if you've let your lawn grow higher than 4.5 inches, then adjust your blades so they'll only cut roughly one-third of the grass. For the next cut, to get back to a three-inch height, make sure you cut the grass before it exceeds 4.5 inches in height.

A common misconception about grass clippings is that they are harmful to a lawn. In fact, clippings can enrich the soil and make for a stronger yard. However, this is only the case when fertilizer is properly applied. If it's not, clippings could lead to thatch. Consult your local lawncare store and discuss how to correctly apply a fertilizer.

*** Water properly:** The best time to water is early morning. If you wait until the afternoon to water, especially during months of intense heat, evaporation will render much of that water ineffective. Watering at night tends to promote the growth of fungi.

Another common mistake

is to water frequently for short periods of time. This is both a waste of water and time. Grass will not benefit greatly from this type of watering, which will promote shallow roots. When watering, you want the roots to grow deeply, so periods of heavy watering are ideal. This doesn't need to be done every day. In fact, most lawns will only require one session per week of deep watering. Most lawns can handle relatively prolonged droughts of up to six weeks, so don't be overly concerned if it seems as though your lawn is taking a beating from drought. If you water properly, the roots will be deep and strong enough to survive the drought.

*** Aerate:** As any golf course maintenance worker can tell you, aeration is key to keeping fairways, tees, and greens looking healthy and green. The same can be said for your lawn. A successful aerating job will make it easier for water and nutrients to reach roots while reducing thatch. Where you live and the condition of your lawn will determine when to aerate, so consult a professional before beginning the process. To start, you'll need to rent an aerator, a cost you should consider sharing with a neighbor who also takes care of his lawn.

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