

Rutherford County

FROM THE GROUND UP



March 26, 2024

Cut your Grass, Don't Beat it Into Submission!

Have you ever had a bad haircut? The kind that when the barber turns the chair around so you can look at yourself in that big mirror your first thought is "Oh my gosh, what have you done to me!" Your first glimpse of a bad haircut may be a bit of a shock and cause you to start calculating how long you'll have to wear a hat to hide it but you can take comfort in the fact that it's temporary. Fortunately, a bad haircut will grow back out. The same can be said for a bad lawn mowing job... up to a point. To help you avoid reaching the point when a bad lawn mowing won't grow back, please read on.



Mitchell Mote,
Extension Agent III



Mowing does stress turfgrass. Mowing removes some portion of the grass's leaf blade. The grass plant captures sunlight with its blades which it uses to produce energy through photosynthesis. Removing a portion of grass blade reduces the amount of sunlight it can capture and alters its rate of photosynthesis and reduces its level of energy production. When the grass's level of energy production decreases while its' energy requirement remains the same, it's forced to use stored energy to meet that requirement. Usually, the time spent using stored energy instead of producing energy is relatively short. During good growing conditions, the grass will likely overcome the shock of

mowing and start producing new leaf tissue within a couple of days. This is especially true if the grass is mown within its' recommended mowing height range.

All grasses used as turfgrass have a recommended mowing height range. Staying within that range will lessen the chance that too much leaf is removed on the low side to severely stress the grass and that enough is removed on the high side to create a well-groomed appearance. Tall fescue, the most commonly used cool season grass in Rutherford County, has a recommended mowing height of 3 inches in the spring and fall and 3 to 4+ inches in the summer. Bermudagrass and Zoysia grass, commonly used warm season grasses, have a mowing height range of three-fourths to 2 inches during their mowing seasons. If you can't remember anything else about grass mowing heights, remember the one-third rule. This where your aim is to remove no more than one-third of the grass blades' length at a time. This will minimize stress tremendously. Continuously mowing grass lower than the recommended height will force it to use stored energy and usually shorten its' life span. It's usually advisable to increase the mowing height during stress periods (think hot, dry weather on tall fescue) and reduce it during favorable growing conditions.

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Another grass mowing recommendation is to mow with sharp blades. A sharp mower blade cuts grass blades much more cleanly and with less physical damage than a dull blade. The ends of grass cut with a dull mower will have a very distinct, ragged look. They will turn brown due to desiccation from excess water loss which results from the greater than necessary damage from the dull blade. A day or so after mowing with a dull blade, the brown grass tips will often cause the lawn to have a somewhat hazy, off-color appearance which is very noticeable. Damage caused by mowing with a dull blade also creates a larger potential entry point for some disease organisms due to excessive tissue trauma. The simple act of failing to regularly sharpen a mower blade can make an otherwise great lawn look like it was beaten into submission with a blunt object. I can't say with certainty how often your mower blade should be sharpened because of such variation in conditions and physical environment from one lawn to the next, but I'm fairly certain that once a year isn't often enough.

When you pull the mower out in preparation to groom your personal piece of paradise, remember people are watching. Take care to avoid becoming known as the worst grass barber in the neighborhood.

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