
TURFGRASS MANAGEMENT

Agricultural Experiment Station, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, University of Guam, Mangilao, GU 96923

Mowing Your Lawn

by Greg Wiecko, Ph.D. Turf Scientist

Mowing is one of the primary maintenance practices essential for a good quality lawn. Mowing is the process which creates a lawn rather than a pasture or meadow. A beautiful lawn depends on proper mowing which results from cutting at the right height, at the right frequency and with the right equipment.

The main component of mowing is to know the proper cutting height. The optimum cutting height is determined by the turfgrass growth habit and leaf width. A grass that spreads horizontally can usually be mowed shorter than an upright-growing grass. Grasses with narrow blades can be mowed closer than grasses with wide blades. Zoysiagrass and bermudagrass are mowed the shortest because of their narrow leaf blades and low growth habit. On the other hand, St. Augustinegrass needs to be mowed the highest because of its wide blades and more upright growth habit.

Proper mowing height is important in creating a dense stand of grass plants. A dense turf keeps out weeds through competition for sunlight and nutrients. A weak thin turf allows weed seeds to germinate and grow. When the cutting height is too low, turf quality will be reduced because of severe defoliation. Cutting turf at the high end of the recommended mowing height is advised for residential area. Such lawns have increased tolerance to drought, have deeper roots, grow slower and require less water and fertilizer.

Examples of recommended mowing height for the most popular turf grasses:

Bermudagrass	1" - 1.5"
Zoysiagrass (Japanese lawn grass)	0.75" - 1"
Centipedegrass	1.5" - 2.5"
St. Augustinegrass	2.5" - 3.5"



Fig. 1. Cut 1/3 of the leaf blade per mowing.

The growth rate of the lawn determines how frequently it needs to be mowed. The growth rate is influenced by weather conditions, levels of management, and grass species. The slowest growth rates occur under low fertility and irrigation, while the fastest growth rates occur under high fertility and watering. Bermudagrass is a rapidly growing grass compared to zoysiagrass. Low-maintenance grass like centipedegrass is frequently mowed just to remove seedheads rather than to cut leaf blades. Mowing frequency can be determined based on growth of the turf. Mow often enough so that about one-third of the blade height is removed per mowing (Fig. 1). For examples, if your St. Augustinegrass lawn is mowed at a height of 3 inches, it should be mowed when it grows to a height of 4 to 4.5 inches. Removing over half the leaf blades can cause severe stress to the turf.

MOWING EQUIPMENT

Lawn mowers vary widely in sizes, styles and features. The two basic types are the reel mower and the rotary mower. Most mowers can be obtained as push or self-propelled. Front, side, and rear clipping discharge models are available. The choice of mower often depends on personal preference. Points to consider when purchasing a mower are the size of the lawn, turfgrass species and level of lawn maintenance.

Rotary mowers are the most popular because of their low cost, easy maneuverability, and simple maintenance. A large motor is required to horizontally turn the blade. The grass blade is cut on impact with the mower blade. Most rotary mowers cannot mow lower than 1 inch and

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are best used for higher mowing heights. The blade needs to be frequently sharpened and balanced for the best possible cut. A modification of rotary mowers is mulching mowers. These are designed to cut leaf blades into very small pieces, which are able to fall into the turf rather than remaining on top of the grass. Being so small, these pieces can decompose quicker than blades cut to traditional size. Reel mowers are for highly maintained turf where appearance is important. Reel mowers cut with a scissor-like action to produce a very clean, even cut. They are used at cutting heights of 2 inches or less. Sharpening reel mowers is difficult and is best left to a professional mower repair service. String mowers (bush-cutters) should be used only for trimming and hard-to-mow areas.

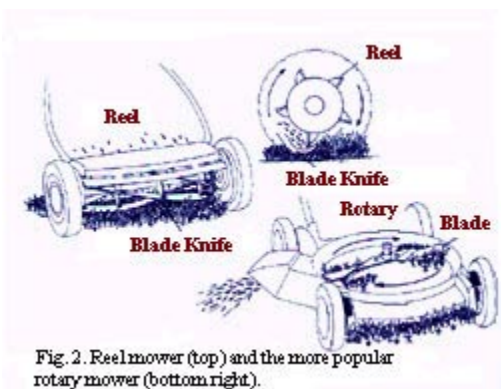


Fig. 2. Reel mower (top) and the more popular rotary mower (bottom right).

GOOD MOWING PRACTICES

Follow these procedures and precautions for safe, good mowing:

1. Pick up all stones, sticks and other debris before mowing to avoid damaging the mower or injuring someone with flying objects.
2. Never mow wet turf with a rotary mower because clippings can clog the machine.
3. Sharpen the mower blade frequently enough to prevent a ragged appearance to the turf.
4. Mow in a different direction every time the lawn is cut to prevent wear patterns and to reduce the possibility of scalping.
5. Do not remove clippings. They should be returned to help recycle nutrients. If the lawn is mowed frequently enough, clippings cause no problems. If clumping occurs, distribute these by lightly raking.
6. Check your mower every time it is used. Follow manufacturer's recommendations for service and adjustments.
7. Never fill a hot mower with gasoline.
8. Always wear heavy leather shoes when mowing the lawn.
9. Wash mower after use to reduce rusting and weed seed movement.

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