YARD

Eliminate grass clipping collection no. 7.007

by C.R. Wilson, T. Koski

Quick Facts...

One-thousand square feet of bluegrass lawn generates approximately 200 pounds of clippings annually; 75 percent or 150 pounds of this is water.

Leave clippings on the lawn for healthier grass.

Clippings break down quickly and encourage beneficial microorganisms and earthworms that digest thatch and maintain healthy soil.

Nitrogen and other nutrients in the clippings are recycled into the lawn, promoting steady grass growth.

Clippings left on the lawn mean no bagging and hauling for people and trash hauling trucks, saving both human and fuel energy.

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Proper lawn care requires regular mowing and produces large quantities of heavy grass clippings that are inconvenient and expensive when collected for disposal. An alternative is to leave clippings on the lawn, which saves labor and promotes a healthy lawn.

Thatch and Clippings

The idea that clippings left on lawns will cause thatch has been disproven. Thatch is a brown, spongy material consisting of dead grass stems and roots.

Excessive thatch is undesirable in lawns because it prevents water and air penetration to grass roots. A healthy population of microorganisms and earthworms in the soil can digest thatch.

Returned grass clippings break down quickly and encourage the beneficial earthworms and microorganisms that maintain healthy grass and healthy soil. Regular core cultivation (aeration) is the best way to prevent thatch. See fact sheet 7.202, *Lawn care*, for more information on thatch management.

Clippings and Nitrogen Fertilization

Nitrogen is the fertilizer nutrient most used by turf. Clippings contain nitrogen and other fertilizer nutrients. When returned to the lawn, clippings recycle nutrients in an organic, slow-release form that promotes steady grass growth. Returning clippings reduces the amount of supplemental nitrogen fertilizer required by lawns but does not eliminate it entirely.

Returning grass clippings prolongs the effects of any fertilization by returning nitrogen in a desirable, slow release form. Refer to 7.202 for more information on fertilizing home lawns.

Mowing

Lawns are most healthy when mowed at 2½ to 3 inches, leaving the clippings on the lawn. Some people prefer to lower the height to 1½ inches for the last mowing in the fall to avoid grass matting over the winter.

Mow frequently enough that no more than one-third of the grass blade is removed. This may mean mowing every five days instead of waiting a full week when grass is growing fast in the spring. This is necessary for two reasons. First, grass plants undergo less stress when the amount clipped off is short compared to the amount remaining. The resulting clippings will be smaller so they drop into the lawn more easily. Even with mulching mowers that chop clippings finer, mowing more frequently results in less turf stress and enables the mower to work more efficiently.

Secondly, studies show that it takes less overall time to mow more often and leave clippings on the lawn, compared to mowing weekly and bagging clippings. If grass becomes excessively long between mowings, it will be necessary to bag or rake clippings to avoid matting on top of the lawn.

Total Lawn Care

The health and quality of a lawn is the result of the sum of the care given it over the years. Four main lawn care practices are necessary to maintain lawns:

- *regular mowing,*
- *watering,*
- *fertilizing, and*
- *core aerating.*

For more information on caring for lawns, see 7.202, Lawn care.

Mowers

Various types of mowers are available on the market, each having its own advantages and disadvantages. From the viewpoint of leaving clippings on the lawn, any mower can do the job if the lawn is mowed frequently before clippings become too long.

Mulching mowers, a type of rotary mower that chops clippings several times before they fall into the lawn, are a good choice. Bagging mowers may or may not require the bag to be attached. Kits are available to convert some bagging mowers into mulching mowers.

Choice of mower will depend on budget, mowing habits and size of lawn. In selecting a mower, consider its ability to return grass clippings to the lawn.

Savings

Many municipalities are getting out the message to “take the waste out of yard waste.” From a trash disposal viewpoint, yard waste makes up 20 percent of materials sent to landfills annually, and yet it is 100 percent recyclable. Less yard waste, such as grass clippings in the trash, means less trash hauling for municipalities. Savings in labor, fuel and other costs can be substantial.

Clippings as Compost or Mulch

If clippings are too long to leave on the lawn, there are at least two alternatives for recycling them: composting and mulching.

Grass clippings contain nitrogen and can be a valuable addition to compost. Compost is useful for improving Colorado’s heavy clay or light sandy soils. See 7.212, *Composting yard waste*, for information on how to compost.

Clippings also can be recycled as mulch in the garden. Mulching reduces weeds, modifies soil temperature, and retains moisture. Mulch maintains good soil structure by reducing the force of rain droplets. It minimizes erosion by protecting the soil surface. When using clippings as a mulch, layers piled deeper than 2 inches will rot and produce a foul smell. Scatter and allow the first thin layer to dry. Later, additional grass can be added to produce a 4- to 6-inch deep mulch.

Avoid mulching with clippings from a lawn that has been treated with a weed control product within the last two weeks. The herbicide on the clippings can harm desirable bedding and garden plants. These clippings are best left on the lawn where the clippings and herbicide are broken down naturally by soil microbes and earthworms. Always read and follow the label on all pesticides, including herbicides.

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