



GRASSCYCLING:

Let the Clippings Fall Where They May

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Most homeowners can easily deal with leaves and grass clippings by recycling them on their own property instead of bagging them and setting them curbside for someone else to handle. In fact, many counties throughout Georgia discourage homeowners from putting landscape trimmings, leaves and grass clippings in landfills. Although some municipalities accept these organic materials and recycle them as mulch or compost, others do not accept them at all. This publication describes the process of grasscycling, a practical and environmentally responsible way of recycling grass clippings in the landscape.

Grasscycling is the natural recycling of grass clippings by leaving them on the lawn after mowing. Grasscycling saves time, effort and, when done properly, is good for the environment and health of the grass.

Saves Time

A study in Texas, the “Don’t Bag It Lawn Care Plan,” found that grasscycling required one extra mowing per month, but that mowing time was reduced by 35 minutes at each mowing. After six months of grasscycling, homeowners who took part in the study reduced their time spent doing yard work by an average of seven hours.

Does Not Lead to Thatch

It has been a commonly held belief that grass clippings were a major cause of thatch, and that removing clippings would slow thatch development. However, research has determined that thatch buildup is caused by grass stems, shoots and roots – not clippings.

Returns Nutrients to the Soil

Homeowners who practice grasscycling aid soil fertility because grass clippings rapidly decompose, returning nitrogen and other valuable nutrients to the soil. These nutrients can then be absorbed by the turfgrass. One study suggests this process takes less than one week. Depending on the grass variety, soil conditions and type of nitrogen applied as fertilizer, the amount of nitrogen recovered from grasscycling could be as much as 20 percent.

Requires Proper Mowing

Proper mowing is the key to successful grasscycling. All mowers can be “grasscyclers,” and no special equipment is needed. However, some manufacturers sell mower attachments that chop clippings into finer pieces and can improve a mower’s grasscycling performance. Proper mowing means:

1. Cutting the grass at the recommended height
2. Maintaining a sharp mower blade
3. Mowing when the grass is dry
4. Mowing often enough to remove no more than one-third of the plant height

For example, if tall fescue is maintained at 3 inches, it should be mowed when it reaches 4 inches. If the grass becomes too tall between mowings, raise the mowing height for the first cutting and then gradually lower it with subsequent mowings until the proper height is reached. During stress periods, such as summer drought, raise the mowing height, but continue mowing regularly enough to avoid excess leaf removal.

Sometimes clippings do not fall into the canopy but remain on top of the lawn. These should be distributed to reduce their concentration and allow them to more easily move into the canopy. Consider scattering the clippings with a hand rake or blower.

Recommended Mowing Heights	
Centipedegrass	1.0 to 2.0 inches
Common bermudagrass	1.0 to 2.0 inches
Hybrid bermudagrass	1.0 to 1.5 inches
Tall fescue	2.0 to 3.0 inches
St. Augustinegrass	2.0 to 3.0 inches
Zoysiagrass	1.0 to 2.0 inches

Needs Timely Fertilization

A fertilization program should be based on turfgrass needs, soil tests, maintenance practices and desired appearance. An analysis of your soil can be obtained for a nominal fee through your local county Extension office, or a mail-order sampling kit can be obtained from www.SoilTest123.com.

In the absence of a soil analysis, a widely used fertilizer for turfgrasses is 16-4-8. Six pounds of 16-4-8 per 1,000 square feet of lawn area will provide the recommended rate of 1 pound of nitrogen per application. The table below provides suggested application frequencies for these fertilizers. A well-fertilized turf is attractive, but it also requires more frequent mowing and irrigation. If the growth rate of the turfgrass is too fast for your mowing frequency, you may need to reduce the amount of fertilizer applied by one-third to one-half. On well-established and well-maintained lawns, lower rates often produce acceptable turf.

Recommended Fertilization Frequency for Grasscycling												
Lawn Grass	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Bermudagrass					•	•	•	•				
Centipedegrass					•		•					
St. Augustinegrass					•	•	•	•				
Tall Fescue		•	•							•	•	
Zoysiagrass					•	•	•	•				

Promotes Water Conservation

Established lawns often need irrigation to maintain good color and growth. Turfgrasses generally require more water in hot weather, but may also need water in cool periods. Grasses in need of water appear dull bluish-green and leaf blades begin to fold or roll. Footprints may remain in grass that is water stressed. Lawns should not be watered until these moisture stress symptoms are evident. To save water and avoid turf diseases, the best time to water is between sunset and sunrise. The 2010 Georgia Water Stewardship Act permits outdoor water use for landscapes to between 4 p. m. and 10 a.m. daily. Apply enough water to moisten the soil to a 6- to 8-inch depth. This is usually equivalent to a 1-inch irrigation or 600 gallons of water per 1,000 square feet.

Summary

When turfgrass is properly mowed and maintained at its recommended mowing height, soil microorganisms can effectively break down clippings left behind and add valuable nutrients to the soil. However, the turfgrass system (i.e., turfgrass plant, soil, microorganisms, etc.) can become overwhelmed when too many clippings are allowed to accumulate. To avoid potential problems, do not over-fertilize or over-water, mow at recommended heights, and mow often enough not to have a buildup of clippings on the turfgrass surface.

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