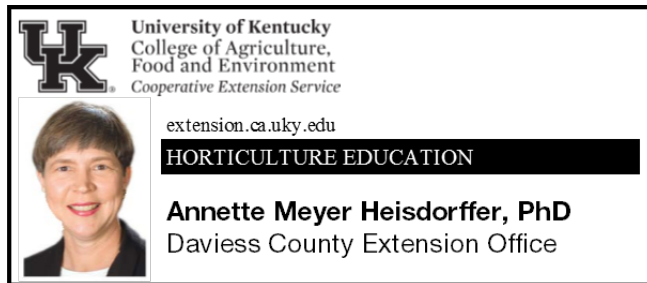


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Proper Lawn Care Begins in the Spring

It begins again! Mowing the lawn. Through using best management practices for the lawn including mowing and avoiding fertilizer application in the spring, the environment is protected, and possibly money is saved.

Properly mowing the lawn improves its quality. An important mowing practice is to sharpen the mower blade at the beginning and then four to six times throughout the mowing season. A sharp mower blade makes mowing easier, reduces wear on the mower, and results in a better-looking and healthier lawn. A dull mower blade tears the leaf instead of making a clean, sharp cut. A torn leaf blade is more susceptible to invasion by a disease.

Following recommendations for mowing height and frequency results in a more attractive lawn. The recommended mowing height for tall fescue is 2 to 3 inches; for Kentucky bluegrass the height is 2 to 2.5 inches. Mowing at the best height for the grass encourages a deeper root system, which helps protect the lawn against drought and weeds.

If your mower has a fixed, all-year height, set it at 2.5 inches. However, if the deck height is easily adjusted, set it at 1.5 to 2 inches for the first several mowing times. The shorter mowing height removes the winter-burned, brown leaves. Exposing more dark green growth transforms the lawn into the most uniform, attractive one in the neighborhood. Then move the mower deck height up to 2.5 inches.

When summer arrives, protect the grass from summer heat and drought injury by raising the mower deck height to 3 or 3.5 inches. However, remember that extra high grass, especially tall fescue, tends to fall over and mat down during hot summers, causing increased summer disease problems.

Another best practice is to mow often so that only one-third of the grass blade is removed. Removing too much leaf tissue at once decreases spring root growth and

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summer drought tolerance and increases weed and disease problems. During the spring, the lawn may need to be mowed more than once a week. Mowing off more than 50 percent of the leaves at one time causes scalping, resulting in increased weed competition and death of some grass plants during the hot summer.

With all of the mowing, what should be done with the grass clippings? The answer is, leave grass clippings on the lawn, which saves time, money, and energy since the person mowing the lawn doesn't have to stop and empty the bagger or buy trash bags. Clippings also add free fertilizer to the lawn, possibly as much as 25 percent of the lawn's annual nutrient needs. Remember, grass clippings are not accepted in the garbage.

Grass clippings do not increase thatch. Clippings contain 75 to 85 percent water and decompose quickly. Thatch is a tight, intermingled organic layer of dead and living shoots, stems, and roots that develop between the green leaves and soil surface. About a half-inch of thatch is normal. It helps moderate temperature extremes and provides a cushion effect at the soil surface. A lawn of tall fescue grass generally does not have a serious thatch problem.

Short grass clippings decompose faster. A mulching mower or blade, while not necessary, will cut or shred the leaves into small fragments.

Collecting grass clippings may be necessary when the grass is tall, especially the first cutting, and when normal mowing tends to windrow the clippings and smother the grass underneath. The collected clippings can be used as a mulch around ornamentals and between garden rows to a depth of 1 inch. Do not mulch with clippings from lawns that were treated with an herbicide to control weeds or contain seed heads of weeds.

Early spring or fall is a good time to aerify a lawn if the soil is compacted. The soil is considered compacted if you are not able to push a pocketknife blade into moist soil with your thumb, gently. Plugs of soil must be removed to be beneficial. As a note, most lawns do not require aerification because there is not enough traffic to compact the soil.

A best management practice for fall is to apply nitrogen to the lawn. It is tempting to apply it in the spring. A fall nitrogen application allows the grass to develop a deep root system in autumn and becomes very dense to crowd out spring weeds. Avoid spring nitrogen applications because it promotes excessive grass growth without the root growth. Lush growth also makes the grass more susceptible to lawn diseases.

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For more information about lawn management tips, contact the Daviess County Cooperative Extension Service at 270-685-8480 or annette.heisdorffer@uky.edu.

“Considering the Environment in the Maintenance of Your Kentucky Lawn: A Season by Season Approach” is available at

<http://www2.ca.uky.edu/agcomm/pubs/ID/ID222/ID222.pdf> or at the office.

Annette’s Tips:

Crabgrass begins to germinate when the soil temperature is between 57 and 64 degrees F at the 1-inch soil level. A good rule of thumb is to make sure the pre-emergent herbicide is applied by the time forsythia shrubs begin to drop their blooms which is happening now. The herbicide needs to be applied again about one month later. Try to use a pre-emergence crabgrass preventer without nitrogen. Read and follow label directions. Only specific herbicides for crabgrass prevention can be used when seeding a new lawn without damaging the seedlings. Do not apply the crabgrass prevention herbicide before heavy rain because it may wash away and carry it off target.

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