

# MESSENGER-INQUIRER



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Start with Good Practices for a Healthier Lawn  
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Looking over the lawn, I notice hints of green. Soon the lawn will need to be mowed. Using best management practices for mowing the lawn and proper fertilizer application in the fall could save money and protect the environment.

Using a sharp mower blade is important. In fact, sharpening the blade several times throughout the mowing season is best. A sharp blade reduces wear on the mower. According to research, a dull blade can increase fuel consumption by as much as 20 percent. “Mowing your Kentucky Lawn” shares more detailed information about this topic (<https://publications.ca.uky.edu/sites/publications.ca.uky.edu/files/AGR209.pdf>). 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. The shredded leaves have brownish tips in two or three days after mowing. By using a sharp blade, the lawn looks better and is healthier.

The next consideration is the recommendations for mowing height. Mowing at the best height for the grass encourages a deeper root system, which helps protect the turf against drought and weeds. The recommended mowing height for tall fescue and Kentucky bluegrass is 2 to 3.5

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inches. During summer, mowing at 3 inches promotes deeper root growth while allowing for air movement to reduce problems with brown patch disease in the turf.

Another best management practice is to mow often so that only one-third of the grass blade is removed at one time. Removing too much leaf tissue at once decreases spring root growth and 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. If removing one-third of the grass blade in one mowing does not reach the desired height after returning from a vacation, then the lawn needs to be mowed again during that week to gradually bring the grass height down to the proper height without scalping the lawn.

The next common question is what should be done with the grass clippings? The answer is to leave grass clippings on the lawn. This 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 providing 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 half an 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 doesn't have a serious thatch problem.

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Short grass clippings decompose faster. A mulching mower or blade 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 treated with herbicide to control weeds or that contain seed heads of weeds.

What about aerifying the soil? Early spring or fall is a good time if the soil is compacted. The soil is considered compacted if you cannot gently push a pocketknife blade into moist soil with your thumb. 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.

Another best management practice is to apply nitrogen to the lawn in the fall. 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 a spring nitrogen application because it promotes excessive grass growth without root growth to support the new leaf blades. In addition, lush growth makes the grass more susceptible to lawn diseases and requires more mowing to avoid removing more than one-third of the leaf blade at a time.

For more information about early season lawn management, contact the Daviess County Cooperative Extension Service at 270-685-8480 or [annette.heisdorffer@uky.edu](mailto: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 our office.

Annette’s Tip:

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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 apply the pre-emergent herbicide by the time forsythia shrubs begin to drop their yellow blooms. Then apply 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 to avoid washing it away and off target. “Preemergence Herbicides for Kentucky Lawns” is available at

<https://publications.ca.uky.edu/sites/publications.ca.uky.edu/files/AGR272.pdf>.

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