

Improper lawn care assures problems for home owners

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Improper mowing and watering are two lawn care practices that guarantee pest problems.



Healthy, deep-rooted grasses can crowd out many weeds and withstand attacks by many insects and diseases, minimizing the need for pest control products. So when you mow and water your lawn, do it with the goal of keeping the grass strong and deep-rooted. Mowing is stressful to grass; roots stop growing temporarily, nutrient production is reduced, water loss increases and water uptake decreases. The

shorter the grass is cut, the more stress it causes and the longer it takes the plants to recover strength.

If grass is cut short repeatedly and too frequently, small openings will appear in the grass where weed seedlings can establish. The weakened grass also will be more susceptible to diseases and insects.

So how short is too short? And how frequently is too frequently?

As a rule of thumb, leave the grass as tall as possible and still look good.

Kentucky bluegrass, perennial ryegrass and tall fescue are some of our more common lawn grasses in Montana. In spring and fall, leave Kentucky bluegrass and perennial ryegrass at least two inches tall after mowing. In summer, leave it at least three inches tall. Leave tall fescue at least 2.5 inches high in spring and fall, and at least three inches high in summer.

If you have other species of grass in your lawn, ask your nursery about mowing height for that species.

Leaving the lawn taller during the summer helps prevent heat and drought stress, both of which can make grass susceptible to weed invasion.

As for cutting frequency, about every seven to 14 days is appropriate for most home lawns. Try to avoid removing more than one third of the grass blades at a time. For example, if the mowing height is three inches, let the grass get about 4.5 inches tall before you cut it.

Watering deeply and infrequently can create deep roots, because the roots follow the moisture down into the soil. Deep roots create strong grass plants that are better able to crowd out weeds and withstand insect and disease problems.

Apply about one to 1.5 inches of water at a time. Allow the top 1.5 inches of soil to dry out before watering again. This encourages roots to reach down into the soil to find moisture.

To determine how long to leave the water on an area, place several straight-sided cans under sprinklers and determine the amount of time required to catch one to 1.5 inches of water in each can. Check to see that the moisture is penetrating 6-8 inches deep. Some soils will require more water to get moisture that deep, other soils will require less.

Combining these mowing and watering practices with the application of the kinds and amounts of fertilizer that soil tests show are needed by the soil in your yard will go a long way in keeping grass strong enough to out-compete many of the pests that visit your yard.

When pesticides are needed, make spot applications whenever possible, rather than blanket applications.



Q/A

Moisture, shingles and old tubs puzzle homeowners

Q: We have a moisture problem. Our 4-year-old, two-story home, is a few hundred feet from a saltwater creek. By midsummer, condensation develops in the crawl space under the house and drips down on the plastic vapor barrier that covers the crawl space floor. By autumn, the dampness has caused the oak flooring in the room above it to buckle. When the heat comes on in the winter, the floor dries out and settles down, though not completely. Can you help us solve this problem?

A: Check that the vapor barrier on the crawl space floor has no holes or open joints. Specifically, check the joints between the vapor barrier and the foundation walls. All open sections must be sealed with duct tape.

In addition, during the winter when the humidity is low, install a vapor barrier (large polyethylene sheets with taped overlapping joints) to the underside of the floor joists in the area below the room with oak flooring. Also, place a dehumidifier in the basement that can discharge condensation to the outside by means of a condensate lift pump. Disconnect the dehumidifier during the winter.

It's important to keep the crawl space dry, not only for the oak flooring, but because excessive dampness promotes rot and creates conditions conducive to termite infestation.

Q: I have light-colored shingles on the roof of my house to reflect the summer sun and thereby reduce my air-conditioning costs. The problem is that the shingles are discolored by dirty streaks of what I believe is mold. Is this discoloring due to mold, and can anything be done to eliminate it?

A: The discoloration is probably caused by mildew spores. According to the Asphalt Roofing Manufacturers Association, this is a common problem and is often mistaken for soot or dirt. Fortunately the mildew spores do not cause the shingles to deteriorate. The discoloration cannot be eliminated, but it can be lightened temporarily with bleach. Gently sponge a dilute solution of chlorine bleach on the shingles then rinse it off with a hose. Don't scrub the shingles or you will loosen their granules.

Q: The porcelain in my bathtub is worn off on about half of the tub. The remaining porcelain is very rough and porous. I cannot replace the tub, but I think that a good paint and primer system would improve its appearance. Do you have any suggestions?

A: We would definitely not recommend painting the tub. This is considered a temporary solution. We have seen tubs where the finish has peeled, cracked, chipped and discolored in just a few years. It would be better to replace the tub or to cover it with a Re-

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