

# Be YARD SMART

# A Guide to Environmental Gardening

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Special Insert to the University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension *NEBLINE*.

## What is "Grasscycling?"

Grasscycling is the natural practice of leaving clippings on the lawn when mowing. It is obvious how this practice can save resources like landfill space, but there are additional benefits as well. The clippings quickly decompose, returning nutrients to the soil. Grasscycling, in conjunction with the practice of reducing water and fertilizer inputs, can reduce mowing time in addition to disposal costs.

Grasscycling can be practiced on any healthy lawn

as long as responsible turf management guidelines are followed. Proper mowing, watering, and fertilizing practices result in more moderate turf growth yet still produce a healthy, green lawn.

The nitrogen contained in grass clippings removed from a lawn almost equals the recommended application rate for healthy turf (about 5 pounds of nitrogen per year per 1000 square feet). While some of this nitrogen is lost through the

decomposition of the clippings, leaving the clippings on the lawn by grasscycling can have the overall impact of reducing fertilization requirements by 15 to 25 percent or more. Similar savings on water use are possible.

Returning clippings to the lawn usually means mowing more than once a week during the few weeks of rapid growth in spring and early summer. Grass clippings should be less than 1 inch, or no more than

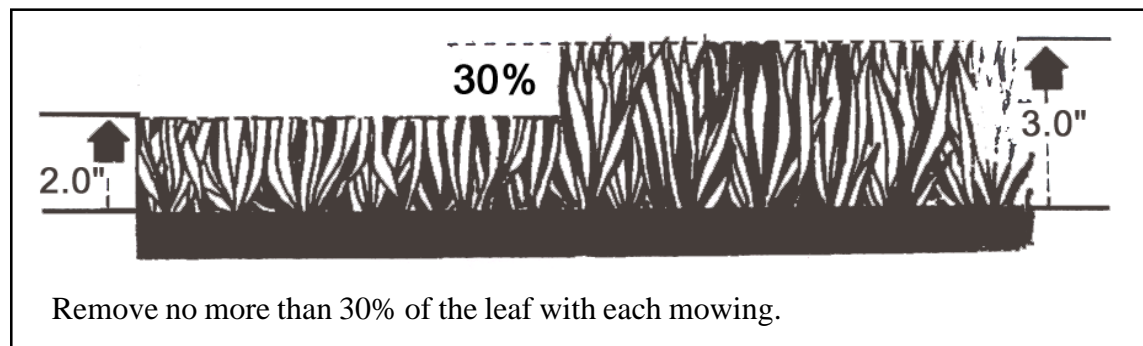
one-third of the total plant height, to ensure rapid decomposition. Mowing more frequently is not as much extra work as you might think, because lawns mowed at the proper height cut more easily and quickly. Mowing infrequently damages the lawn by removing too much of the plant at one time. When mowed regularly, clippings filter down through the grass, decompose rapidly and recycle nutrients back into the soil.

Fertilize your lawn to provide uniform, moderate growth throughout the growing season. A properly fertilized lawn will have a healthy, dense stand of turf that reduces weeds and recovers quickly from insect or disease injury. The number of fertilizer applica-

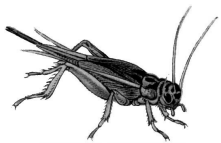


tions you make will depend on how you want your lawn to look, the type of grass, and soil type.

Good lawn care practices can save water and prepare turf for dry summer months. Taller mowing and proper fertilization result in a deep and efficient root system that reduces the need for additional water. The best time to water is early morning. Less water is lost by evaporation, and disease incidence is reduced. (DJ)



## Is Your Yard Producing Unwanted Critters?



Sometimes it is easier to prevent or eliminate conducive conditions than control pests that are invading your house.

There are a number of conditions around the yard that may be contributing to increased populations of some pest invaders. Mulching has many benefits for the ornamental plants and trees in your yard by decreasing weed growth and preventing moisture loss, but it may also serve as habitat for several types of insects/pests that may move inside your home later. The more mulch/wood chips you have and the longer it sits, the more likely there will be pillbugs, sowbugs, millipedes, and crickets living in it. Predators, like spiders and centipedes, will also increase in these areas. Most of the time, these critters find their way into the house in the fall of the year.

One way to use mulch and still reduce the critters is to use it farther away from the



house. Another is to seal cracks and crevices in your house exterior to prevent entry. Another strategy might be to anticipate these pests and use an insecticide barrier around the house in the fall to help prevent entry.

Compost is great stuff. But it has its own complement of insects that like to live in it, including many of the insects/pests that are also found in mulch. A poorly managed compost pile may produce stable flies. These flies look a lot like house flies, but can give a painful bite to people and pets. Another source of stable flies is animal excrement. Removing this waste promptly will prevent the development of stable flies and later discomfort to people and outdoor pets.

Other conditions in the yard environment can be attractive to pests. Dense vegetation is attractive to many pests because of increased humidity; most insects survive better in higher

humidity. You have probably noticed mosquitoes seem to be especially attracted to dense vegetation. Rabbits are also fond of dense vegetation or piles of brush that they can hide in. Snakes like to live under concrete porches or under sidewalks. If foundations have cracks, snakes may enter basements.

Mice can easily enter through small openings in basement foundations.

Some plants serve as a food source to insect species. A couple good examples are elm leaf beetles and boxelder bugs. Both of these pests enter homes in the fall to overwinter. Elm leaf beetles feed primarily on elm trees so if these beetles really drive you crazy, consider planting another type of tree, if you have the opportunity to plant one. Box elder bugs feed on members of the *Acer* genus, including box elder trees and maple trees. Nearly every tree species has

something not-so-good about it. Hackberry trees, in addition to dropping branches easily, produces lace bugs that have a nasty bite in the late summer and early fall. Oaks are messy and attractive to squirrels. It can be a real challenge to find the "perfect" tree.

Fruit-bearing trees are highly attractive to bees in the springtime, a fact that someone highly allergic to bee stings might want to consider before planting fruit trees. Yellow jackets are attracted to dropped, fermenting fruit in the fall of the year. Picking up dropped fruit is one way to reduce wasps in the yard. Or, plant crab apples that don't produce much of a fruit.

Lighting around the home can attract nocturnal insects, like moths, midges, wood roaches, and spiders that prey on these insects. Using yellow light bulbs that are not as attractive to nocturnal insects may reduce these pests.

Aquatic environments,

like wetlands, lakes, streams and ponds near your home can breed aquatic insects like mosquitoes, midges, horseflies, deer flies, and black flies.

Homes made from wood shingles or cedar siding attract a number of insects that prefer living in wood. These include carpenter ants, carpenter bees, paper wasps, yellow jackets, and honey bees. Log homes are very attractive to beetles that naturally invade felled trees.

It is impossible to completely prevent pests in your yard, unless you decide to completely pave your yard with concrete and we don't recommend that.

But, by recognizing conducive conditions and remedying problems in your yard, you might be able to decrease the numbers of pests.

For more information about most of the pests mentioned in this article, contact the Lancaster County Extension Office. (BPO)

