

Strategic Mowing Helps Lawns Grow Healthfully



Your lawn needs your help to stay carefree. Mowing properly is a simple thing homeowners can do to maintain a healthy, beautiful lawn.

First, cut grass to a lower height in spring and fall, and raise the cut during summer. Mowing lower in the spring allows for soil warming, promotes early growth and stimulates turf density. Raising the height just before and during summer enhances stress resistance. Mowing lower again in the fall promotes lawn density.

Closer mowing allows grass to green up faster in the spring. More sunlight can reach lower areas of the lawn to stimulate growth, and dead foliage leftover from winter can be easily removed. The green growth

underneath becomes exposed and the lawn appears greener sooner.

However, continuing to mow short through the spring might encourage weeds, like crabgrass, to develop. If you want an early spring green lawn, cut the grass short for the first two mowing cycles. Then cut the grass at its normal height, two inches for bluegrass and three inches for fescue, to control crabgrass and other weeds. The biggest problem with this first strategy is forgetting to raise the mowing height again. Low mowing too far into spring can result in a weaker root system in the summer.

Second, mow at the high end of the recommended range for a lawn species throughout the growing season. This will promote a deep root system. The downside to this approach is turf density isn't stimulated. Mowing lower, even if only in April and October, can make a big difference in turf development.

While these strategies can produce attractive turf, don't overlook basic mowing principles. Follow the one-third rule: remove no more than one-third of the turf's leaf material at one time. Mow lawns at least once a week in high growth periods like

April, May, and October.

Sharp mower blades make for a cleaner cut surface that will both heal faster and be more aesthetically pleasing. Sharpen mower blades every ten hours of use, or one to three times a season.

Next, recycle grass clippings. It's an easy way to promote healthy turfgrass without generating landfill waste.

Lawn clippings can return valuable nutrients and organic material to the turfgrass system. Much of the nitrogen taken up by turfgrass plants goes to make new shoot material, and ends up in mowed clippings. Removing these clippings permanently removes the nitrogen from the system.

Recycling doesn't reduce a lawn's fertilizer requirement, but up to 25 percent more fertilizer is required to get similar growth responses. Clippings decompose quickly and evenly into the lawn. They don't contribute to thatch buildup, as was previously thought. Just remember to follow the one third rule to make recycling most effective.

SOURCE: Roch Gaussoin, Ph.D., turf specialist, NU/IANR. (DJ)

Healthy Tomatoes Result of Planning, Care

Caring for tomato plants doesn't end with planting.

Fertilizing is key to raising healthy tomato plants. During planting, use up to two or three pounds of high-phosphorus fertilizer per 100 square feet of land. Continue to add a teaspoon of fertilizer once or twice a month, depending on the soil's fertility, which can be determined by a soil analysis. Be careful not to over fertilize, because too much fertilizer results in more foliage than fruit.

Although it's a chore many people put off, tomato cages should be set up while plants are small. Inexpensive cages can be made from concrete reinforcing wire, available at home centers or lumber yards. The wire comes in rolls 50- to 150-foot long and five-foot wide so the cages are tall enough for large indeterminate tomato cultivars. Using heavy-duty wire cutters, cut the wire five-foot long to make cages approximately 18 inches in diameter. Form a circle with the wire and bend the ends to hold the cage together. Although the cage rusts quickly, the wire is sturdy and may last 30 years or more. Two electric fence posts woven through the wire and pounded into the ground will hold the cages steady in almost

any Nebraska wind.

To prevent the branches from growing out the openings in the cage, wrap nylon tulle, available at fabric stores, around the cage and fasten with clothes pins. This forces the plant to grow upward, and by doing so, one doesn't have to repeatedly reposition the branches, which often causes breakage. Once the plant has filled most of the cage, remove the netting and store for



the next growing season.

Some gardeners prefer to stake their tomato plants instead of using cages. Stakes should be placed before planting or soon after to avoid damaging the roots of the tomato plants. Place the stake 4 inches from the plant and tie the plant to it, using a nylon stocking or soft cord. Make sure the tie is placed under a leaflet

branch to avoid damaging the plant.

Place mulch around the plant to maintain uniform moisture, which is critical to preventing blossom end rot. The mulch also reduces the spread of soil-borne diseases and reduces weed growth and water loss. Fungicides also help keep diseases at bay. To increase growth and prevent against late and early blight, apply fungicide every 10 to 14 days.

Proper watering is critical. Most plants need one to two inches of water per week depending on the soil type, plant size, and the weather. Soaker hoses keep the foliage dry and prevent fungus-carrying soil from splashing onto the leaves. Soil moisture needs to be distributed evenly to prevent the blossoms from rotting.

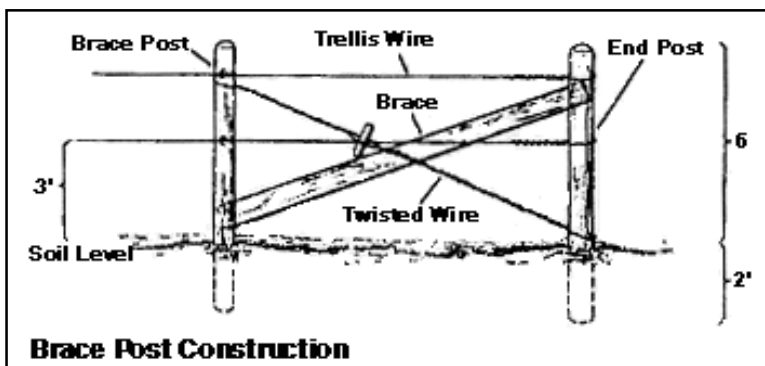
Gardeners should weed often and treat for insects as needed. It's also helpful to rotate the tomato plants' position in the garden from year to year.

For more information, the NebGuide G80-496-A "Tomatoes in the Home Garden," available at the cooperative extension office or online at: <http://ianr.www.unl.edu/pubs/horticulture/g496.htm>. (DJ)

Acreage Insights



Trellis Construction



Grapevines can be supported and trained to a variety of structures. In the home garden, structures range from the decorative arbor to the conventional trellis.

Construction of a grape trellis is similar to constructing a farm fence. The trellis must be substantial enough to carry the weight of the vines plus a heavy crop during high winds. Basically, the trellis consists of one, two, or three wires stretched tightly and secured to firmly set posts.

End posts serve as the anchor points as well as wire supports. End posts are generally eight-foot long, with a diameter of four inches, set approximately two-feet deep in the soil. They may be braced in several ways. A common method is to set an extra post within a few feet of the end post. A heavy piece of wood or another post makes a good brace between the two end posts.

Line posts are also about eight-foot long, but with a diameter of three inches. They are set about two feet into the ground and are spaced about 24 feet apart within the row.

Galvanized wire is strung between the line posts. Galvanized wire is recommended because it is durable and does

not cause serious wire chafing of young vines. Wire sizes commonly used include number nine, ten, or 11.

Wires are fastened to the line posts with ordinary staples. Wire placement is determined by the training system to be followed. For example, a Four-Cane Kniffin system would use two wires, the first three-feet high and the second six-feet high. The Six-Cane Kniffin system requires three wires positioned two, four, and six feet above the ground. In the Single Curtain system, the single wire should be about six-feet high.

Wires are secured to end posts in various ways. A common method is to wind the wire around the post once or twice and then twist the end several times around the wire as it is stretched to the next post. Some growers use special devices to attach the wires to the end posts because they simplify tightening of the wires. These devices employ cranks that eliminate removing the wires from the end post when tightening.

The best time to construct the grape trellis is during the first growing season. Tying new shoots to the trellis wires will allow for straight grapevine trunk development in future years. (DJ)

Suiting the Garden to the Gardener

Gardeners often find they can't use certain parts of their landscape because of the type of soil on the site. However, a raised bed can provide more options for these areas.

While building a raised bed is fairly simple, planning ahead and using good materials are essential. Spending a little money at first will pay off in the long run.

When planning a bed, take into consideration drainage, design issues, available sunlight, and irrigation needs. But, soil quality is the most important factor in determining the success of a raised flower or vegetable bed.

Map out the design with a garden hose. Turf paint can be used to mark the bed line, but is not necessary. Kill all weeds and turf where the bed will be made; this can be done manually or with herbicides.

When creating the bed, it's best to rototill the bed area to a depth of eight to 12 inches and then add topsoil and organic matter to the desired height. Incorporate 25 percent organic matter to 75 percent topsoil. Pile the soil higher than ultimately desired to allow for settling. Install any underground or drip irrigation at this point as well.

Layer mulch on top of the bed after planting, making sure the mulch is lower than the edge of the bed to prevent washing over. Stone, brick, wood, and plastic landscape edger are popular options to provide an edge for the bed.

SOURCE: Anne Streich, coordinator, Horticulture Outreach Programs, NU/IANR. (DJ)