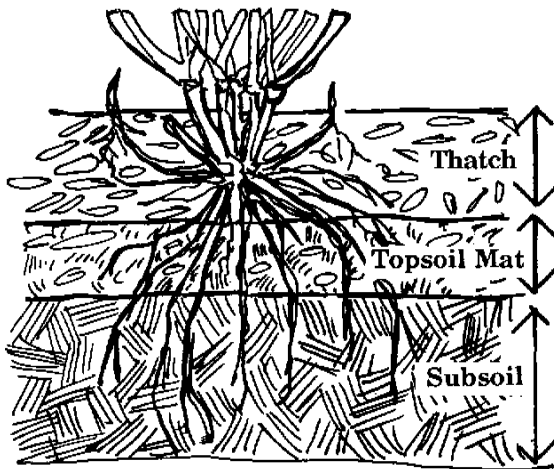


Why Be Concerned?

Anyone who mows a lawn must be concerned with grass clippings. If left haphazardly on the lawn, they will look like clumps of trash and yellow the grass beneath them.

In some cases, clippings may even contribute to an accumulation of thatch. Thatch is that spongy layer of dead or dying plant material located between the green shoots and the soil. A little thatch (about 1/2 inch) is desirable for a cushion effect. Much more than that will cause excessive sponginess, uneven scalping and provide a great place for lawn diseases and insects to flourish. Clippings normally contribute little to thatch buildup, however.

Turf-soil profile illustrates thatch



The handling and bagging of grass clippings cost money and extend the chore of mowing by taking extra time and effort.

Once clippings are bagged, your municipal waste handlers must deal with them. Generally, clippings account for a quarter to a third of the bulk that goes to the landfill during warm months. You know who ultimately pays for the cost of your added trash pickup and disposal!

What Can We Do About It?

If we manage our lawns correctly and use proper cutting practices, we can have nice lawns and rarely be bothered with clippings. Clippings can be left in place without creating a problem. Grass clippings themselves need not contribute to thatch. They also can supply about half the nutrients needed by your lawn in the form of a slow release organic fertilizer. You've already got it; why pay to throw it away?

The Bag-free Lawn Care Plan

The plan is simple. For an established lawn, cut at the lower recommended cutting heights and use the lowest recommended amount of fertilizer. Mowing grass at a lower height will discourage thatch buildup. It will, however, require more frequent cuttings! The general rule for when to mow is to remove no more than about one-third of the leaf area at a time. If this practice is followed, clippings will be small enough to sift into the turf and naturally compost near the soil surface. Shorter-cut grass will reach

this one-third growth sooner than taller-cut grass. This may mean that the lawn can't wait until Saturday morning. To ensure that your blade is set at the recommended height, set mower wheel height on a concrete surface.

Lawn	Mower setting	Mow at or before this grass height
Bermuda common	1"	1 1/2"
hybrid	3/4"	1 1/4"
Zoysia	3/4"	1 1/4"
St. Augustine & Tall Fescue*	2"	3"
Centipede & Carpetgrass	1 1/2"	2"

*Cut fescue to 3" during June through August

Reducing fertility will reduce the amount of clippings you'll have to deal with. A complete turf fertilizer is recommended for the average lawn. This is a blend with more nitrogen, little phosphorus and some potash. Fertilizer N-P-K ratios of 3-1-2 or 4-1-2 are common for turf. With a waste-saving plan, choose a blend which contains some 'slow release' or 'controlled release' nitrogen since you will fertilize less often.



Lawn	Soil Acidity	Nitrogen* (lbs./1,000 sq. ft./yr.)
Centipede and Carpetgrass	6 pH	1 lb. (split)
St. Augustine, Zoysia and Tall Fescue	6.5	2 lbs.
Bermuda common	6.5	3 lbs.
hybrid		4 lbs.

*Do not apply more than 1 lb. N/1,000 sq. ft. at one time.

Other practices will add to your success. First, don't overwater your lawn. During the hottest period of summer, most lawns should get one inch of water a week. If your sprinkler puts out too much water too fast, water in stages. Allow the water to soak in so that the inch of water will go into the soil and not down the sewer. Keeping a lawn too wet will slow or stop thatch degradation. Allowing turf to become dry is the quickest way to stop thatch degradation. Water as needed for weather conditions.

Cut your grass when the leaf blades are dry. The clippings will sift down to the soil better.

Maintain an adequate pH for the composting microbes. Thatch breaks down better as pH approaches neutral, which is 7. Centipede and carpetgrass prefer more acid soil but grow well at pH 6.

Use a sharp mower blade in a clean mower housing for best cutting and movement of clipping. A mulching mower or mulching attachment will help.



When You Can't Follow the Program

If rain or vacation has delayed your scheduled mowing, don't just mow as usual. Cutting tall grass low means long clippings. In this case, use your grass catcher or rake the lawn. These clippings will produce rich compost for the garden or flower bed in a compost pile. They may be used as mulch if herbicide has not been applied within the past month. All or part of the waste-saving program is beneficial. When you can't follow the program, then catch the clippings to help reduce thatch buildup, and recycle as compost.

More specific lawn care information can be found in Extension Service publications 2293, Louisiana Lawn Maintenance, and 1668, Disease and Insects of Lawn Grasses and Their Control.

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Don't Bag It: Lawn Care

