

Recycling Your Grass

If there is one thing for certain this year, is that we have seen much of rain. In 2013, Dixie, GA has recorded 82 days or rain. By this time last year, we saw 73 rainy days. This data is found on the Georgia Automated Environmental Monitoring Network (www.georgiaweather.net). We are above last year's rainfall by 7 inches so far. We see water in ditches and in places where water would normally would not be in the summer. This rain is keeping our grass growing tall. Roadside ditches, pecan orchards, and homeowners are all struggling to keep the grass mowed. Something you can do to make mowing easier is "grasscycling." The rain gives me good opportunity for me to discuss the advantages of grasscycling. I believe collecting grass clippings is a thing of the past; however, I routinely get questions about this concept.

Most of us can easily deal with leaves and grass clippings by recycling them on our own property instead of bagging them and setting them on the curbside. Grasscycling is the natural recycling of grass clippings by leaving them on the lawn after mowing. It benefits us by returning nutrients to the soil, saving time and it does not contribute to thatch development.

The saving time advantage is self-explanatory. Years ago, I watched Granddaddy collect his grass clippings from his St. Augustine lawn each time he mowed. Even as a kid, I remember thinking, "Why are we stopping the lawn mower to unload a heavy container of grass clippings and dumping it on the side of the road? Why not let it fall to the ground?" (This was the mindset of a future Turfgrass Management Major in college). A study in Texas found that grasscycling required one extra mowing per month, but that mowing time was reduced by 35 minutes at each mowing. After six months homeowners reduced their time spent doing yard work by an average of seven hours.

Not only does grasscycling save us time, it also promotes soil fertility because grass clippings rapidly decompose, returning nitrogen and other valuable nutrients to the soil. These nutrients are broken down by soil microorganisms and then absorbed by the turfgrass. The Rodale Institute Research Center reports that an acre of clippings provides 235 pounds of nitrogen, 77 pounds of phosphorus and 210 pounds of potassium. This all depends on the grass variety and soil conditions, but regardless, grasscycling adds health to the turfgrass while requiring less physical work. Do I need to go any further?

The most common fallacy about recycling grass clippings is this practice increases thatch development in turf. Thatch is the dead grass stems, shoots, roots and stolons which, over time, forms a "mat" in the lawn and reduces water and air availability to the soil. Thatch also harbors disease and insects. However, research has determined that thatch buildup is caused by grass stems, shoots and roots – not clippings. This is because grass clippings break down faster than stems, shoots and roots.

What about piles of clippings left behind taller areas of grass? Sometimes these clippings do not fall into the canopy but remain on top of the lawn. These clippings should be distributed to reduce their concentration and more easily moved into the canopy. Consider scattering the clippings with a hand rake or blower.

It is also important to understand that grasscycling is better accomplished when the proper mowing and fertilization takes place. All mowers can be "grasscyclers," and no special equipment is needed. Proper mowing means cutting the grass at recommended height, maintaining a sharp mower blade, mowing when the grass is dry and removing no more than one-third of the grass height.

Grass type	Mowing height
Bermudagrass	1-1½ inches
Centipedegrass	1-2 inches
St. Augustinegrass	2-3 inches
Zoysiagrass	1-2 inches

Also, a sound fertilizer program is necessary to the effectiveness of grasscycling. Perform a soil test on your lawn each fall/winter to determine lime requirements and fertilizer needs for your lawn. In the absence of a soil analysis, a widely used fertilizer for turfgrasses is 16-4-8. Six pounds of 16-4-8 per 1,000 square feet of lawn area will provide the recommended rate of 1 pound of nitrogen per application. No warm season turfgrass in this area needs to be fertilized before the month of May and after August. Fertilizing at the wrong time of the year causes stress to the turfgrass.

Grasscycling, when done properly, is good for the environment and health of the grass. Soil microorganisms can effectively break down clippings left behind and add valuable nutrients to the soil. However, the turfgrass system (plant, soil, microorganisms, etc.) can become overwhelmed when too many clippings are allowed to accumulate. To avoid potential problems, do not over-fertilize or over-water, mow at recommended heights, and mow often enough not to have a buildup of clippings on the turfgrass surface.

Information from this article was taken from UGA Publication, "Grasscycling: Let the Clippings Fall Where They May." For additional questions, contact Thomas County Extension office at 225-4130.