

## Cultural Practices in Turf Management

*by John M. Roberts, Extension Specialist, Turf*

*Cultural practices such as watering and mowing are essential for maintaining a dense, healthy turf.*

### **WATERING**

Water is essential to all living organisms including turfgrasses. Turf plants contain about 90 percent water and, unless they receive supplemental irrigations during a New Hampshire summer, they will turn brown and become dormant or die. It is true that a brown, dormant turf will save you money in terms of reduced mowing, fertilizing and irrigation costs. However, you can expect increased weed invasion and a turf which will be slow to recover after stress from traffic, disease and insects. You must also learn to live with the brown turf.

If you decide that watering will be practical, here are a few guidelines to follow.

#### ***When to Water***

Home lawns can be watered any time throughout the day but an early morning watering is the most desirable. Watering early provides the turf with moisture during the heat of the day and helps reduce disease invasion.

Mid-day waterings are also helpful but evaporation losses are greater than in the early morning. Evening waterings are usually the most convenient for homeowners but the water pressure is often low and disease invasion will be promoted.

#### ***How Much Water to Apply***

The amount and frequency of watering is important. Avoid light, frequent waterings on established turf areas. This will produce a shallow-rooted turf which will be more likely to succumb to the everyday stresses to which turfgrasses are subjected. Try to water less frequently and more thoroughly. That is, watering should wet the

upper 4 to 6 inches of the soil. Do not water again until the turf begins to show signs of moisture stress. During the summer months the turf will use about 1 inch of water per week.

### **MOWING**

Proper mowing practices not only increase turf density and root development but will reduce weed invasion and generally improve the appearance of the turf area.

#### ***Mowing Height***

Most turf areas in New Hampshire contain Kentucky bluegrass, the fine-leaved fescues or the perennial ryegrasses. Because of their upright growth habits, they should be cut between 1 1/2 and 2 inches tall throughout the spring and fall. During mid-summer stress periods, increasing the mowing height to 2 1/2 to 3 inches will protect the plants from drying and also will reduce weed invasion. A compromise is required to maintain an aesthetically pleasing turf and to protect it during the stress period.

These grasses, if grown in shady areas, should be mowed between 2 and 3 inches tall to increase the leaf area in these low-light locations.



## ***Mowing Frequency***

Mow your lawn often enough so that not more than 40 percent of the green leaf is removed per mowing. This means mowing the turf about once per week during the growing seasons. Turfgrasses are well adapted to frequent mowing if the height of cut is not too low.

## ***Clipping Removal***

Should you remove or leave grass clippings after mowing? When the lawn is mowed frequently enough, with less than 40 percent of the leaf removed per mowing, the grass clippings can be left on the lawn. Actually, they are quite beneficial. They serve as mulch which returns essential plant nutrients to the growing turf. Clippings also protect the turf from moisture loss.

However, clipping removal under these conditions does improve the lawn's aesthetic appearance and minimizes the amount of clippings tracked into the house. You must consider your particular situation but, in general, leaving the clippings is beneficial and is recommended.

Clippings should be removed promptly after mowing when they will completely shade and smother the turf.

A heavy clipping deposit results from the lawn being mowed too infrequently.

## ***Mowing Equipment***

Various types of mowers are available on the market and each has its own advantages and disadvantages. The most commonly used for general use turf areas are the rotary mowers. These are less expensive and easier to maintain than reel mowers but the quality of cut is generally inferior.

Mulching mowers, which are a form of the rotary mower, are also recommended for most turf areas when used properly. Flail mowers are not recommended for home lawns or turf of higher quality.

Regardless of the mower type, the key to quality is the use of sharp, well-adjusted mowers. Dull mowers require more gasoline and give a frayed appearance to the turf. In general, mowers should have their blades sharpened at least every other year. Avoid mowing when the turf is wet as the clippings can clump and smother the turf and clog the mower. *Always be careful to keep your hands and feet away from the cutting blades of any mower.*