

# Basic

## Lawn Maintenance

or Less is More

### Many Americans

*accept the idea that we must have lawns of thick, green, healthy grass with few weeds. We spend a lot of time, money, and energy trying to achieve that perfect lawn. All too often, we direct our efforts toward trying to discourage the plants and insects we don't want by using chemical weed killers called herbicides.*

*Herbicides are a type of pesticide; other types include insecticides and fungicides. Pesticides are poisonous. They can cause sickness in adults, children, and pets, and they can end up in our drinking water.*

The easier and healthier way to maintain a green lawn is to encourage the plants we do want. By optimizing the conditions that encourage grass growth, it is possible to have a healthy, green lawn without using chemicals. The Green Thumb Project promotes alternative lawn management practices that eliminate the use of pesticides.

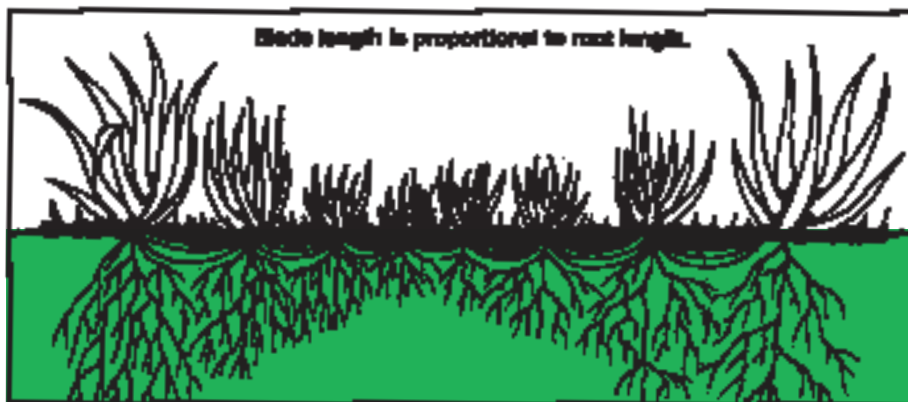
### Less Mowing

- Don't mow your lawn too short. Maintain a height of 3-3 1/2". Mowing your grass at the proper height is the single most important thing you can do to improve the health of your lawn.
- Mow when your lawn needs it. Don't mow every weekend just because it's tradition, and don't let the grass grow so long that you have a hay field. Maintain a fairly constant height by mowing when the grass is about 4" tall, so that you're always removing about 1/3 of the leaf blade. In Duluth this usually means more frequent mowing in spring and fall, less frequent mowing in summer.
- Always mow with sharp mower blades so the grass is cut cleanly, not ripped.



### Why are these things important?

- The depth of the grass root is proportional to the height of the grass blade. By letting the grass grow up, you allow the roots to grow down. Deeper roots can reach more water during dry periods, making it less necessary to water the grass.
- Grass manufactures food from sunlight. The longer the blade, the more food the plant can make, keeping it healthier and stronger. The deeper roots can also reach more nutrients.
- Longer leaf blades create more shade, making it harder for weeds to get established.



### Less Watering

Here in Duluth we usually get enough rain during the summer so that it's not necessary to water the lawn. In addition, grasses that survive best in Minnesota naturally slow down their growth during the hot, dry part of the summer. During this dormant period they look brown and dead, but they're just resting. Maintaining your grass at least 3" high will help it to survive dry periods without extra watering. If you do water your lawn:

- Water only if it hasn't rained for 7 days.
- Water early in the morning (Between 6 and 10 a.m.)
- Thoroughly soak the ground, giving it about 1" of water.

*Knowing how to keep your lawn healthy is more valuable than the best lawn mower.*



## Less Fertilizing

The soil provides nutrients such as nitrogen, potassium, and phosphorus that are essential for a healthy lawn. Not all soil is equal, but about half of the nitrogen can be provided by leaving grass clippings on the lawn to decompose. Grass clippings break down quickly and do not promote disease or thatch buildup.

If you think your lawn is lacking nutrients, have the soil tested. Call the Minnesota Extension Service (218-726-7512) to help you determine what kind of fertilizer will correct the deficiencies indicated by the test. Use slow-release fertilizer, use only the amount needed to correct the deficiencies, and add it in the fall. After you've improved the health of your lawn, you only need to have the soil tested every 3 years.

### To Have Your Soil Tested:

- Call the Minnesota Extension Service at 218-726-7512.
- Tell them you would like to have your soil tested
- They will mail you a form to fill out and bag for the soil sample.
- You collect the soil sample and mail it to St. Paul along with the form.
- The results are mailed back to you in about 10 days.
- The Extension Service also gets a copy of the results so they can help you interpret them.
- The cost of a regular soil test is \$7.00.

## Less Raking

If you leave the grass clippings on the ground as fertilizer, you won't need to rake your lawn except to clean up fallen leaves. Grass clippings decompose rapidly and do not promote disease or thatch buildup. If you rake the lawn in spring, be sure to rake gently so you don't pull up on the young grass plants.

## No Pesticides

Using pesticides to control weeds is like treating symptoms of a cold. You may succeed in killing the weeds, but you won't change the conditions that allowed the weeds to grow. A weed-free lawn is not necessarily a healthy lawn. Weeds can tell you something about what's wrong with your lawn. Here in Minnesota,

- Plantain may indicate the soil is compacted or poorly drained.
- Creeping Charlie may indicate the site is too shady or the soil is poorly-drained.
- Hawkweed may indicate the soil is low in nutrients.
- Dandelions may indicate the grass is too thin.
- Moss may indicate the site is too shady or too wet for grass to survive.

The easiest way to control weeds is to optimize the conditions that favor grass. That way the weeds don't have a chance to get established. If you do have weeds, interrupt their cycle of seed production by digging up the roots or cutting off flowering stalks before they go to seed. Spread a "northern mix" of grass seed in the empty space. After spreading grass seed, dampen it and cover it with mulch. Keep the grass seed evenly damp until it germinates. In heavy shade, plant shade-tolerant ground covers instead of grass.

### The Green Thumb Philosophy:

A lawn is a community made up of thousands of individual plants. Each plant in the community competes for the resources it needs—sunlight, water, and nutrients. The easiest way to maintain a healthy lawn is to optimize the conditions that favor grass growth. That way the grass can out-compete the weeds, and you'll have a green lawn without using pesticides.

The Green Thumb Project is committed to zero lawn pesticide use in the Great Lakes Basin.



**The Green Thumb Project**

**The Green Thumb Project** is sponsored by the Western Lake Superior Sanitary District Zero Discharge Project  
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