

# WATER WISE: The dos and don'ts of mowing your lawn

*University of Nebraska Extension, the Nebraska Forest Service and the Cities of Gering, Scottsbluff and Terrytown, are working together to provide information on how to conserve water by using it wisely and the benefits that come from doing so.*

The simple act of mowing, often taken for granted, can have a major impact on a lawn's quality, according to Scotts Bluff County Extension Educator Jim Schild.

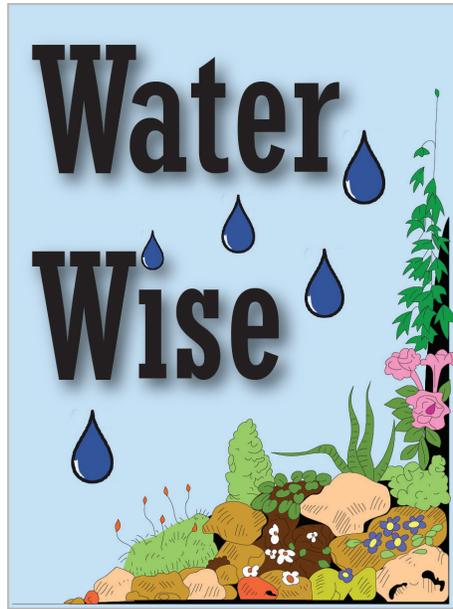
There is a science to mowing the turf, Schild says, and he provides several guidelines for best results:

First, never remove more than one-third of the grass blade at any one time. "If more than one-third is mowed off, that's stressful to the grass, depletes root reserves and may make the grass go off color."

Second, mow the grass tall instead of short. The benefits are numerous, according to Schild. "First, the tall grass shades the soil surface and reduces evaporation from the soil surface. Probably the most important feature is that a number of weed seeds require sunlight for them to germinate, and by mowing tall instead of short, the soil is shaded and a lot of these weed seeds never germinate."

Grass that is mowed tall all season long also will develop a deeper, more extensive root system than grass mowed short, Schild said.

Schild recommends leaving the lawn 3 ¼ to 3 ½ inches tall, but not so tall that it begins to lie down.



"When grass starts to mat down, it has a hard time standing straight up again."

Evening or early morning are the best times of day to mow, Schild said. Avoid mowing during the heat of the day. Also, it's better to mow after watering the lawn than before. If the grass is moisture-stressed when it is mowed, the mower wheels might break off and damage the grass blade itself and cause brownish patterns that appear to be wheel tracks.

"Basically that's due to the grass blade being damaged because it was dry. As the grass blade dries, it's more brittle and more prone to breaking, leaving the wheel tracks in the grass."

In deciding how often to mow, Schild recommended following the one-third rule: never remove more than one-third of the blade. Those

who use a mulching mower will most likely have to mow every four to five days when it's cooler, and six to seven days during the heat of summer.

Schild said it's important to keep the mower blades sharp: "A dull mower blade, instead of cutting the grass, rips the grass and leaves jagged edges that may take on a whitish gray appearance."

"Examine the blades every month and make sure you're getting a sharp cut. If you see fraying or unevenness in the cut it's time to get it sharpened."

In the mulching versus bagging debate, Schild said he favors mulching mowers.

"By far, mulching is the best for the grass because you're recycling nutrients," he said. "Anywhere from 25 to 30 percent of the total nutrient need of the lawn can be reduced by mulching. The mulch also acts on the soil surface to reduce evaporation, like residue in the field."

Some people wonder whether mulching increases thatch in the turf.

"The answer is no. The leaf blade breaks down easily and thatch is made up more of the root material and is the result of frequent irrigation and fertilization," Schild said.