

Ramsey County No-Bag Lawn Care Leave Clippings for a Healthier Lawn

No-Bag Facts

There are many reasons to return grass clippings to your lawn:

- 1) State law prohibits the mixing or concealing of yard waste in the trash.
- 2) You can skip one fertilizer application every year by returning clippings to your lawn.
- 3) Clippings contain over 80 percent water and decompose very quickly.
- 4) Research shows that clippings do not contribute to thatch problems.
- 5) Average mowing time can be reduced by 30 percent when clippings are not bagged.
- 6) The need for less fertilizer and fewer plastic lawn bags results in cost savings.

The Thatch Myth

Thatch is a layer of undecomposed or partially decomposed grass roots, stems, crowns, runners and lower shoots that build up between the soil surface and actively growing green turf. Research indicates that grass clippings do not contribute to thatch. Instead, grass clippings normally decompose very quickly.

To make certain that your grass clippings decompose quickly, your lawn must have a thatch layer less than half an inch thick. If your lawn has more than half an inch of thatch, you should dethatch your lawn before you begin to leave lawn clippings. The best time to dethatch lawns in Minnesota is in late summer or early fall (August 15 to September 30th), although you can dethatch in April or May if necessary. Remove thatch by power raking.

Three-Step No-Bag Lawn Care

Step 1: Mowing To ensure rapid decomposition and to encourage a healthy lawn, remove no more than one-third of the grass blades when mowing. During the cooler spring months when lawns grow rapidly, you may have to mow more than once per week. However, mowing before the grass gets too long actually takes less time and maintains a neater, healthier appearance than infrequent mowing that removes more than one-third of the grass blades. Smaller clippings readily filter down through the lawn and decompose very quickly, recycling vital nutrients back into the soil.

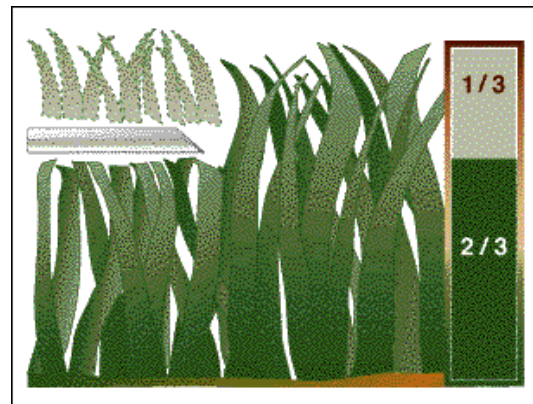


Figure 1. Mow frequently enough so that you remove no more than 1/3 of the grass blade at one time.

To maintain a thick, healthy turf, set your mower height to 2 ½ inches in spring and fall, and 3 ½ inches in summer. When you set your mower at a high cutting height, the grass plants produce a deep and efficient root system better able to resist periods of summer drought. Higher mowing also helps to shade out many weeds.

Clippings should be uniformly distributed rather than deposited in clumps. Mowing the lawn when the grass is dry and using a properly sharpened mower blade will spread the clippings evenly. A dull mower blade tears the grass plants rather than cutting them, giving a lawn an unsightly brown appearance. In addition, avoid mowing when the lawn is under drought stress as this, too, can injure grass plants.

Step 2: Fertilizing

Proper fertilization results in a lawn that is thick, moderately vigorous, and more resistant to weeds and diseases.

Base the number of yearly fertilizer applications on whether you have a low or high maintenance lawn. Lawns older than 25 years that are infrequently watered or any shady lawn should be considered low maintenance, while a high maintenance lawn is newer, in full sun and receives frequent watering. For a low maintenance lawn, fertilize once annually, in September. Fertilize a high maintenance lawn up to three times annually, in late May, late August, and late October.

To gauge fertilizer rate and type, conduct a soil test every three years. Obtain a soil test kit from your county extension office. Because most soils in Ramsey and Washington counties are rich in phosphorous, and because excess phosphorous applications pose an environmental hazard, you will normally purchase lawn fertilizers with little or no phosphorous.

Step 3: Watering

Good lawn care practices can save water and make your turf more resistant to drought. Taller mowing and proper fertilization can result in a deep and efficient root system that reduces the need for additional water.

If you have a high maintenance lawn, keep your lawn green and actively growing during the driest part of summer by providing 1 to 1 ½ inches of water per week if no rain has fallen. Most hose sprinklers deliver ¼ to 1/3 inch of water per hour. In general, water only once per week. If your soil is sandy, however, split water applications into two or three 1/2-inch applications per week. Lawns watered too frequently develop shallow root systems and are more susceptible to disease. Avoid watering in the evening as this practice may favor the development of turfgrass diseases.

When to Collect Clippings

In most cases, you will maintain a healthier, easier-to-care-for lawn by leaving clippings. There are, however, situations in which clippings should be collected:

- 1) If your lawn becomes seriously diseased, removing clippings can reduce the potential for disease spread.
- 2) If you must mow a wet or excessively tall lawn, clippings will mat together and will not easily filter down through the turf. Bag them instead.
- 3) If your lawn mower is unsafe to operate without the bagging attachment, you should continue to collect grass clippings. Read the manual!

For More Information:

Ramsey County residents may contact a Master Gardener volunteer by calling the Ask a Master Gardener Line at 651-704-2071.

For visual diagnosis of routine plant disorders, bring samples to the Master Gardener Plant Diagnostic Clinic, located at the Ramsey County Extension Office, 2020 White Bear Avenue, St. Paul. Clinic hours vary by season, please see website for dates:

<http://www.co.ramsey.mn.us/mastergardener/DiagnosticClinic.htm>

By Doug Foulk, Horticulturist, University of Minnesota Extension Service.

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