



**Nature's Lawn & Garden's**

# *Mowing Secrets*

**15 Tips for a  
Greener, Healthier Lawn**

Excerpted from *Building A Healthy Lawn: A Safe and Natural Approach*, Updated Second Edition by Stuart Franklin



**M**ost homeowners dream of having a dense, lush, green carpet of a lawn, but often struggle to achieve it. There are plenty of ways to improve a lawn with products and seeding techniques, *but you don't need to spend more money to improve your lawn right away.*

The truth is you are probably not mowing in a way that encourages your lawn to thrive. In fact, **the number one reason for deficient color and poor grass health is poor mowing habits**. This is not just our opinion! It's what we have observed in 40 plus years of experience on thousands of customer lawns. Both fertilized and non-fertilized lawns suffer from lack of mowing know-how. Homeowners *and* professional mowing services are actually mowing away color, health, and causing lawns to be more susceptible to weeds, disease, and even insect invasion.

In order to understand how to mow in a way that encourages a healthy lawn, you'll need to know a few fundamentals about how grass grows and thrives. Then, read the 15 Best Mowing Practices that follow and you'll be armed with the know-how to make your lawn the best looking lawn in the neighborhood.

By simply mowing better, you can transform your off-color grass into a thicker, greener, and healthier lawn you can be proud of.



# THE FUNDAMENTALS OF GRASS:

## What You Need to Know About the Grass Plant to Help it Thrive

**A** GRASS PLANT MANUFACTURES ITS OWN FOOD IN ITS LEAF BLADES. *Photosynthesis* is how plants make food from the sun's energy, and this occurs in the green blades of grass plants. Fertilizers and existing soil nutrients help supply raw materials to *assist* this process, but *it's the grass plant that makes the food*, and that food keeps the grass healthy.

When food production (photosynthesis) is at optimum levels, above and below ground growth will be strong and color will reach its full potential. Grass blades get their green color from a pigment called *chlorophyll*, which is a component in the photosynthesis process.

**THE MOST IMPORTANT THING TO KNOW:** *Every time you mow your lawn you are cutting off some of the food factory of the grass, as well as some of the green color found at the top of the leaf blade.*

Mowing properly will help **optimize food production, color, and the overall thickness and health of your lawn** in a matter of *weeks*.

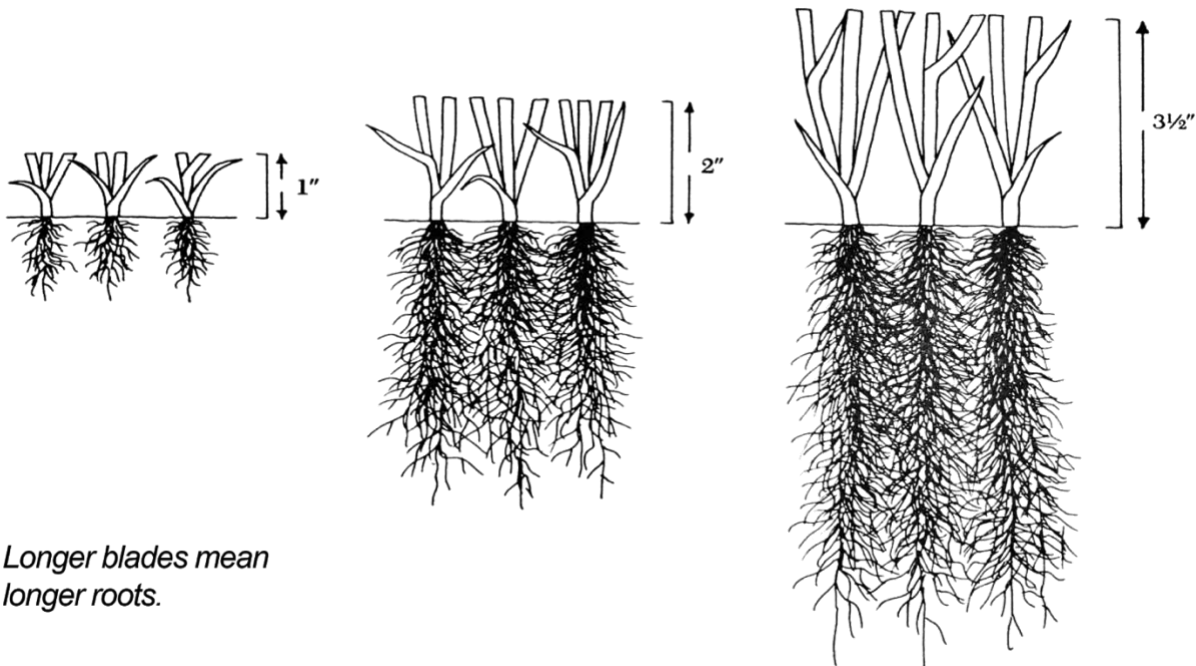
Now that you have the basics, let's get into the details of how to mow better.



# Nature's Lawn & Garden's 15 Best Mowing Practices

## 1. MOW HIGHER, NOT LOWER

There is a temptation for some homeowners to mow short you can “get ahead of the lawn” and mow less frequently, but this is a sure way to damage your lawn. **Only certain grass types can withstand short mowing.** Higher mowing means more food is being produced, and that gives the plant energy to send out and support deeper roots. Deeper roots are able to obtain more water and nutrients from the soil, which gives you a healthier and greener lawn. Here is a good illustration that shows the relationship of leaf blade height to root depth.



*Longer blades mean longer roots.*

There is a nice balance between above and below ground growth. If you were to cut off most of the top growth, *the deeper roots would partially die off.* And if you were to cut off  $\frac{1}{2}$ - $\frac{2}{3}$  of the lower roots, the top growth would cease and perhaps wilt until the roots start repairing themselves. This brings us to our next tip.

## 2. TRIM, DON'T CHOP THE GRASS

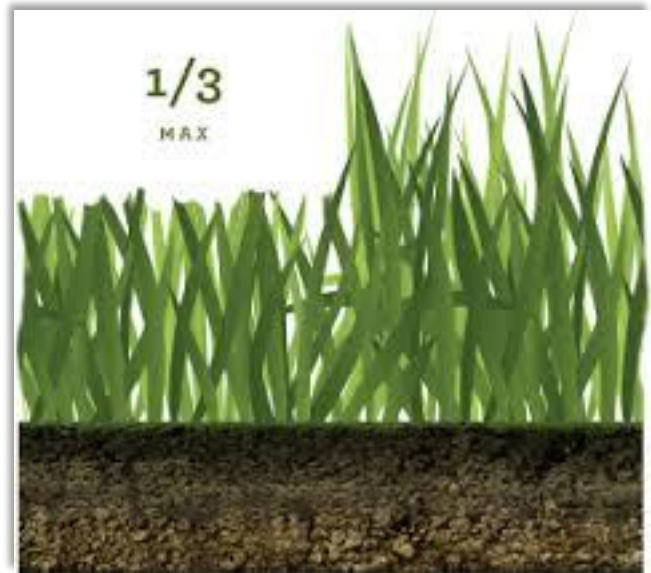
Each time you mow the lawn you are slicing off part of the food factory of the grass plant, located in the leaf blades. Light trimming is easy on the grass, but when you cut off too much at once you “shock” the grass. The more you cut off, the greater the shock. When grass is cut too short, the root growth ceases and all energy goes into leaf blade production to help the grass recover.

**The lawn should be nice and green after it is cut.** Many homeowners cut all the color off their lawn by mowing too short. A week later, when the grass has recovered and is green again, they repeat the process and chop it down again. Lawns suffer tremendously from this all-to-common mowing method. To prevent growth-stopping shock and loss of color, the general rule is ***do not cut off more than 1/3 of the total blade height when you mow.***

**The time to mow the lawn is when grass approaches a length 1/3 higher than the desired height.**

Homeowners have a distinct advantage over lawn mowing services when it comes to timing their mowing. They can mow as often as needed for best health, and mow as little as needed as well.

**Note:** In the springtime, when growth is fast and strong, the grass can *tolerate* being cut a little shorter than the 1/3 ideal, but once the fast growth slows down you must definitely pay attention to this rule.



## 3. LEAVE YOUR CLIPPINGS

Grass clippings are almost 80% water; another 10% is fiber or organic matter (good for soil), and the other 10% is nutrients, similar to what you get in fertilizer, with perhaps some extra nutrients obtained right from the soil and air. *Whenever you remove clippings you are disrupting the natural growth/decomposition cycle and are removing nutrients.* If these nutrients are not replaced by

fertilizers, the grass will definitely deteriorate. Leaving clippings is equivalent to giving your lawn an extra, free fertilizer application every season.

We recommend using a mulching mower, or putting a mulching blade on your current mower, so the clippings are chopped finely and quickly break down into the soil. You could also double cut the lawn to chop up regular clippings. In any case, the clippings must be short enough to not form a thick mat on top of the lawn. If your soil is healthy and bioactive, the clippings will be broken down very quickly.

**What about thatch?** Grass clippings do not cause thatch unless they mat up on top of the soil and do not decompose. Thatch can be caused by a number of things aside from clippings not decomposing. In fact, many of the worst cases of thatch we have seen over the years come from lawns where clippings are always bagged.

You can read all about the causes of Thatch on our website in a post we have called [How to Handle Thatch](#).

## Before You Mow...

### 4. MAKE SURE YOUR MOWER BLADES ARE SHARP

Dull blades tear or rip the grass instead of slicing it cleanly. When grass is wounded like this, it is slower to heal and is an open invitation to insects and disease.

Dull blades cutting **wet** grass makes the shredding even worse.

You can tell when a lawn has been cut with a dull mower because the top of the grass has a white or gray look to it due

to the shredded tips, like the lawn on the right side of the picture. You can actually see this easier from the street than when standing in the middle of the lawn.



## 5. INSPECT YOUR BLADES OCCASIONALLY FOR NICKS

We all hit stones or branches now and then, which can cause your mower blades to collect nicks and scratches on the cutting edge. File them out if you can, or take the mower to your local hardware store to have it sharpened. Sharp blades give a clean cut, which in turn puts less stress on your mower engine. **Start the season with a sharp blade** and if your lawn is a good size, have it sharpened (and balanced) again before the fall. If possible, keeping an extra sharp blade around to use while the other is being sharpened is a great idea.

## 6. KEEP THE UNDERSIDE OF THE MOWING DECK CLEAN

Check the underside of your lawnmower before mowing. Moist grass has a tendency to stick and clump up under the mower deck. When it gets thick it affects the ability of the mower to lift up the grass, resulting in a poor cut. You can scrape off the grass with a putty knife, flat stick, or whatever is close at hand. I use a hand weeding tool. If you are mowing really lush or wet grass, you may have to stop and clean underneath mid-mowing. ***Unhook the spark plug first, or at least make sure the mower has been stopped for 5-10 seconds before putting your hand under it!***

To get under the deck you are going to have to turn the mower on its side. Make sure you do this in a way that doesn't spill oil or gas out. And be careful doing anything around sharp mower blades. Wear gloves. In fact, it's not a bad idea to put gloves on *before* you mow.

Cleaning the underside of the mowing deck when you're finished mowing is a good habit to get into, too. You can toss the clippings into a compost bin if you have one.

## 7. CLEAR OFF ANY STICKS, STONES, ETC. . .BEFORE YOU MOW

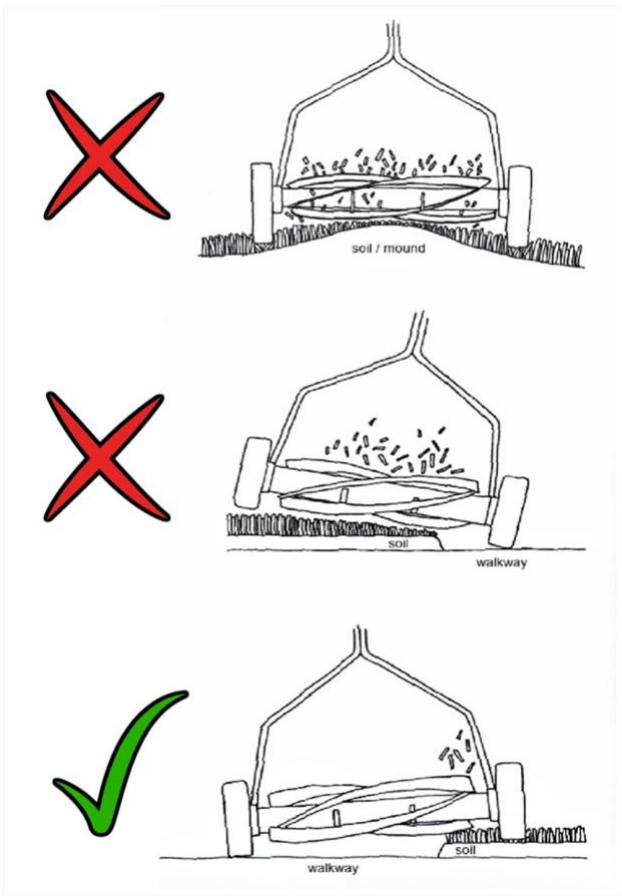
Aside from dulling the blades, stones or wood chips can fly out of a grass chute and cause a lot of damage to your mower *and* to you. Make sure you know where any potential obstacles like vent pipes, above ground tree roots etc., are hidden in the grass.

## 8. KNOW YOUR MOWER

In particular, know where the blades are in relation to the deck, wheels, and ground. This way you can safely navigate around the obstacles in the lawn without damaging them or the mower blades. You can also avoid "***scalping***" the lawn if you know where the blades actually are.

**Scalping of the lawn** happens when the blades cut far too close to the soil line, way below the height the grass can withstand. Usually this results in either dead grass, weeds, moss, or a combination of the three. Most scalping occurs on high spots (or bumps) on the lawn, or they occur where the lawn meets the drive or sidewalk and the soil is a little high.

Here is an illustration taken from our book **Building A Healthy Lawn: A Safe and Natural Approach** published way back in 1988. (Not much has changed about good mowing practices since then, but keep an eye out for an updated second edition, coming out soon!)



You can see in the top drawing how the wheels of the mower sit on both sides of the high spot, resulting in a cut that is much too short for the health of the grass. The mower would have to be moved a few inches to either side to avoid this.

The second drawing shows how the point where the lawn meets the walk gets scalped. This happens when the soil under the grass is higher than the walkway and the mower wheel is positioned on the walk but close to the grass. You can see that the mower and the mower blades are at an angle, cutting down into the corner.

A person may think that scalping the edges of the grass this way makes the grass look neater, but cutting this way means the grass will eventually die off, inviting weeds or moss will replace it.

The way to fix this is to simply *move the mower wheels further out into the walkway*, lessening the tilt of the mower and thus keeping the blades higher at the edge of the lawn. You might only be cutting a



width of 5-6 inches of grass on this pass, but no scalping will occur. The third drawing illustrates this pretty well.

## On the Lawn

**9. Avoid mowing a wet lawn whenever possible.** It gives a poor, uneven cut unless you have a really strong vacuum effect on your mower. It also tends to result in a *shredded* cut rather than a clean slice.

**10. Always make sure your grass is standing straight.** Grass that is standing upright will give you the cleanest cut, and a cut that stays looking good the longest. If you cut a lawn that is leaning (due to wetness, being too long, or mowing too much in one direction) it will cut poorly, and may even lean more when you are done. Sometimes a mower with a very strong vacuum can straighten up a wet or leaning lawn, especially if you mow against the way it is leaning. *A light raking in the opposite of the direction of the way the lawn leans will lift the grass upright and make for a clean cut.*

**11. Keep your lines straight when mowing and avoid tire ruts.** This gives the lawn a nicer look than having the tires make wiggles all over the lawn. Also, don't run the tires of the mower in the same groove that you made on your last pass. This can create tire ruts and lines of grass being pressed down by the wheels but not cut. If the grass springs back up you can get skinny lines of higher grass appearing on the lawn. *For each new pass, always overlap the tires by at least a few inches to make sure all of the lawn is getting cut.*

**12. Alternate your mowing pattern frequently.**

If you continually mow in the same pattern you will get a wavy look to the lawn and probably tire ruts too. Try reversing or going in a perpendicular or diagonal direction to the way you normally cut. As mentioned above, grasses that lean in one direction can often be lifted back up by mowing in the opposite or a different direction.



**13. Keep the discharge chute unclogged so clippings can shoot out easily.** Damp grass, or too much grass cut at once, will clog up the shoot, especially if there is a grass catcher set-up. ***Never*** clean the discharge chute when the mower is running. You are asking for trouble. Shut the mower off. Unhook the spark plug. *Of the 50,000 people that go to the hospital yearly for lawn mowing injuries, cleaning the discharge chute while the mower is running is probably the most frequent reason cited.*

**14. Watch where your clippings are going** if you aren't bagging or mulching them. If you have a side discharge chute on your mower, you need to know where the clippings are going. You normally don't want the clippings blowing into your beds or all over the drive and walks even if they are cut pretty short. Also, you don't want to create a buildup of grass clippings that gets too thick to mow over.

The easiest way to mow when concerned about clippings is to mow around the perimeter of the lawn and then move inwards with each new pass *with the discharge chute facing the center of the lawn, away from the beds*. Then, when you think it is safe to do, reverse the direction and start throwing the clippings outwards towards the bed, but not reaching into them. This is just one way to do it. Because you should be changing mowing patterns frequently, you'll have to do a little thinking beforehand.

**15. Don't force the mower when the grass is thicker, taller, or wetter.** It will result in a very poor cut. When you are mowing, you can get a feel for whether the mower is cutting the grass easily or if it is straining. When conditions are tougher, slow down a bit. Shut the self-propel function off if necessary, and take your time over the really bad spots. *You can also mow less with each pass when the grass is too thick.* Cut the mowing width of your passes by a third or even a half when conditions warrant it.

## **BONUS TIP**

**16. Be very careful on hills or steep grades, or don't mow them at all.** You really don't want to slip and have a foot or other body part go under the mower. Controlling a mower going down a hill is not easy even in perfect conditions. Never mow hills when they are wet. You don't want to be another mowing injury statistic. If the slope isn't too bad, mow side to side when the grass is dry. If it really isn't a safe slope to cut, consider putting in ground cover.

**REMEMBER: Don't allow children to mow the lawn until they are physically strong enough to control the mower, and to understand these mowing tips.**

## Thanks for reading!

If you enjoyed these mowing tips, please check out the other informative posts we have on [Nature's Blog](#)! Or, [sign up for our mailing list](#) to be notified when *Building A Healthy Lawn: A Safe and Natural Approach* Updated Second Editions is available!

Email us at [info@natureslawn.com](mailto:info@natureslawn.com) for more information about lawn care, gardening, products, and more!



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