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I think one of the things that really means spring is here is the fact that the grass (or in my case, the weeds) are beginning to green up and grow and that yard mowing season is just around the corner. When most of us think about lawn care, we tend to think about things like fertilization, watering, and even weed control. I am also glad to know that many of us even think about soil testing and liming in our lawns and gardens.

Probably the most overlooked and often forgotten about aspect of lawn care is mowing. I think that is because most of us think about mowing simply as a once or twice per week chore that is dreaded almost as bad as the annual spring cleaning. Mowing instead should be thought of as a very vital management practice almost if not more important as fertilization and weed control. Fertilization, weed control, proper seeding and other management practices will accomplish very little if lawns are not mowed properly.

For most of us, now is a great time to drag the old mower out of the shed and give it a good service job including changing the oil, filters, and belts. Also perform any other routine maintenance that is called for in your owners manual. Don't forget to replace your blades or at least have them sharpened. There is absolutely no substitute for sharp blades on your mower. A good set of sharp blades will actually help the looks and health of your grass by making clean cuts. Clean cuts will heal faster resulting in less water loss and less stress on your grass, and it will prevent the jagged grass edges from looking brown or off colored at the top. Proper tire inflation will also ensure that you will make even passes over your lawn and will prevent you lawn from having a "tiger striped" appearance.

For the best appearance and quality, turfgrasses should be mowed at the proper height for the specific turfgrass that you have growing in your lawn. Each turfgrass species has a range of mowing heights that will allow it to grow optimally in your yard. Turfgrass species that spread or grow horizontally, such as bermudagrass, can usually be mowed at a much lower mowing height than upright growing grasses such as fescue. Turfgrasses with smaller leaves that are finer textured such as zoysiagrass can usually be mowed lower than turfgrasses with larger coarser leaves such as St.

Augustine or centipede grass. Turfgrasses that are under environmental stress such as drought, heat, or shade should be mowed higher than grasses that are under no stress at all. As a general rule centipedegrass can be mowed to 1 ½ to 2 inches in height while zoysiagrass should be mowed to 1 to 2 inches. Bermudagrass lawns can be mowed from ½ to 1 ½ inches depending on whether your yard is common (seed propagated) Bermuda or a hybrid (sprigged or sodded) bermudagrass. Common bermuda is typically left higher than the hybrid grasses. For those people with fescue lawns, plan to mow your lawns from 2 to 3 ½ inches. The most common mistake I see with fescue lawns is that we tend to mow them too close to the ground. The resulting “scalping” cuts will eventually thin out or else outright kill your fescue turf. It is extremely important for us as homeowners to maintain the appropriate mowing height for the type of grass that we have in our lawns. If you hire someone else or even if you contract your lawn maintenance to a lawn care service, it is your responsibility to make sure that they understand the type of grass that you have and that they maintain it at the appropriate height.

How often should you mow your lawn? Mowing frequency should depend on the growth rate of your grass and the amount of fertility you provide it as well as the environmental and weather conditions that occur.

Another factor in mowing frequency is the optimum mowing height that we discussed earlier. A good rule of thumb is to mow your lawn regularly and never remove or mow off more than one-third of the height at one mowing. For example, if you have fescue grass and you want to maintain your mowing height at 2 inches, you should mow the lawn when the grass reaches 3 inches in height or before. Removing more than 1/3 of the height of the grass at one time can lead to stress in the grass and will also cause damaging thatch to build up around your turf. If your turfgrass becomes too tall between mowings, raise the mowing height of your mower and gradually reduce it until your grasses optimum height is reached.

One last aspect of mowing is the type of mower that you use. Most homeowners mow their lawns with a rotary-type mower. Rotary mowers are so popular because of their low cost and easy maintenance. Many rotary mowers cannot give a quality cut at a mowing height of less than 1 inch but they are versatile and can be used on just about any taller growing grass.

Reel mowers are relatively more expensive and are commonly used for highly maintained turfgrasses such as zoysia or hybrid Bermuda that are often mowed to 1 inch or less. Reel mowers cut with a scissorslike action to produce a very clean, even cut. They do require a relatively smooth surface

to obtain their highest quality cut and they will frequently “scalp” areas on uneven surfaces.

Spring is also a very busy time for some special, dedicated, and hard working people here in Walker County. Members of our Walker County Master Gardener class have been very busy helping to make our community a better more beautiful place. Several of our Master Gardener volunteers have been busy working along the medians of highway 78 in both the Carbon Hill and the Argo communities pruning the crape myrtles which will bloom later this summer.

Our Master Gardeners work very long hard hours volunteering their service so that our community can look better, please join me in thanking them for a job well done! Our Master Gardeners have also been involved in numerous other projects throughout our community.

Upcoming meeting – The American Association of Retired Persons and the Walker County Extension office will be conducting a driver safety course for drivers over 50 years of age on Thursday March 30 and Friday March 31 from 10:00 a.m. until 12 noon each day at the Walker County Extension Office. The registration fee for the course is \$10 which will include the instruction and refreshments. Participants will also receive a certificate which can help to reduce car insurance premiums. For more information or to register for the class, contact our volunteer instructor Ann Gibson at 221-1803. For more information on many upcoming meetings and programs, check out our County Extension Website at <http://www.aces.edu/counties/Walker/>.