

Busting the Most Common Lawn Myths and Misconceptions

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1. Myth: If you let turfgrass seedheads grow in your lawn and then mow them off, they will germinate and grow.

Seedheads need to mature on the stem for several months in order to germinate. So the seedheads produced in spring will not germinate when they are mowed or if they are moved as mulch to the garden. The most effective way to control turfgrass seedheads is through mowing frequently with a sharp mower blade. Seedhead production usually lasts only about a month for cool-season grasses and zoysiagrass. Bermudagrass produces seedheads throughout the summer.

2. Myth: I will not have to mow as often if I mow my lawn shorter.

Lawns need to be mowed in such a way that no more than one-third of the leaf blade is removed in any one mowing. According to the one-third rule, a lawn mown at 3.0 inches will need to be mown about every seven days. A lawn mown at 2.0 inches will need to be mown about every five days. Lawns mown at a higher height of cut will be healthier and will need to be mown less often.

The optimum mowing height for most lawns is about 2.0 to 4.0 inches. When mown at the optimum mowing

height, turf is thickest and requires the fewest inputs. Mowing above these heights will tend to create a less dense turf with coarser leaf blades and potentially a puffy or scraggly appearance. Mowing significantly below this height will create a weak turf that will require more inputs like fertilizer, irrigation and pesticides. Can a turf species be maintained below the optimum mowing height? Yes, but be prepared to spend much more time, energy and money to maintain that turf.

3. Myth: I should set my mower down for the first mowing in the spring.

Before bermudagrass begins to grow in the spring, it is possible to mow the turf slightly shorter than normal to remove dead leaf blades and other debris. This practice will reduce shading of the emerging plants and will also serve to warm soil temperatures more quickly in the spring. The result is a lawn that greens-up more quickly in the spring. The risk in this practice is that you could scalp some of the emerging grass if this practice is delayed until after the lawn has begun to green-up, and you could increase the number of weeds in the lawn by allowing the sunlight to reach the soil surface. Carefully inspect the turf before removing dead leaf tissue and debris to ensure there

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are no green shoots emerging. Zoysiagrass lawns often do not go fully dormant like bermudagrass during winter. Therefore, this practice is likely to be more damaging on a zoysiagrass lawn than a bermudagrass lawn. Low mowing in early spring is damaging to centipedegrass and St. Augustinegrass lawns since they spread by aboveground stems (stolons) and are more prone to injury from this practice.

4. Myth: If I mow my lawn on the lowest setting, it will look like a golf course.

As with myths two and three, mowing your lawn too low is never a good thing. Mowing your lawn below the optimum mowing height (2.0 to 4.0 inches) will result in a weak turf that will require more fertilizer, irrigation and pesticides to control weeds, diseases and insects. Additionally, mowing a lawn too short will increase the amount of time, energy and money required to maintain that lawn. Grass species and cultivars on golf courses are different from those in most lawns. Golf course superintendents select their mowing heights based upon turf species, environment, golfer expectations, revenues generated and equipment available. Golf course superintendents mow fairways, tees and greens with reel mowers, which are needed for low mowing heights. Additionally, golf course superintendents have advanced degrees and training necessary to maintain turfgrasses at this high level of quality. So, the next time you get the urge to mow your lawn short, simply go play a round of golf and enjoy the quality short turf at the expense of somebody else's labor.

5. Myth: I need a putting green in my backyard.

Let me advise you strongly against this idea. Maintaining a backyard putting green requires more fertilization, mowing, cultivation and pesticide applications than a normal lawn. It also requires special soils, turfgrass species and cultivars as well as an irrigation system. Additionally, it must be mown five or more times weekly with a special greens-type reel mower that requires servicing from specialized shops. A putting green is like a puppy. You have to go home and check on it at lunch. When you leave for vacation, you will have to find someone to look after it. And, accidents do happen, so be prepared to do some clean-up when squirrels, raccoons, armadillos, the neighborhood dogs or possibly your nephews decide to

dig up your investment. If you are still undeterred, see FSA6143, *Building a Backyard Putting Green*, for more information.

6. Myth: I must have a white grub problem if I have moles in my lawn.

The diet of moles consists mainly of earthworms. If they happen upon a grub, they will eat it, but it is not their preferred snack. Therefore, if you have moles and then kill the grubs with an insecticide application, you will still have moles.

7. Myth: Use chewing gum to kill moles.

There are many myths about products that control moles. Usually, these myths get started in the following manner. Joe Smith has a big mole problem. After battling with them all spring long, he decides to put chewing gum (tobacco, castor oil, cod liver oil, etc.) in as many runs as he can find in his yard. At the same time, the daily highs are getting warmer, the soil temperature rises and the soil becomes drier. Naturally, moles move deeper in the soil and stop digging up Joe's yard in the meantime. As a result, Joe thinks that he has successfully controlled the moles in his lawn using chewing gum. Using traps is the only sure way to reduce mole problems. See FSA9095, *Controlling the Eastern Mole*.

8. Myth: It is best to fertilize in the spring since that is when the home improvement stores sell fertilizer.

Fertilizing in the spring will result in excessive growth (additional mowing), reduced rooting and a lawn that is more susceptible to summer stress on cool-season grasses. For warm-season grasses, many have not greened-up and initiated new growth in the spring, especially in northern Arkansas.

The timing of N fertilizer applications depends on the lawn species. Warm-season turfgrasses such as bermudagrass, centipedegrass, St. Augustinegrass and zoysiagrass should be fertilized in the summer months when they are actively growing. Cool-season turfgrass species such as tall fescue should be fertilized mainly in the autumn. A fertilization in September and November and an application in the spring after the flush of growth (April or May) will result in a

healthy cool-season lawn. Avoid fertilizing tall fescue in the summer months because of increased risk of the disease brown patch. Lawns damaged during summer months and newly seeded lawns may need an additional N fertilizer application in October to help with recovery and establishment.

Regardless of species, turf should only be fertilized when it is actively growing. Therefore, do not fertilize warm-season turf lawns during winter months and any species during drought. More fertilizer information is available in FSA2114, *Fertilizing Your Lawn*.

9. Myth: It is best to control dandelions in the spring when I see them flowering.

We get many questions in the spring from individuals in northern Arkansas who want to limit the dandelion seed source by spraying, picking or hand pulling the dandelions from their lawns. Though this is very noble and makes theoretical sense, count the millions of dandelions along the roadsides, farm fields, parks and rights-of-way that will each produce hundreds of viable seeds. Controlling the few dandelions on your property will not significantly affect the seed source. Instead, concentrate on maintaining the thickest turf possible in order to prevent dandelion seed from establishing in the first place.

If herbicides are necessary, dandelions, clover and other broadleaf weeds that are a problem in the spring and summer are best controlled in the fall. The period from late September to mid-November is the ideal time to control broadleaf weeds in turfgrass because broadleaf weeds are most susceptible to herbicides at this time. The turf and weeds must be actively growing for this to be effective. Apply on a sunny day with moderate temperatures, no wind, ample soil moisture and no rain in the 24-hour forecast. A herbicide containing two or more active ingredients including 2,4-D, MCPA, dicamba or triclopyr will control most broadleaf weeds with one application. Consider spot spraying the weeds to limit the amount of pesticide you apply. Many of the weed-and-feed products available should be applied in mid-to late September to receive the full benefit of the fertilizer as well as the most efficacious weed control. Read and follow all directions on the herbicide label when using the product. See FSA2109, *Home Lawn Weed Control*, for more information.

10. Myth: It is best to seed in the spring since that is when everything is greening up, rainfall is plentiful and the farmers are planting.

Not all grasses have the same optimum seeding window.

Do not seed bermudagrass after July 1. Later plantings do not have sufficient time to become well established before cold weather arrives. May to early June is a good time to seed bermudagrass, although seed can be planted as early as February. Research in Arkansas has shown that in addition to May and June, bermudagrass can also be successfully established when seeded in late winter (February) to early spring (April). The practice of planting seed when soil temperatures are outside the normal range needed for germination is referred to as dormant seeding. Dormant seedings of bermudagrass will begin to germinate and grow once soil temperatures are optimum for germination, which is around 63° F. If this approach is used on a new lawn, care must be taken to prevent erosion during the period before the seed germinates.

Do not seed zoysiagrass and centipedegrass after July 1. Later plantings do not have sufficient time to become well established before cold weather arrives. Late May and June are good times to seed zoysiagrass and centipedegrass. These grasses are slower to germinate (10-21 days) and fully establish (90 or more days) than bermudagrass, so weed control is important during establishment.

Ideally, tall fescue and other cool-season grasses should be seeded in September so that they have sufficient time to develop before the onset of cold weather and heat the following summer. A second choice would be seeding tall fescue in March. The primary drawbacks of spring planting are potentially wet conditions, cool temperatures, early spring weeds and poor summer survival. See FSA2113, *Seeding a Lawn in Arkansas*, for more information.

11. Myth: The numbers on the fertilizer bag don't matter.

All fertilizers will have a series of three numbers displayed prominently on the label. These numbers represent the percentage by weight of nitrogen (N), phosphorus (as P₂O₅) and potassium (as K₂O) and are referred as the guaranteed analysis. For instance, a 10-2-5 fertilizer will have 10% N, 2% P₂O₅ and 5% K₂O. A 46-0-0 fertilizer will have 46% N, 0% P₂O₅ and 0% K₂O.

Though all three elements are important in maintaining a healthy turf stand, N will cause the greatest response. Because of this, most fertilizer recommendations for lawns are listed as lb N per 1,000 ft². Nitrogen fertilizers come in two basic forms: quick-release (soluble) nitrogen and slow-release (insoluble) nitrogen. Quick-release nitrogen normally causes a response in a week or less, whereas slow-release nitrogen will cause a response in 3 to 10 weeks or more. Quick-release nitrogen is inexpensive and may burn leaf blades if applied improperly. Slow-release forms tend to be more expensive but will rarely burn leaf blades even when applied at temperatures above 85° F. Both N forms can and should be used on lawns. Both forms of N are often blended in one fertilizer bag. This is advantageous because the quick-release N gives a response shortly after application and the slow-release N results in a more gradual and longer response.

The amount of fertilizer applied to a lawn depends upon its guaranteed analysis. The first step is to measure the size of the lawn. The general formula is the rate of nitrogen per 1,000 ft² multiplied by the lawn area (ft²) and divided by the fertilizer nitrogen analysis. See FSA2114, *Fertilizing Your Lawn*, for more information.

12. Myth: Returning mulched leaves can be detrimental to turfgrass quality.

Heavy layers of tree leaves shading the grass can smother and kill grass. However, research shows that moderate levels of tree leaves can be mulched without any detrimental effects on the soil or turf and usually result in improvements in soil structure. The easiest way to dispose of leaves is to simply mow them into the turf. Regular mowing during the fall will chop the leaves into small pieces and allow them to filter into the turf. Mulching leaves with a mower is much easier than raking, blowing and/or vacuuming the leaves like some have done in the past. It still may be necessary if copious amounts of leaves accumulate between mowings.

13. Myth: Like agriculture fields, all lawns must be limed frequently.

Proper soil pH is necessary to produce a healthy, high-quality, attractive lawn. Lime is often applied to Arkansas lawns to help raise the soil pH nearer to neutral, which increases the availability of most plant nutrients. The first step in liming your home lawn is to obtain a soil test before applying any nutrients.

A soil test provides key information including soil pH, potassium and phosphorous levels. Soil testing is free through county Cooperative Extension Service offices. The soil test report will provide you with recommendations on whether or not you need to lime.

Soil pH can have a dramatic effect on plant growth and on soil nutrient availability. Nutrients essential to plant growth are most available between pH 5.8 and 6.5. Lime (usually CaCO₃, calcium carbonate) may be used to reduce soil acidity and improve nutrient availability. Data indicates that about 50% of lawns in Arkansas have a below optimum soil pH (≤ 5.7). Bermudagrass, tall fescue and zoysiagrass prefer a soil pH in the range of 5.8 to 7.0. St. Augustinegrass prefers more alkaline conditions with an optimum pH of 6.5 to 7.5. Centipedegrass is more tolerant of acid soils (pH = 5.0 to 6.0) compared to other species. Lime should not be applied to centipedegrass lawns unless soil pH is < 5.0 , whereas other turfgrass species will benefit from lime if soil pH drops below 5.8.

Agricultural fields often require liming because of the acidifying effect of the fertilizer anhydrous ammonia used in some crop fields but not in lawns. For more information, see FSA6134, *Liming Your Lawn*.

14. Myth: Applying gypsum will help reduce the compaction in my lawn.

Gypsum (CaSO₄) is a product that can help improve soil structure when soils contain high amounts of sodium. In these soils, applying gypsum improves soil structure and water infiltration and reduces compaction. However, these soils are only common in the western United States. Therefore, applying gypsum to Arkansas soils will not reduce compaction. Additionally, there is plenty of calcium and sulfur available to plants in our soils, and these deficiencies are rare.

15. Myth: The grasses advertised in the weekend newspaper inserts really work.

There are certain grasses sold in weekend newspaper circulars that claim they are the solutions to every homeowner's lawn problems. The ad might say something like "just sprinkle the seed and water" or "survives blistering heat and the coldest winters." These statements are sometimes misleading and must be evaluated in the larger context. It is important to know which grass species you are really purchasing to check and see if that particular species is

well adapted to your local climate. Ask for information on the turf species and cultivar before purchasing. If it is seed, ask to see a copy of the seed label (required by law) prior to your purchase. If sod or plugs, ask for information on the particular cultivar being sold to make sure it is adapted to Arkansas.

16. Myth: Shade-tolerant grasses grow well in the shade.

Turfgrass species and cultivars vary in their tolerance of shade. Warm-season grasses prefer full sunlight. Bermudagrass, which is the predominant lawn grass in Arkansas, unfortunately has very poor shade tolerance. Zoysiagrass (*Zoysia* spp.) and centipedegrass have fair shade tolerance, with zoysiagrass being adapted for use throughout Arkansas and centipedegrass limited to the southern half of Arkansas due to poor low-temperature tolerance. St. Augustinegrass has good shade tolerance and is the most shade tolerant of the warm-season grasses, but its use is also limited to the southern half of Arkansas due to poor low-temperature tolerance. Cool-season grasses have good shade tolerance and perform well in northern Arkansas in lawns receiving morning sun and some afternoon shade. Tall fescue is well adapted for Arkansas lawns since it is the most heat and drought tolerant of the cool-season grasses. Creeping red fescue is the most shade-tolerant grass for northern Arkansas, but it lacks heat, disease and drought tolerance compared to warm-season turfs and it is not widely recommended for use in Arkansas. No grass species will grow well in areas that receive only filtered sunlight. Even the most shade-tolerant grasses require some sun.

As trees mature on your property, turf will get weaker and weaker under the increasingly thick shade. If you have moss in your turf stand, it is an indication that there is not enough sun. Pruning trees to increase light penetration should occur annually (but that will only help a little). You're better off planting shade-loving ornamentals as opposed to battling nonperforming turf. There are many ground covers and perennials better adapted to shade than turfgrasses. Visit your local garden center to find out which shade-tolerant plants are best adapted to your location in Arkansas. If plant materials are not suitable for your site or landscape design, decorative mulch and gravel are alternatives. For more information, see FSA6140, *Growing Turfgrass in Shade*.

17. Myth: Tonics made from common household products will improve your lawn.

There are a number of "tonics" advertised on local and national television as well as radio that include ingredients like ammonia, cola, beer, hydrogen peroxide and dish soap among others. There is little or no scientific basis for applying these products to your lawn. Many of these products are targeted at increasing microbial activity, providing nutrition or suppressing insect pests, but their efficacy is questionable and they may cause more damage than good.

18. Myth: Wear your golf spikes when mowing your lawn to help reduce compaction.

Lawn aerator shoes/sandals as well as golf shoes are commonly recommended as a method for you to use to aerate your lawn while mowing. It sounds promising since you could mow and aerify at the same time; however, a little math shows that this is a colossal waste of time. There are approximately twelve $\frac{1}{8}$ inch (0.125 inch) diameter-sized spikes on each shoe. Assume that when mowing your lawn you make a footprint (step) for every 2.5 ft² of turf that you mow, which would equate to 40 steps for every 100 ft² of turf you mow. If each of the 12 spikes (0.125 inch diameter) penetrates the soil when you walk, you will penetrate a total of 0.15 in² (0.00102 ft²) with each step you take. Therefore, if you take 40 steps for each 100 ft² of lawn that you mow, you will be impacting a total area of 0.04 ft² or 0.04% of your lawn. Turf specialists recommend that to effectively reduce compaction at least 5% of the soil surface must be aerified. Additionally, hollow-tine aerification is more effective than the solid-tine aerification simulated by the golf shoes.

19. Myth: Returning grass clippings will increase thatch.

In the 1960s, it was commonly believed grass clippings were a major component of thatch and removing clippings dramatically slowed thatch development. In 1967, researchers at the University of Rhode Island completed and published a detailed study of thatch showing it was primarily composed of lignin-containing tissues (rhizomes, stolons and stems) as well as living turfgrass roots. They concluded that leaves and clippings do not contribute to thatch buildup. Their findings were confirmed in numerous other studies. Thatching tendency in zoysiagrass is only increased by 3% from returning clippings, which is likely the result of the nutrients

added from recycling clippings. Research with bermudagrass also confirmed that clippings do not contribute to thatch buildup. For more information about mowing, see FSA6023, *Mowing Your Lawn*, and FSA6139, *Thatch Prevention and Control*.

20. Myth: Turf performs better the more it is irrigated.

More fine turf is damaged in Arkansas each year from homeowners overwatering than underwatering. During most summers (June to September), your lawn will need supplemental watering in addition to rainfall to maintain color and density. Turf seldom needs irrigation from October 1 to June 1. Water only as needed when the lawn first shows signs of water stress, which include a bluish-gray to brown color of the grass and/or footprints that remain for an

extended period after walking across the lawn. Lawns should be watered in the early morning hours as needed, and watering once per week is usually sufficient in the summer months. Research shows that most cultivars of bermudagrass require slightly less irrigation than zoysiagrass. Both bermudagrass and zoysiagrass need less irrigation than tall fescue. Centipedegrass and St. Augustinegrass are not as drought tolerant as bermudagrass and require careful management during dry periods.

Additional Information

Additional fact sheets are available at <http://www.uaex.uada.edu/>.

Additional information about turfgrass management is available at <http://turf.uark.edu/>.

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