

Ripple Effect # 53

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT LAWNS

We are faced with the same questions about our lawn every year: How high should I set my mower? Do I need to fertilize every year? How do I manage dandelions? It doesn't make it any easier that a number of misconceptions about lawn care are still alive and well.

- Misconception 1: When mowing grass, the shorter the better.

Although most of know better by now, the idea of short-cut grass has dominated our idea of how lawns should look. We can trace this misconception back to popular advice during the 1950s to clip lawns to 1.5 inches.

TRUTH IS that we need to keep mowing heights no shorter than 3 – 3.5 inches. Cutting grass short weakens the grass and requires more inputs. Short grass doesn't shade itself well and thus requires more water. Short grass develops shallow roots that cannot reach nutrients and thus needs more fertilizer. Shallow roots weaken the grass and thus need more herbicides to compete with weeds.

- Misconception 2: Get rid of grass clippings!

Another common misconception is that grass clippings are unsightly and harmful—and best gotten rid of. Bag them, rake them off—but they should not be left on the lawn.

TRUTH IS that grass clippings disappear quickly, especially when we are careful to mow off no more than one-third of the grass blades at a time. More importantly, grass clippings provide up to 50% of the nitrogen that a lawn needs, so can reduce significantly the need for applying manufactured fertilizers.

- Misconception 3: Fertilize extra early—and generously.

Our mistaken idea about fertilizing in early spring may go back to a 1960s advertising campaign that “reminded” consumers to apply fertilizer in March!

TRUTH IS that feeding the grass that early, particularly in colder climates, works against—not for—deeply-rooted grass. The resulting shallow roots are susceptible to heat, which requires more water, which can leach minerals from the soil, which requires even more fertilizer. As for amounts of fertilizer, remember those grass clippings! Or add clover, an excellent nitrogen fixator, to your lawn. As for phosphorus, one study showed that lawns on which grass clippings are returned may need additions of manufactured phosphorus only every 22 years!

- Misconception 4: Spring is the best time to apply herbicides to broadleaf weeds .

It's late April, early May. Dandelions are showing up—herbicides promise results against broadleaves. But, somehow, the kill isn't what we expected—so we apply more herbicide. By the middle of the summer, many of the dandelions we thought we had killed are back!

TRUTH IS that applying herbicides in the spring puts us in an uphill battle against nature. In the spring, plants are pulling nutrients upwards, so no matter the strength of the herbicide, it often doesn't make it down to the roots. It's in the fall, between the end of August and frost, that we can catch plants translocating nutrients downwards—and when herbicides work the best.

You can have a beautiful lawn. Remember: set your mower blade no lower than 3-3.5 inches, only cut off one-third of the grass blade, leave the clippings, don't over-fertilize and try to kill the weeds in the fall.

Until the next Ripple Effect,

The Red River Basin Commission (RRBC)

The RRBC is a grassroots organization that is a chartered not-for-profit corporation under the provisions of Manitoba, North Dakota, Minnesota, and South Dakota law. Our offices in Moorhead, MN and Winnipeg, MB can be reached at 218-291-0422 and 204-982-7254, or you can check out our website at www.redriverbasincommission.org.

