

## Mowing before vacation

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Are you going on a long summer vacation this year? If so, have you found someone to mow your lawn while you're gone? If not, you may be tempted to scalp your lawn down right before you depart. That is a bad idea. Our research shows that scalping actually increases growth rate – called compensatory growth. It also stresses out the plants and opens the canopy up to weed invasion. A better option is to mow close to your departure time at the normal mowing height. Then raise the mowing height if you will need to remove greater than 50% of the leaf height when you return from that amazing vacation.

We typically recommend that you never remove more than one third of the leaf during one mowing. This is a good rule for normal mowing, but it can be bent from time to time. The grass “gets used” to its typical mowing height. So if you normally mow at 3” and you find it at 5” inches when you return you can most likely mow it back to 3” without much of an issue. If it were greater than 6”, then I’d suggest raising the mowing height to 4.” Then you’ll need to mow again a few days later at 3”. Just make sure you adjust all the wheels on the mower. Don’t make the same mistake as the homeowner in Figure 1.

Another mowing practice I frequently don’t recommend is bagging your clippings. They are free organic fertilizers that return important nutrients to the soil. But when mowing after a vacation, it can be necessary to bag the long clippings. This will avoid “clumps” that can kill the turf below. I’m still too lazy to bag, however, and just mow it twice to break up those clumps and return those nutrients.

Another option is to apply a plant growth regulator. Many lawn care companies do offer this service. Remember that nothing in life is ever free, however. That includes reducing growth rate with plant growth regulators. It’s very common for the grass to grow at an even faster rate than non-treated turf once the growth regulator wears off. You’ll need to mow more frequently, or raise the height, to keep up.

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Figure 1. This homeowner forgot to set both sides of the mower when changing the mower height of cut. Check to make sure the mower looks level on concrete before mowing. Look for signs of issues on your first few passes to avoid mowing the entire lawn incorrectly.