



Outdoor lawnmower care tips: Results can be a healthy and happy lawn

By JAMES AND MORRIS CAREY
The Associated Press

If, after mowing, you discovered later that what was once a green and beautiful lawn became a bright white patch of something else, read on. A dull lawnmower blade is the culprit.

When grass is torn by a dull lawnmower blade — instead of cleanly cut with a sharp one — the result is frayed edges of grass that dry out and turn white. It's like the difference between a slice with a surgeon's scalpel and a rip with Captain Hook's claw. Besides the resultant bad coloring, each torn blade of grass means you've a lawn susceptible to disease.

Unfortunately, the blade isn't the only part of the mower that you must maintain each season. This is especially true if you own a gas-powered mower. Getting ready for cutting and edging always requires preparation.

Even a sharp blade can do some damage if it isn't spinning fast enough. A sharp blade that is turning slowly is just as bad as a dull one

that is spinning at the proper speed. When the grass is too long or when the lawnmower motor isn't running just right, the blade turns more slowly. In this case, even a sharp blade can tear your lawn to pieces. That's why a mower should always be properly tuned.

A tuneup can save you big bucks in many ways. First, a well-tuned motor burns fuel more efficiently. This means lower fuel costs, more horsepower and greatly reduced emissions. A well-tuned motor even runs a little quieter. When a motor runs properly, it lasts longer. Engine replacement is a big cost that you'll want to avoid.

Besides a full-blown tuneup, you'll also want to perform regular maintenance:

■ **Check oil** — Check the oil level before every use. Make sure it is filled to the mark on the dipstick. Don't overfill. Experts say you should change oil after every 50 hours of operation. We think it's a good habit to drain and replace the oil in your mower at the beginning of every season, along with the tuneup.

■ **Change air filter** —

Experts say you should change your air filter "at least" every three months or after 25 hours of use. If you live in a sandy area, you might want to change your air filter monthly. Cleaning your air filter can be helpful, but there is no substitute for replacement.

■ **Use clean fuel** — To avoid a slow, sloppy-running motor, don't use old gas. Use fresh gasoline and keep it in a well-sealed can.

■ **Check blades** — Periodically inspect the blade for wear or damage and have it professionally sharpened at least once a year. Yes, it is OK for you to sharpen the blade. However, having a pro bring it up to snuff occasionally might end up saving money in the long run. If you own a riding mower, be careful not to leave the blades engaged while the mower is stopped. This can stretch the drive belt and result in decreased belt life.

■ **Spark plug** — Replace or clean the spark plug after every 100 hours of use. If you don't use your mower for 100 hours in a season you might

want to replace the plug after each year of use anyway.

■ **Clean blade housing** — Buildup can occur inside the blade housing. Wet grass sticks like glue. A wooden stake is sturdy enough to loosen such buildup, and it won't damage the paint job that prevents rust. Remember that a slow blade can result when grass buildup occurs in the blade housing.

■ **Vegetable oil** — Spray vegetable oil in blade housing to prevent mud and grass buildup and to reduce the amount of cleaning you have to do.

■ **Keep engine clean** — The engine must always be clean and free of all debris, including mud. Lawnmower engines are air-cooled and can only cool when the engine parts can get to the air. An overheated engine can cook in a matter of minutes.

Keep all your garden equipment stored in a sheltered area to prevent water in the fuel, and rust everywhere else.

The 'unfitted' bathroom

The Associated Press

Functional rooms like kitchens and baths typically are fitted with wall-hung cupboards and storage areas.

Still, there's plenty to be said for junking the wood-veneer boxes attached to your walls. The rewards of starting from scratch with a few attractive, functional dressers, tables and freestanding cabinets are worth it.

Space you didn't know you had is the most notable benefit of this design concept. According to British interior designer Johnny Grey, who focuses mainly on kitchen design, "An illusion of spaciousness (is) achieved by leaving space around each piece of furniture, rather than fitting cupboards from wall to wall."

This now-exposed wall area can host well-placed shelves and hooks for extra storage and display. Your room will be tailored to your specific needs and tastes in a way rooms full of factory-made storage spaces can't.

Home designers and those in the cabinet industry have gotten wise



AP photo

Functional rooms like kitchens and baths typically are fitted with wall-hung cupboards and storage areas. Still, consider replacing the wood-veneer boxes attached to your walls. The rewards of starting from scratch with a few attractive, functional dressers, tables and freestanding cabinets may be worth it.

to this idea and have begun designing and manufacturing storage units that have the look of furniture and the ease of pre-designed cabinets. The bath shown here features attractive vanity cupboards; dresser legs replace the flat-front toe space usually seen where the storage units meet the floors in baths and kitchens. Atop a matching set of drawers and cabinets is a tall, open-faced shelf secured to the wall, which reveals its contents — towels, photos and art — without shame.

Indoor garden tips: Healthy houseplants 101

By JANE LOUISE BOURSAW
Special to the Record-Eagle

If your houseplants are starting to resemble withered remnants of the Apocalypse, don't despair. A green thumb is just a positive state of mind, and with a little attention, those plants can be restored to their original lush, tropical nature.

There are three main facets to growing healthy houseplants: light, water and fertilizer.

"Plants originated outside, where they got as much light as possible," said Jackie Hall of Hibbard's Flowers and Wedding Center in Traverse City. "We've brought them indoors, but they still need a lot of light."

That's especially true during our long northern Michigan winters, when the sun may not shine for many weeks or, God help us, months at a time. A good rule of thumb is to set your plants in a southern window, where they get as much light as possible.

In fact, Hall joked that it wouldn't hurt most of us to stand in a southern window for a while, too. But unlike people, plants have varying light requirements depending on their type.

That's why it's a good idea to pick up a book that covers specific growing conditions required for each plant.

Melissa Weber of Garden Goods in Traverse City agreed, adding, "If it's a plant that requires bright light, you'd probably need a grow light for it to really do well."

There are plenty of great fertilizers on the market: granules that are mixed with the soil, spikes placed in the top of the soil, and those that are mixed with water.

As far as which is best, "it all depends on how lazy you are," said Weber, adding that time-released spikes placed in the dirt are wonderful for people who don't want to have to think about it.

"You don't have to use them as frequently, maybe once every few months," she said.

Water requirements also vary depending on the type of plant. Some, like succulents, require very little water. Others require a lot. Balance is the key.

"You're pretty safe if the soil stays in between extremely dry and extremely wet," said Weber.

And if you're of the school that believes a plant should be watered through three times, maybe that's not such a good method after all.

"It's okay," said Weber. "I like to see the water run all the way through the bottom, but I don't necessarily think you have to do it three times. That would make for some really soggy soil, and it's a good set-up for root rot, if the soil stays too moist for too long."

She also suggested keeping an eye out for insects, which are more prevalent in the winter months. Common pests include spider mites (red, white or black pests that produce a noticeable webbing), scale (small scales on the stems and leaves that produce a sticky sap), and mealy bugs (small plumps of cotton-like pests on the leaves, crotches or stems).

If you suspect you've got pests, treat them right away with an insecticidal spray used in conjunction with an insecticidal spike. Then again, for some bugs, it's better to just bite the bullet.

"If it's a plant you don't care about, I'd just plain throw it away," said Weber.

Other things to keep in mind include air (use a fork to aerate the soil once in a while); humidity (mist plants with a

sprayer bottle or give them a shower now and then); drainage (make sure it has enough pebbles in the bottom for good drainage); and grooming (snip off dead leaves and clean the foliage so it's easier for them to absorb light and air).

For those of us who want the ambience and beauty of plants in our lives, but not the hassle, try some of the low-maintenance varieties. There are a lot out there.

"Succulents and cacti are really easy because you can ignore them for so long," said Mary Griffin, owner of Finishing Touches - Everything from Plants to Paint. "Succulents store water in their leaves, and the less care the better actually. You don't have to hover over them and baby them, and they're not like African Violets that need humidity or orchids that need constant care."

Other easy-to-grow plants include peace lilies, dracaenas, dieffenbachia, ficus, philodendron and ivy.

But if you bring home a lush plant, only to see the leaves immediately wilt and fall off, just give it time. "They need time to acclimate themselves to your home," said Griffin.

In her experience, the two biggest mistakes people make with houseplants is over-watering and over-potting. Her five-foot-long Burro's Tail is so spectacular that people often come in off the road to exclaim over it. But it's only needed re-potting twice in all of its 27 years.

So if you've got a plant that won't leaf out or flower, maybe it's in a pot that's too big.

"It's putting all of its energy into filling that pot of soil up with roots," said Griffin.

But even low-maintenance plants require a little commitment. You have to be willing to give some time and energy to their care. And after a while, as you see the results — lush leaves, new growth, maybe even a few blooms — you'll find yourself giving more and more of your time and enjoying every single minute of it.

Jane Louise Boursaw is a local freelance writer.

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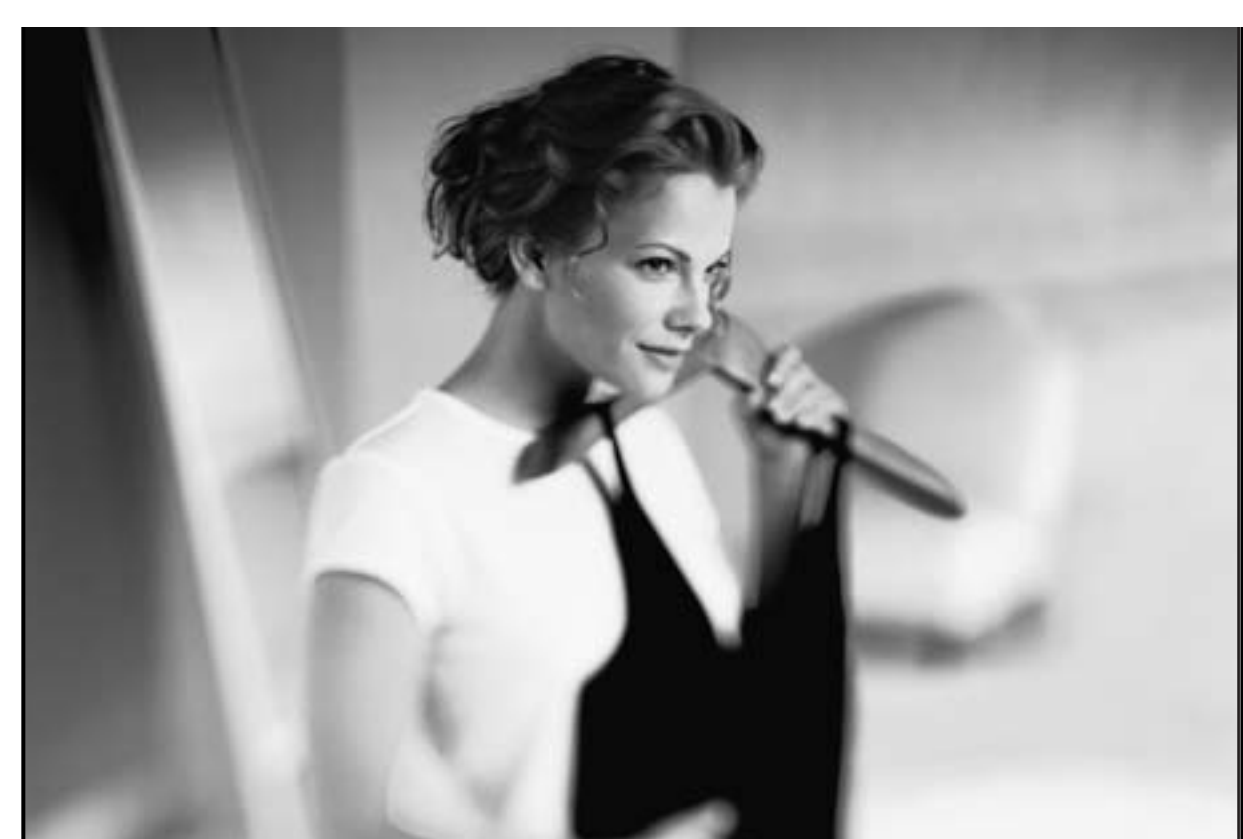
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