

Outdoor care, while you are gone

BY ED HUTCHISON

Special to the Record-Eagle

Summer is finally kicking in and by the time some folks have entertained company during Fourth of July and Cherry Festival week — you may be ready for a vacation.

So now is a good time to look for someone to mow the grass and take care of the yard in general while you are gone, especially if you'll be away longer than seven days.

Why seven days? My experience has been that a lawn and garden can pretty much take care of itself for that period. The grass may be tall on your return, but steps can be taken before you leave to tend to container plants and other sensitive areas.

While a healthy lawn is resilient, summer can be a scary time for it as it can suffer at the hand of someone who is sloppy or not knowledgeable about best practices.

The tips that follow also apply if you are thinking about, or have hired, someone to mow and trim on a regular basis. And they apply especially if hiring a

college or high school student to mow. Here's what I would tell someone tending to my place:

Mowing height — If the mower has six settings and six is the highest, mow at number five. Mowing short to reduce the number of cuttings needed is not a good idea as it can shock the grass plant. Taller grass is your ally in dry times, as taller blades shade the crown of the plant, keeping it cooler. A buzz cut, on the other hand, exposes the crown area to drying effects of sun and air.

Refueling — It's common sense, but emphasis this to your helper: Refuel on a hard surface, not the grass or in the flowerbeds. Also, if the mower deck needs cleaning, tip the mower on the side that does not let gas drip from the tank. If you think this is so-simple-it's-stupid advice, keep your eyes open as you drive around town and you'll see lots of refueling and mower fiddling going on in the grass.

Mowing frequency — Once every seven days will suffice, assuming your goal is to have it maintained versus manicured in your absence.

Mow high, as mentioned, and once every week is plenty frequent. The exception would be in times of frequent rain — then you may want to move the schedule up to once every five days. Spell this out clearly to whoever is mowing in your absence.

Fertilizing, weed and pest control — Don't entrust this to anyone while you are on vacation, the exception being a lawn service that you already know and trust. Save any of these tasks for when you return. Why is this? Each of these tasks needs to be done correctly in terms of time, method and material, and if you are not familiar with the yard, it is easy to make mistakes.

Lawn watering — If you have a sprinkler system, monitor it closely for a few weeks before you go to make sure the heads are working well and reaching where they need to for the right amount of time. Make any adjustments well before you leave. The last thing you need or want is for the sprinkler system to not be working well while you are gone, wasting water or not reaching certain zones and

leading to dieback.

Don't have the person mowing set up or move sprinklers. Doing a good job requires someone to be there and see what areas need water, when the sprinkler should be changed and so on. Rely on rainfall and your sprinkler system, if you have one.

String trimming — I'd lock up the string trimmer while you are away and give your helper a pair of hand grass shears instead. A string trimmer in the wrong hands can do a lot of damage to tree trunks and shrubs and most folks, sadly, are careless.

Containers — Here's where a helper can shine. Before you go, set the container in an area shadier than it prefers. This will reduce drying. Have your helper check it every four days or so and water it if the top inch of the soil is dry. Another moisture-saving trick is to "plant" the container in the ground, to just below the rim. The soil mass that now surrounds it will protect it somewhat from rapid drying. This is especially important with clay pots given their porous sides.

Ed Hutchison is a freelance writer from Midland.



Before leaving on vacation, go over the mowing height, refueling and other points to ensure your lawn's safety will be nicely maintained while you are gone.

New ways to sell your old stuff

BY NANCY SUNDSTROM

Special to the Record-Eagle

For many, garage sales are much more than finding a few needed items at a discounted price — they are treasure hunts to be enjoyed.

Both those who hold sales and those who call themselves "salers" agree that garage sales have changed over the years. Both sellers and buyers are much more savvy and choosy about what they want.

At one early June neighborhood yard sale in Traverse City, organized by M.J. and Terri Gabjewski, buyers arrived almost an hour in advance of the 8 a.m. start time that had been advertised the day before and on the sale.

Gabjewski, who has headed up several of these group sales, said that he made sure to include that there were a number of participants, listed some of the more interesting items that would be available, and gave clear directions. After that, he said, the sale "was on its own."

"If you're going to do this, then have a little fun with it, and make it an event," said Gabjewski, who also made sure to supply sellers with balloons and put out directional signs. "Having more neighbors be a part of it can really help the impact, because people like to make one stop where they can find a number of different things."

So what were salers looking for that day? One group of four who arrived early identified themselves as Maxine, Linda, Caroline, and Kay, and said that during the summer, part of their regular gathering as friends included a day to go

to yard sales.

"We'll look in the paper, see what's been advertised, and then just take off," said Maxine. "We get done when we're done, and we never know what we'll find. That's the fun of it."

The women had already acquired a number of items at other sales, such as hardly worn tap shoes, a carnival glass candy bowl, some costume jewelry and books, among other things.

"Sometimes we're looking for something in particular or something that was in an ad, but mostly we're just out to find bargains," Linda said. "Do we need any more stuff in our houses? Probably not. Chances are that some of what we buy today will end up in one of our yard sales. Some of it may end up on E-Bay."

And what did buyers not take with them? At the end of the sale, around 2 p.m., the sellers were boxing up clothes, books, kitchen items, holiday collectibles, and some bigger-ticket items, such as a pie rack, bikes and appliances.

With the growth of the Internet, Web sites dedicated to the topic say that every year, more than 60 million Americans will attend at least one yard sale. Such sites offer tips for how to host a money-making, people-pleasing sale, and offer information on everything from how to unload clutter from your house for the sale to selling strategies and post-sale clean-up. Others offer forums for browser input, and chat rooms to exchange ideas, or how-to manuals with sale techniques.

Whatever the site, the recurring theme is planning and preparation to make your sale worth the time

and effort it takes.

Following a few simple guidelines and proven methods can mean the difference between a profitable sale or disappointment, plus still having a load of items that will most likely be given to charity.

Some of the basics include being sure to advertise the sale, organizing your goods for maximum display and accessibility, grouping items together by price or subject, and making sure that items are clean, in working order, with all the parts, and sensibly priced. The rest comes down to

good customer service at the event, and paying attention to details such as having the right amount of change, knowing your pricing, and having an open mind about bargaining.

With buyers and sellers alike knowing more in the recent years about garage sale "etiquette," chances are that the time one invests in holding or attending a sale can be productive, and sometimes even a "win-win" for both parties.

"We hope we're putting out some things people want to buy, and the point is to make that easy for them to



do so," Gabjewski said. "There's a lot of truth in something being valuable to someone else that you might not have any more use for. It's also a great way to meet

people, so if you have a sale, be sure to have fun with it."

Nancy Sundstrom is a local freelance writer.

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