

### How Low Should You Go?

Ample rain has arrived and once temperatures get back a little closer to normal, grass is going to take off and take off quickly! In some cases, it takes off way too quickly, requiring us to mow much more than we'd like!

Mowing height actually has more to do with the quality of your grass stand than you'd like to give it credit for. Take crabgrass seed for instance. Since it must have light to germinate, a good, thick turf stand and a higher mowing height can help shade the soil, preventing at least some potential germination. Remember as well that root depth and mowing height are related when it comes to our upright growing grasses like tall fescue and Kentucky bluegrass. What's that mean? The higher the height of cut, the deeper the root system and a deeper root system tends to equal a more drought-resistant turf.

So what should be our optimal mowing height? Great question!

In early spring, you might get by with mowing a little lower than normal – at least for a mowing or two. Doing so can actually speed green-up as it removes old, dead grass and encourages soil to warm up more quickly. Low is a relative term, however! You might be able to get as low as an inch to an inch and a half on fescue or Kentucky bluegrass, but you have to be very careful not to scalp the turf. Just be certain that you don't forget to raise the mowing height after that first or second cutting. Doing so can increase weeds and discourage deep rooting needed to keep the stand competitive.

The optimum height for the remainder of the season varies by your turf species. If you do decide to drop mowing heights for that first mowing, return the mowing height for Kentucky bluegrass to two to three inches and tall fescue heights to three to three and a half inches.

Grass will no doubt grow faster than you want it – and require you to mow much more than you might want! – but a healthy stand can really be encouraged by a proper mowing height. In addition to adherence to mowing height recommendations, turfgrass specialists also suggest following the 1/3 rule. That rule states you should never remove more than one third of the leaf tissue when mowing. For tall fescue, it means you want to maintain turf at a three and a half inch height. That means never letting it grow higher than four and a half inches before mowing.

Why the 1/3 rule? For starters, health of the grass plant is important. Frequent mowing stimulates lateral growth. We want energy and time spent by the grass spreading out – rather than only growing up (tall and spindly)! It creates a much more attractive turf as well!

Clipping management is also enhanced using the one third rule. If you bag your clippings because you don't want unsightly grass clumps in the yard that a) look bad and b) can harm the stand, the one third removal rule can help you eliminate those piles – and maybe bagging, too! Mowing more frequently and only removing one third at a time can actually allow us to put clippings back on the surface where they can degrade and provide valuable nutrients (clippings contain enough nutrients to reduce fertilizer needs by 25-33%) back in to our stand.

Happy mowing!