

San Jacinto River Authority Kids Page

Spring is in the air...and it's time to get back to lawn care basics!



There is something wonderful about the smell of freshly cut grass in the spring. For lots of youngsters this pleasant experience is sweetened even more by the money they can earn performing this manual task. With the increasing number of specialty landscape and lawn service companies, however, many young entrepreneurs have had to look elsewhere for income opportunities. That doesn't mean that they cannot play an important role in lawn care at home. Here are some important tips behind a great lawn!

At the top of the list is WATER. Throw out the old "inch of water a week" advice that may or may not be the formula for your lawn. Most yards can get by with less than half of the irrigation currently applied. Water moves into clay soils at a rate of about 0.09 inches per hour...not very fast. An irrigation system, on the other hand, may apply water at a rate of 0.25 to 1.5 inches per hour or more. Delivering water faster than a soil can absorb during one application results in water moving across the soil surface, running into the gutter, and down into the storm drain – and that causes another problem altogether.

Stop training your grass to be a water hog! Start by accepting the fact that "lawns don't waste water, people do!" If the yard is watered only when it needs to be, for example, savings can reach between 750 and 1,500 gallons of water a month. Encourage the grass to grow deeper roots by watering it sparingly.

Take control of the controller! Don't just set it and forget it! How often does your irrigation system come on when your grass isn't even

thirsty? When was the last time the system controller was checked and adjusted for the season? Perhaps you rationalize that it isn't hurting the grass, so what's the harm? Actually, besides the obvious answer that it is wasting water and money, too much water DOES harm your lawn. Overwatering encourages turf to grow shallow roots which cause the grass to stress if water isn't available. And, if your system is still on during the winter months when St. Augustine and other native grasses are DORMANT and need no more water than Mother Nature provides, the waste factor multiplies.

Program the controller so it will "**cycle and soak**". This applies water slowly so the soil can actually absorb it. Each lawn has different components – soil quality and content – but the key here is to water only as long as it takes to get moisture down into the soil, and that could be as little as 10 minutes or as many as 20 depending on the soil. It takes at least 30 minutes for water to percolate into the soil, so schedule the next cycle to start an hour later.

Do a test run; turn on a zone to discover at what length of time water is no longer soaking into the soil and begins to run off. Use that amount of time to set the first "cycle." Set the timer to come on again after an hour, to deliver a similar amount of water. Technically, while you may be watering more often, the system is delivering the same amount of water...only it is being utilized more efficiently!

Mowing practices can make or break a good lawn. Pay special attention to selecting the proper height for the mower, and how often the lawn is mowed. Mowing too close and too infrequently causes "scalping and shallow rooting" and can lower the turf's ability to resist drought, weed and insect invasion, and diseases. Experts say that the rule of thumb for mowing is to cut no more than 1/3 of the blade of grass. This reduces stress on the grass and allows the clippings to be mulched right back into the soil instead of bagging them. It is also important to keep the mower blades sharpened and to remove sticks and debris in the yard that can dull the blade.

Even if the household utilizes a professional lawn or landscape service, youngsters can learn about using finite water resources efficiently to maintain a healthy and attractive lawn. This will be important to them as they become adults and have families and homes of their own. ♦