



# To Water or Not to Water? Classic Debate Over Summer Lawn Care Begins

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URBANA — Every summer, neighbors on either side of their respective fences revive the great debate about which is better when it comes to summer lawn care. Do you water all summer or let Mother Nature take its course?

“You can find pros and cons on both sides of the fence,” says Richard Hentschel, a University of Illinois Extension horticulture educator.

One of the biggest perks is enjoying a beautiful, lush green lawn in the height of the summer heat, which has the downside when July’s water bill comes.

Hentschel advises deciding whether you are going to water or not in spring because it determines what other lawn management practices are needed.

“If you are going to water all summer, that changes the fertilizer program, mowing frequency, and when to collect or leave lawn clippings,” says Hentschel. “Depending on the age of the lawn, disease management may also be on your list.”

Those who decide to water will need to maintain a higher level of care including adding fertilizer. The typical cool-season grasses naturally expect to go dormant during the heat of summer. Keeping the grass alive with water means it will need more energy through fertilizer. More water and more fertilizer mean more frequent mowing and an overall increase in the amount of time you’re likely to spend on lawn management.

If you have an older lawn, the potential for lawn fungal diseases can increase with more water and fertilizer. Newer lawns are grown from improved seeds that are less prone to disease. A good preventative practice is to map out your watering so the lawn is dry well before the end of the sunshine. Consider starting on the north or east sides of the home, where it will take longer to dry and finish on southern or western exposures.

For those who opt-out of watering, the lawn will stay green as long as the rain lasts. It will go dormant when the weather turns hot and dry.

Homeowners will find plenty of cost savings with this option. In addition to using less water, you’ll use less fertilizer because grass that is dormant does not need to be fertilized. A dormant lawn will also need to be mowed less often, meaning less fuel for the mower.

One of the best ways to keep your lawn looking good is to mow higher, more often, and with a sharp mower blade.

“The taller grass blade further shades the soil, helping to retain what soil moisture is there,” Hentschel says. “This works out very well for the lawn, whether you water or not.”

There will be no need to figure out what to do with all the clippings either, so long as they do not smother the lawn.

To keep your grass green for as long as possible, Hentschel suggests top-dressing the lawn annually with quality black dirt or other organic matter that will absorb and hold water for the lawn to use later.

SOURCE: Richard Hentschel, Horticulture Educator, University of Illinois Extension

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