

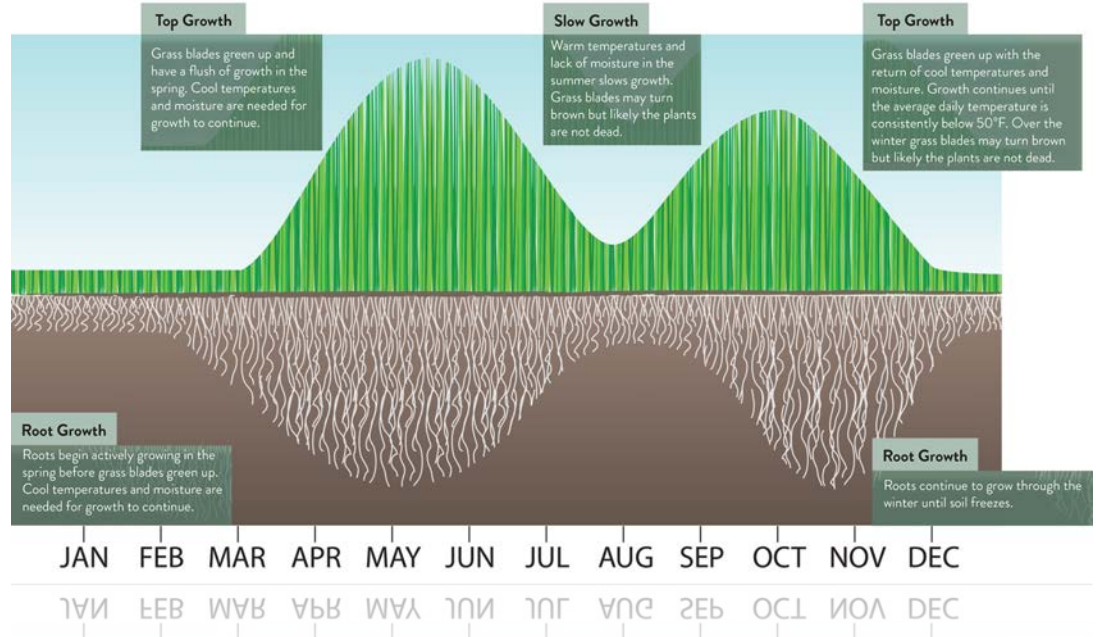
March 30, 2020

Volume 21:1

Gazing in the Grass

Frank S. Rossi, Ph.D.

This issue of ShortCUTT marks my 21st year of journaling the turfgrass growing season in the Northeast as the Extension Turfgrass Specialist in New York State. It will be among, if not the most, awkward

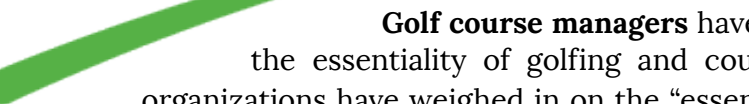


entries we all make into Spring-time in NY. During these challenging times, it is critical the industry encourages safe, smart, practical, progressive, and most importantly MINIMAL turfgrass management practices in areas deemed essential. A minimal mindset can preserve the plant material in our landscapes for their function. A mindset that values vigilant adherence to workers safety and protection standards and designs care to **reduce maintenance needs**.

Spring-like weather is prevalent in urban areas, after a very mild Winter (top 10 warmest). Soil temperatures, always a good barometer for grass growth, remain in the upper 30's to upper 40's. The GDD since March 1 are 7-10 days ahead of normal except most northern areas. This does not bode well for reducing maintenance needs unless strategic planning on mowing, feeding, and pest control is enacted now.

Reduction in maintenance needs for turfgrass begins with managing top growth and reducing the amount of mowing. Under the ground, roots are actively growing (see inset image) and will be useful during dry periods ahead. Additionally, good root growth at this time will enhance resiliency to late-instar soil insects and root infecting fungi such as take-all and summer patch.

All turfgrass managers should raise mowing heights to reduce mowing needs and encourage deeper more active rooting. Unless your area is receiving the regular traffic it would get at this time, do not apply fertilizer of any kind. Soil moisture is adequate across the region and as it warms will release ALL the nutrients plant will need at that time, unless growth is stimulated.



Golf course managers have been scrambling like many to determine the essentiality of golfing and course maintenance. The USGA and major organizations have weighed in on the “essential” care of golf courses. It appears from reading these standards, that almost everything is “essential or we wouldn’t do it”. Of course many practices are governed by play/traffic. If you have regular play and traffic then everything the industry suggests regarding safety applies and the essential practices are governed by worker and player safety standards. However, for all others, I challenge you all to consider holding back on routine maintenance, raise mowing heights, and delay any product applications except those designed to reduce plant growth. Consider using this time to understand effective maintenance reduction strategies and develop some “herd immunity” in your turfgrass stand or simply to save money.

Some have suggested holding back resources now will cost more when when stay at home orders end and turfgrass must be prepped for play. As a researcher that has explored reduced pesticide and fertilizer use for 30 years, I assure you we all need less than we think and the preparations for play can be made if the right decisions are made now to manage growth. We had an extensive conversation about the use PGR’s during this past week webinar with Professor’s Doug Soldat and Bill Kreuser of GreenKeeper App. The recording can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wCW558SmRrw&feature=youtu.be>. Hope you can keep joining us for our weekly webinars Wednesdays, 10 a.m. Link: <https://cornell.zoom.us/j/599896323>

Sports Field Managers have a front row seat this Spring to field performance with little or no focused, organized sport traffic. Most fields are getting some traffic from people out distancing, but the regular focused traffic of organized outdoor sports played on natural surfaces is less than normal. Consequently, much like golf courses essential maintenance should be scaled back. Mowing heights should be raised to reduce mowing needs and growth rate, no applications of any products are warranted at this time, including all pesticides and fertilizers. If allowed consider using PGR’s to slow growth when timing is warranted. A more extensive conversation regarding PGR use in sports fields will be held this week during our weekly webinars on Sports Turf Thursdays @ 10:00am ET. Link: <https://cornell.zoom.us/j/968527067>

Lawn Care and Grounds Managers have additional safety concerns due to the nature of their work that puts them often at homes where now customers will be present. Consequently, additional care must be enacted for work crews in lawn care and grounds deployed in our communities. Here’s a good resource from Penn State University <https://extension.psu.edu/coronavirus-best-management-practices-for-the-green-industry>.

Once determining the ability to work and the precautions enacted to make work safe, what should we be doing to lawns and grounds at these times? First, if work is possible and done safely removing debris, especially piles of leaves, can be considered a public health benefit. Removing piles of leaves from the wooded edges of the landscape has been shown to reduce populations of black-legged ticks compared to leaving the leaves. Interestingly, this study did not investigate mulch mowing, a study our own NYS IPM Program hopes to study over the next few years.

Beyond cleaning up the landscape, refrain from mowing at this time and when considering mowing, raise the height of cut to 3.5 to 5” to reduce growth rate and need for mowing. Do not apply fertilizer or “weed and feed” at this time. It is much too early for either of these products based on soil temperature and growth potential. Also with regular heavy rainfall, ANYTHING applied to the lawn has increased potential to move off or through. We have weekly discussions about lawn care and ground management topics Fridays, 10:00 ET. : <https://cornell.zoom.us/j/790738453> ▲

