

STRASSER NOTES

Dethatch Your Lawn

By summer's end, does your lawn green on top, but brown underneath? When you mow it, does it look dead and scalped? Your lawn may have too much thatch.

If you didn't dethatch your lawn in the spring, then another good time to get this chore done is early fall

Thatch is the woody parts of the grass plant - stems, roots and stolons (above-ground roots) - that accumulate above the soil. Thatch is not grass clippings, which break down and return to the soil quickly. In plug or core samples, thatch is the brown, fibrous layer on top of the soil. A moderate thatch layer, about 1/2 inch, protects the soil from erosion, binds plants together to resist wear, and cushions falls from people playing on a turf area. But much more than 1/2 inch can be a problem, reducing aeration and water infiltration. Extreme thatch buildup (several inches) causes the active roots of the grass plant to grow in the thatch layer rather than the soil, making the lawn nutrient-starved and prone to drought stress.

For best results, dethatch your lawn about every one to two years, in early spring or in early fall. Regular dethatching forces buds to grow near the base of the grass stems, preventing the grass plants from being dead underneath and only green on top. Thatching frees new grass shoots to grow in thick and lush.

The easiest, most economical way to dethatch is to rent a dethatcher. Two types are available - the swing blade dethatcher and the solid knife-type verticutter. The solid knife-type is better for bentgrass and zoysia lawns and used improperly can damage regular turf type lawns.

Small dethatchers, sold as lawn mower attachments, are also available, We don't recommend those, because they put tremendous strain on the lawn mower engine.

The old-fashioned, elbow-grease method to dethatch is to use a thatching rake, but unless you are heavy into physical fitness, rent a power unit.

Dethatching should not pulverize the soil surfaces. Adjust the blades to about a quarter-inch above a concrete surface. Dethatchers work by having the blades swing between the blades of healthy grass and lifting out the dead thatch without harming the bases or roots of the good grass.

You don't want to destroy your lawn in the process of dethatching.

Make between two passes through your lawn at 90 deg angles, until most thatch is removed.

After dethatching, fertilize the lawn with a nitrogen fertilizer to stimulate regrowth.

Homeowners who dethatch their lawns every one to two years will end up with about one to two pick-up truck loads of thatch from an average-size lawn.

Thatch is only a problem when homeowners wait too long to dethatch. Dethatching regularly is just a little more work than mowing a lawn. But if you wait for too many years, removing thatch becomes a long, agonizing process. It needn't be.

The thatch can be composted or used for mulch if it is herbicide-free. If you have used a weed killer or "weed and feed" treatment in the month before dethatching, then do not use the removed thatch to make compost or mulch.