**Can you hear the mower mowin’?**

While this year feels like spring has been drawn out into one mega-season, May is still when we start workin’ on the yard care. Whether or not you’re one to rise up early in the morn’, now’s the perfect time to start out with a fresh outlook on what habits we’ll continue for the rest of the year. Our lawns can take a heavy toll on municipal water resources, but they can also be an asset for water conservation. So how will we use or community’s water all the live-long day?

*Start with the basics: Mowing height*

* Maintain a mowing height of 3” or more, especially early in the year. This will encourage robust root growth that will reduce the need for irrigation later in the year.
* Deeper roots have a better ability to withstand drought, retain moisture, and access nutrients when they’re needed most.
* Taller grass also shades out weed seeds and keeps soil cooler. This is great for soil health, keeping and urban heat island effect.
* If short turf hardens due to sun exposure, a hard crust can form on the soil surface. This creates an ongoing struggle for turf, as the crust will resist water when wet conditions return, requiring even more maintenance, re-seeding, and higher water use to repair the lawn. Thankfully, this can be prevented with higher mowing heights.

*Irrigation: Don’t just pass the time away*

* “Set it and forget it” is not a water-friendly method. If you have an irrigation system, consider updating to a smart irrigation that adjusts watering according to rainfall.
* Conventional turf only needs about 1” of water per week. Try a paper cup to estimate water depth from a sprinkler, or a rain gauge to keep track of precipitation. If you’re

*Bee Lawns and Lo-Mow: Strummin’ on a new banjo*

* For adventurous types, turf conversion could be just the ticket for a change-up. Bee lawns are naturally deep rooted and more resilient than conventional turf. True to the name, they help support pollinators.
* Bee lawns need not include the infamous dandelion. Many utilize other low-growing flowering plants.
* Lo and no-mow turfs often use tall and or hard fescue varieties as the dominant grass type. Whether it’s lo or no-mow depends on preference and management style – some mow once per year to keep seed heads down, and others who don’t mind seed heads may not mow at all. The grass lays over to create a “tuft” or a “Dr. Seuss” aesthetic, which many find to be a pleasant texture on the yard.

*Other tips:*

* Avoid “weed and feed” lawn treatments, as these don’t apply herbicide or fertilizer in ways specific to what the lawn needs. This leads to excess product in the form of wasted nutrients and a higher risk of exposure to pollinators. The best practice is to apply treatments according to a soil test, and to err on spot treatment rather than blanket treatment.
* Grass clippings are like ice cream for lakes. Too much of a good thing (nutrients) makes them green with a tummy ache. Keep grass clippings off of pavement and always sweep or blow them back up to the lawn. This keeps valuable nutrients in your soil instead of losing them and needing to replace them with a treatment later on.
* Change the direction of your mowing to promote upright shoot growth. Changing up the mowing direction also helps reduce soil compaction, which helps the lawn take in water.
* Check out VLAWMO’s [water stewardship at home](https://www.vlawmo.org/residents/water-stewardship/) page for more tips and resources on yard care and yard waste disposal.
* Check out VLAWMO’s [soil health grant](https://www.vlawmo.org/grants/) for potential funding to install bee lawns, alternative turf, raingardens, and even rain barrels.
* Apply for a [Lawns to Legumes grant](https://bwsr.state.mn.us/l2l) for support in installing a pocket prairie, pollinator lawn, pollinator meadow, or targeted trees and shrubs.

New yard routines take time and teamwork, kind of like a railroad! We hope you’ll join us as we learn together and try new things with our local water resources in mind. Next time you find yourself doing yard work humming “fee-fie-fiddle-e-i-o” (don’t we all?), be inspired that even a small yard adjustment can make a big difference for the watershed.

Resources:

[Mowing practices for healthy lawns](https://extension.umn.edu/lawn-care/mowing-practices-healthy-lawns)