

Landfill crisis may curtail bagging of grass

by William E. Knoop, Ph.D.,
Texas Agricultural Extension Service, Dallas

At least once a week millions of homeowners in the United States set out their garbage for pick up by their local solid waste disposal authority. This garbage, mostly in plastic bags, is usually carried to the sanitary landfill and buried. This process has been going on for years and years seemingly without any significant problems.

There is a significant problem, however, and it has a lot to do with how home lawns are managed.

According to information made available by the Environmental Protection Agency, within the next five to seven years as much as one-third of the nation's landfills may be completely full. By the year 1990, Connecticut may not have any landfill space at all. Illinois may run out by 1993, and new landfill space is not readily available.

Bagging to blame?

The connection between home lawn management and the shrinking landfill space has to do with bagging grass clippings. It's been found that in some of our neighborhoods as much as 50 percent of the solid waste pickup each week is nothing more than grass clippings. In one Texas city of 21,000 homes, during a one-week period in June, it was determined that the citizens placed some 700 tons of grass clippings neatly tied in some 31,000

plastic bags at their curbs for pickup by solid waste disposal.

Bagging grass clippings is primarily a homeowner practice, although some landscape management companies also do it. Anyone familiar with basic turfgrass management principles knows that grass bagging isn't required for the production of high quality turf.

How and where did bagging get started? Many of us grew up with the hand push mower with no bagger and our lawns seemed to get along just fine. Then someone put a catcher on the mower so we didn't have to mow as often and all those unsightly grass clippings that were being left on the lawn were eliminated.

The rotary mower was a natural for bagging. Its under-deck design facilitated the movement of clippings into the bagger. Slowly but surely, bagging grass clippings has become associated with perception of lawn quality. Homeowners generally believe that you must bag your grass clippings in order to have a great lawn.

More frequent mowing

Those familiar with turfgrass management know these statements are not true. After all, how many golf courses bag their clippings? The likely truth is that we've slowly grown a little bit lazy about the way we care for home lawns. Rather than

mow them as often as we should, we tend to mow only once a week. That leaves what some consider an unsightly amount of clippings on the lawn. As a result, the mower has evolved from one that had a simple bagging attachment to a machine with a permanent bagging feature. In fact, it's hard to buy a mower today that doesn't bag!

Changes are needed if the trend of filling valuable landfill space with grass clippings is to be reversed. And homeowner education has to be the No. 1 goal of lawn management firms.

Most homeowners have never been taught how to manage a lawn. They have learned by following their parents' example or from watching neighbors. Most neighborhoods have a lawn expert who's more than willing to dispense advice.

Another necessary change has to do with the lawn mower. We need a machine that will, when the lawn is cut only once a week, chop up the clippings fine enough so they will filter down to the soil surface. Key to this mowing concept must be using a reasonable management approach, including a fertility program that stresses the use of slowly soluble nitrogen and reasonably high levels of potassium.

Study changes attitudes

In a pilot educational program in Plano, Texas, many homeowners said grass clippings couldn't be left on the lawn under any circumstances. There was a general belief that these clippings would automatically cause a thatch problem.

Some 20 homeowners agreed not to bag their grass clippings for one year and to follow a prescribed maintenance program. At the end of the year, the overall reaction was that it was far easier to mow the lawn every five days or so than to mow it once a week and mess with the bagger.

The poorer lawns improved and the good ones stayed the same under the program.

Everyone's cooperation is needed if the landscaping industry is to make these changes. We have helped build this bagging monster, and we must take the lead in stemming the flow of grass clippings that unnecessarily clog our shrinking landfill space. **LM**



As America runs out of landfill space, the practice of bagging grass clippings needs to be reevaluated.