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The greenest ways to mow your lush, green lawn

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

If the American dream was landscaped, it would have a lush, green lawn.

But the luster has faded recently for the lawn, a symbol of suburban bliss since the 1950s. Environmental concerns about lawns have been well-documented, from the copious use of water and pesticides to the pollution from gas-powered lawn mowers.

Eliminating or downsizing your lawn can save you time, money and resources. But many of us still want a lawn, especially for our kids or pets, so today we'll look at the greenest ways to cut that green grass.

Q: Aren't lawn mowers better environmentally than they used to be?

A: Yes. California started the trend 15 years ago with tougher standards for emissions from small gas-powered engines, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has followed suit with national emissions standards that are being phased in through 2012.

But using any gas-powered mower is still the least-green way to mow your lawn. It's also no fun when you spill gasoline on your shoes, or the mower fails to start even after you've pulled the cord 20 times.

Q: What's a greener choice? Goats?

A: If you have a big patch of blackberries to tackle, you could consider renting goats. For regular grass cutting, electric-powered lawn mowers will usually be your best bet.

Because most of our electricity locally comes from hydropower, electric mowers result in fewer emissions that contribute to global warming. They are also much easier to maintain.

Q: How much do electric mowers cost?

A: Electric mowers with a cord are relatively inexpensive, usually around \$200 to \$250, but it can be a drag, literally, to mow around that long extension cord. Cordless rechargeable mowers generally cost \$400 or more, but their untethered mobility may be worth the added cost.

In comparison, gas mowers start at about \$150, but self-propelled models or those with electric start (no cord to pull) cost much more.

Q: What else should I know about the cordless electric models?

A: They are a little harder to push than corded mowers, due to the added weight of the rechargeable battery. The biggest issue with cordless electrics has been that they don't hold a charge long enough to mow a large yard.

However, battery life has improved in the latest models, and some come with easily removable batteries so you can have an extra battery charged up, allowing you to cut a sizable lawn.

Q: Are there any other options?

A: The greenest and least expensive choice is the old-fashioned, nonmotorized "reel" push mower, which usually costs under \$120. Reel mowers are also the safest and easiest to maintain.

But they don't work very well on the steep, uneven lawns common in the Seattle area, and if you try to cut high grass and weeds with a reel mower, your lawn will look like it was mowed by goats.

Someday, solar-powered lawn mowers may become practical, but the few models available are prohibitively expensive and only partly powered by the sun.

Consumer Reports offers a free online guide at greenerchoices.org (search for "lawn mowers") to help you sort through the alternatives.

Q: What's the best way to deal with the grass clippings?

A: "Grasscycling," or just leaving the clippings on the lawn when you mow, will keep your lawn healthier. For best results, use a mulching mower and don't let the grass get too high.

If you do collect your grass clippings, put them in your backyard compost bin, or your yard-waste collection bin for municipal pickup and composting.

Q: Any last thoughts on eco-mowing?

A: Your mower will last longer and perform better if you keep the blades sharpened and the blade housing clean. If you have a gas-powered model, get it tuned up regularly.

A lawn maintained with green practices can be enjoyable and beautiful. And if it ever gets totally out of control, just bring in the goats.

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