

## Raise the blade, protect lake

Guest Perspective | Linda Patterson  
Jul 30, 2020



Beach closures, cyanobacteria blooms, bacteria contamination: our lakes are stressed and it's affecting our recreation, our health, and our economy. Maybe we've had to stay out of the water for a day or more, refrain from using tap water, seen our property values go down or experienced a drop in hotel reservations.

Lake Champlain has been at the core of my life for sixty-seven years. Swimming, boating, climbing the rocks, sitting on the shore: all have formed my perspectives, my values, and my spiritual orientation. I have been a witness to the Lake's deterioration.

That is why I joined Lake Champlain Sea Grant as a water quality educator – to devote my skills and my passions to restoring and protecting the waters I love so much.

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One of the projects I work on is a cooperative effort entitled Lawn to Lake. This partnership includes the Composting Association of Vermont, Cornell Cooperative Extension of Clinton County, Lake Champlain Basin Program, Lake Champlain Committee, Lake Champlain Sea Grant/UVM Extension and the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources.

In 2016, we developed a public education campaign called *Raise the Blade* that addresses stormwater runoff and ways to reduce its volume. Stormwater runoff is one of the main culprits in blooms and bacteria pollution. Runoff contains nutrients that feed the algae-forming blooms, and overloads wastewater treatment systems in some of our municipalities during heavy rain events.

*Raise the Blade* promotes three simple practices that help our lawns absorb *and* filter stormwater:

- Mow the grass at three inches
- Leave the clippings on the lawn
- Cut only one third of the grass height, whenever possible, at each mowing.

Longer grass grows longer roots that aerate the soil, helping it absorb more water. Longer roots reach deeper water during droughts. Grass clippings decompose into organic matter, fertilizing the soil with nutrients like phosphorus and nitrogen. The soil acts like a sponge, absorbing and filtering more water than soil that is compacted (more common with shorter grass). Cutting a third of the grass height reduces the stress on grass, allowing it more energy to form strong roots.

Before we launched the campaign, we ran a survey of fifty-six towns in Vermont and New York, asking people about their lawn care practices. We received over one thousand responses. Most people said they mowed less than three inches; most people left the clippings.



We asked what would motivate people to mow at three inches. The majority said: “good for the lawn” and “good for the environment”. We then held focus groups in South Burlington and Plattsburgh to help with messaging. Our campaign name, and some of our terminology evolved from those meetings.

My job is to invite businesses, non-profits, and municipalities to join the campaign by committing to follow the recommended practices. Those I invite have lawns with excellent public visibility and abut streets that carry stormwater runoff either directly into waterways, or into wastewater treatment systems and eventually into our waterways. By joining the campaign, these entities set an example for the community, highlighting their commitment to water quality protection.

To date, several South Burlington businesses (as well as other businesses and nonprofits) have joined, including Stantec Consulting Services, Vermont Gas, Curtis Lumber, Panera Bread, Davis Studios, Torgorm Property Services and The Olive Garden.

On June 8, 2020, South Burlington became the first city in Vermont to join the campaign.

Leading up to this exciting event, I had been communicating with Dave Wheeler, Assistant Stormwater Superintendent. He told me that South Burlington has been following the practices for several years, precisely for the benefits they provide.

The next step was to take it to the City Council. The Council’s vote was unanimous.

This is a thrilling decision. South Burlington is already a leader in stormwater projects. Participation in *Raise the Blade* is yet another way the city is demonstrating its commitment to reducing stormwater runoff and protecting our waters.

Dave started placing *Raise the Blade* signs on grassy areas around the city last week. Brochures summarizing the three practices, with links to more lawn care tips, will be posted in publicly accessible spots. Thank you, South Burlington!!

.....Cutting your grass at three inches may challenge your traditions. You may prefer a short, manicured look. You may enjoy the weekly ritual of mowing your lawn. You may believe your lawn needs to look like the neighbors.

If you know that taller grass is good for your grass, good for your soil, and good for stormwater reduction, maybe you will reconsider. One small change in how we manage our lawns contributes significantly to a larger, critically important effort to reduce runoff, support our economy, and keep our waters clean and safe.

*Linda Patterson is a water quality educator with Lake Champlain Sea Grant.*

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