**“Lazy” Lawn Mowing Helps Pollinators**

![A yellow flower in a field

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Flowers like dandelions and clover are important early-blooming resources for queen bumble bees emerging from hibernation.

*www.xerces.org*

By Karalyn Lamb

The British charity **Plantlife** recently launched a “No Mow May” initiative, urging homeowners to let their grass grow longer in lockdown, “Like the nation’s haircuts.” Uncut British lawns have been shown to support an astonishing number and diversity of bees.

# Research shows that embracing a bit more lawn length in lockdown can benefit pollinators on this side of the pond as well. A 2018 *Science Daily* article entitled, **“Lazy Lawn Mowers Can Help Support Suburban Bee Populations and Diversity”**concludes that a “less is more” strategy of mowing every other week has major benefits for pollinators.

# According to the study of suburban Springfield, MA lawns by US Forest Service ecologist Susannah Lerman, mowing at 2 week intervals at minimum height of 3 inches, coupled with eliminating pesticide use, lets lawn “weeds” like dandelions and clovers bloom; providing critical nectar and pollen resources for bees. Lerman’s study found that lawns cut every 2 weeks [supported 30% more bees](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0006320717306201) than the other lawns. The 2-week lawns had more flowers than the 1-week lawns, explaining the higher number of bees. But researchers suspect that the 3-week lawns, which had even more flowers, were less attractive, because the taller grass might have made it more difficult for the bees to reach the flowers.

In total, Lerman’s team counted 93 species of bees, including 6 new county records and a bee that had not been documented in Massachusetts since the 1920s. The researchers say this demonstrates that suburban environments, if managed properly, can provide suitable habitat for a high diversity and abundance of bees.

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As part of her study, Lerman and her colleagues also sampled lawns for black-legged (aka deer) ticks as well as bees. "There are obvious limitations to this study in terms of establishing the risk of ticks," Lerman said. "We sampled for a single species of tick, and our study was limited to 16 residential lawns in a single city. Still, our study has two significant take-aways: **you do not necessarily invite ticks if you mow the lawn every other week instead of every week,** and common assumptions about nature are always worth investigating;

scientists may be surprised by what we find." Her colleague Vincent D’Amico speculated that while blacklegged ticks are no doubt lurking in people's yards, “the grassy part of a property is probably too dry for the tick. This species needs near 100 percent humidity for at least part of the day," D'Amico said. "Where we have leaf litter, the ticks do very well." (see “Living with your Leaf Litter” information box below)

A close up of a sign

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![A picture containing outdoor, small, green, sitting

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**Golden Northern Bumble Bee *(Bombus fervidus*) foraging on red clover.**

According to Consumer Reports, mowing a bit higher also promotes lawn health. If grass is cut too short, it will respond with a spurt of fast growth with weak root structure. Grass cut at a consistent height of about 3 inches (which allows clover and dandelions to grow) helps promote deep roots that don’t need as much water; making lawns hardier and less likely to turn brown in drought conditions. In terms of deterring ticks, “The trick is to be vigilant about keeping up with mowing and not letting grass grow to a height of 5 or 6 inches.”

So why not let your hair and lawn grow just a little bit longer – not just during lockdown, but all summer! Go to the US Forest Service website: <https://www.nrs.fs.fed.us/urban/landscapechange/bee-habitat/> and download a Lazy Lawnmower sign to show you’re proud of your long(er) grass.

A small bird perched on a tree branch

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*Karalyn Lamb lives in Croton-on-Hudson, NY and serves on the steering committees of the Pollinator Pathway Northeast and of the Native Plant Center at Westchester Community College.*

*She took this picture recently of a tufted titmouse in her yard pecking at the cocoon of a Polyphemus moth (which she had identified by a moth expert and iNaturalist); which it probably found in the leaf litter under oak (host plant) saplings! It is important to leave the leaves. See the box below for information on managing leaf litter.*

**Sources**

**Living with Your Leaf Litter**

According to the Xerces Society, leaves and other “litter” are important for sustaining local food webs; providing essential shelter for hibernating bumble bee queens and the larvae of numerous butterfly and moth species. For more information see their [Leave the Leaves](https://www.xerces.org/blog/leave-the-leaves) campaign.



What about the risk of harboring ticks in leaf litter? Cornell Habitat Network recommends moving leaf litter to areas of your property that are more than two meters (6.5 feet) away from places that you, your family, and your pets frequently spend time. Black-legged ticks *quest*, or travel short distances to find a blood meal. They don’t move more than one to two meters (3.2-6.5 feet) in any direction. If you are able to remove leaves from frequently traveled outdoor areas, you will minimize your contact with ticks. [More information here.](https://content.yardmap.org/learn/managing-tick-populations/)

Science Daily: [*Lazy lawn mowers can help support suburban bee populations and diversity*](https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2018/03/180314101957.htm)

Science Daily: [*Think the tick threat grows with the grass? Not necessarily!*](https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2019/04/190403155411.htm)

Plantlife UK: [*No Mow May: how to get ten times more bees on your lockdown lawn*](https://www.plantlife.org.uk/uk/about-us/news/no-mow-may-how-to-get-ten-times-more-bees-on-your-lockdown-lawn)