

3. Cutting Long Grass and Dealing with Grass Cuttings



This sheet lists the tools for cutting long grass and gives suggestions of how to manage the cuttings by composting them on site, taking them off site or making hay.

Golden Rule: Remove all grass cuttings; compost them, make hay or take them off site.

CUTTING LONG AND TUSSOCKY GRASS

Using the right equipment saves time and effort. Long grass can be cut with:

1. A scythe mower or sickle bar mower

These machines are motorised and have a bar at the front with an arrangement of reciprocating blades that move from side to side like a row of scissors. The cutting bars are available in varying lengths.

These mowers are suitable for cutting long grass in large open areas that have no headstones or kerbstones. The tall grass is cut at the base and falls in a swathe ready for haymaking or raking up.

The downside is that the cutting blades can damage historic stonework and in turn the stonework can break the cutting blades.

Only an experienced operative with full safety equipment should use these machines.

2. Wheeled grass trimmer

These are versatile machines that have an anti-wrap nylon cutter head, with an adjustable trimming height. Suitable for awkward areas, the lighter versions are fairly easy to operate and some models have a key start.

They come in various sizes with engines of different powers. Consider carefully what size is best for the area and type of grassland you will be cutting. Wheeled trimmers also have a choice of cutting cords of different size and intensity.

Hand-held trimmers are basically the same but held by the operator. Damage to trees, shrubs and stonework is particularly easy to do with a hand-held trimmer.

Trimmer mower and trimmer guards are available as an attachment to prevent accidental damage.



3. Hand scythes

Scything today is undergoing a renaissance. The lightweight Austrian scythe is increasingly being used by local authorities and stately home and burial ground managers.

Unlike strimmers, scythes produce no noise, vibration or fumes and are sociable tools to use. They cause minimal harm to wildlife and the grass is laid neatly in a windrow which is easy to turn to make hay, or rake up for the compost heap.

For more information on training and the use of the scythe contact the [Scythe Association](#) or Caring for God's Acre. A short film on how to adjust, use and sharpen the scythe and use a hand hay baler can be viewed on the Caring for God's Acre website.



DEALING WITH GRASS CUTTINGS

All grass cuttings need to be collected and removed from grassland. This is the case for short or long grass. Removal improves the sward for conservation and also gradually reduces the nutrients in the soil, leading to slower grass growth and more flowers.

Short grass

This can be cut with any sort of mower and cuttings should be collected as you go along. These can then be removed from the site or tipped into a compost heap.

Medium grass

This can be cut with a reasonably robust mower and cuttings should be collected as you go along. These can be removed from the site or tipped into a compost heap.

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Long grass

This can be cut with a scythe, scythe or sickle mower, strimmer or wheeled trimmer. After cutting, the grass can be raked up and composted or allowed to dry and used for hay.

Tussocky grass

This can be cut with a scythe, strimmer or shears. After cutting, the grass and coarse plants will be raked but are unlikely to be useful as hay as they are of poor nutritional value. They can be composted however.

COMPOSTING ON SITE

Choose an area for your compost heap which is:

- In a sunny or lightly shaded place.
- Not directly under a tree – this is damaging to the trunk and the roots and can shorten the tree's life.
- Not on top of a known grave site.
- Away from entrances, paths and regularly visited graves.
- Away from areas with spring bulbs or lots of flowers.
- Away from water such as streams or ponds.
- Easy to get to with a wheelbarrow.

Cuttings can be mounded in a loose pile but it is sensible to build a compost bin. This contains the cuttings, keeps the area looking managed and reduces scattering by dogs or foxes.

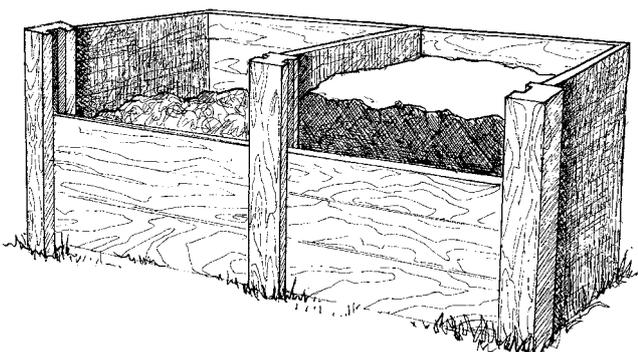
Compost bins

There are many designs of compost bin for sale but they are easy to make.

A compost bin can be made from planks of wood screwed together into a simple box which can be three or four sided.

Pallets, which allow more air, make good compost bins. Pallet compost bins give many access points for animals such as hedgehogs or slow worms. They are easy to construct by driving stakes through the pallet. Pallets come in standard sizes so fit together well.

Building two bays to your compost bin allows one bay to be actively filled over the growing season whilst the



other bay is left to compost. In the autumn empty the composted side. Use or give to volunteers. Put any material which has not composted into the second bay and start to fill the now empty first bay with grass cuttings.

An ideal gardener's compost heap contains a mix of material: grass cuttings, coarse grass, dead leaves and cardboard. It will be turned at least once or twice a year and can produce compost fairly quickly.

By contrast a compost heap in a burial ground is there to get rid of unwanted waste and to provide a haven for wildlife. Do not worry if there is not the 'correct' mix of materials or if it isn't turned. You will get compost in the end!



Quaking Grass

Emptying your compost bin

The ideal months to empty compost bins are October and April when there should be neither nesting animals, such as grass snakes, or hibernating ones, such as hedgehogs or newts. The timing of hibernation is affected by temperature and so may start later than October and earlier than April depending on local conditions. If you need to empty a compost bin in the winter, take care not to injure hibernating animals. Stop if you find one, cover it back up and leave the task until spring.

REMOVING CUTTINGS FROM SITE

Whilst you may be able to compost cuttings from short or medium grass, the quantity of grass following cutting long grass can be considerable and will probably need removing from the site.

Look for help

A local farmer may be willing to take cuttings for hay, silage or for a farm scale composting system. Alternatively your local authority will have a composting scheme for material from green bins and may be willing to take the cuttings. Is there a community composting scheme near to you?

Consider:

- Advertising on notice boards or in the local paper to see if anybody can take it.
- Contacting your local authority.
- Finding out if the [Community Composting Network](#) can help.

Make hay from long grass

Making hay can work really well and gives you a product to sell.

MANAGING CHURCHYARDS AND BURIAL GROUNDS

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After cutting, spread the grass out evenly and leave it to dry. This also allows any seeds to fall back on to the soil. When dry to the touch you need to turn it with a hay rake. Turn the hay a few times until all of it is dry.

Managing your hay

At this point you can:

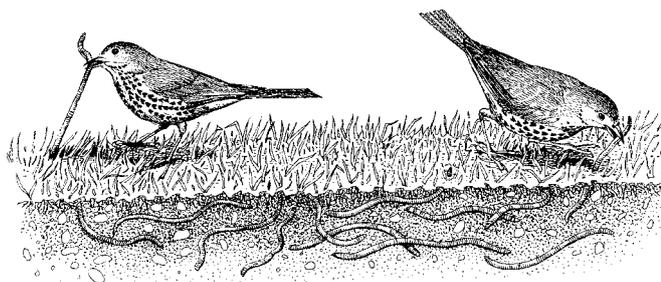
- Sell the hay un-baled to a local farmer. It can be wheelbarrowed or raked into piles on tarpaulins and dragged across the site.
- Stuff the hay into strong paper bags or plastic bags with holes to sell to pet owners or pet shops. This is only recommended if you have a small amount of hay.
- Bale the hay by hand using a wooden hand baler.

Make one using a design which can be found on the Caring for God's Acre website. These small bales can be sold directly from your site, via a local shop, at a farmers' market or similar.

If you are planning to make hay it can be useful to have a backup plan in case of a wet summer. Cut grass, which gets repeatedly rained on, will start to rot and then needs to be raked up and either composted on site or removed from the site as soon as possible.



Sweet Vernal Grass



Useful contacts

Caring for God's Acre for hand balers, see 'view our films', www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk

Community Composting Network, www.communitycompost.org

Garden Organic, www.gardenorganic.org.uk

There are several clips on the internet of 'Making Hay by Hand'

Scythe Association, scytheassociation.org