
I Hate Cutting Grass

So I taught my mower to do it!
By Stephen A. Richardson



During the early 1950s, my wife, Peggy, our four small children, and I lived in Ithaca, New York. Like all households, we had the chores of doing laundry, cooking, shopping, looking after the house and grounds, and getting up at night to comfort a crying child. We also worked on renovating our old house. It was a fulfilling and exhausting life. But there was only one chore I truly hated: cutting the grass. It was time-consuming, boring—and had to be done every week!

Later I got a job in New York City. We fell in love with a house in the suburbs and bought it. The only drawback was that the place had large lawns. My hatred for the task grew large, as well. A nephew, Clive, ended up living with us. One evening we were talking about his school days. He recalled a math problem that he

*I got excited.
Maybe we could
use Clive's math
problem to get
our mower to cut
the grass itself!*

had been given but could not solve. It went something like this: "A vertical post is stuck in the ground, and a rope is tied to it. The other end of the rope is attached to a motorized cart. Because the cart is attached to the rope, the cart has to go round the post in circles. On each circle the cart gets closer to the post. If the post has a circumference of six feet and the rope attached to it is 50 feet long, how many circles will the cart take before it touches the post?"

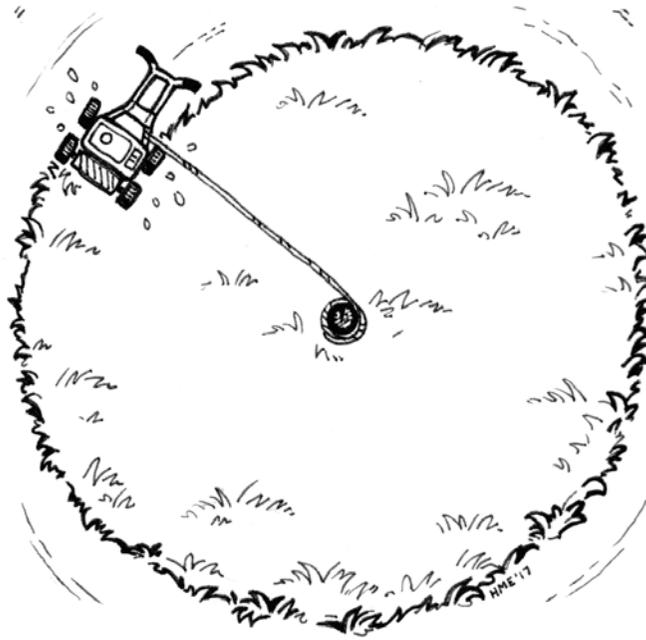
As I listened, I became excited. Maybe we could use Clive's math problem to get our power mower to cut the grass by itself! The next day, I found a log about five feet long whose circumference was similar to the width of the mower's blade (that way each loop around the post would be as wide as the cutting width of the mower). We sharpened one end of the log and drove it into the grass

ILLUSTRATIONS BY HANNAH ENGLAND

at the center of the lawn. Fortunately, our lawn was almost circular. We found the circumference of the log was a bit small, so we built it up by nailing on some wooden strips. Then we attached one end of a long rope to the post and the other end to the mower. We started the mower and set it off. It made a nice wide circle round the edge of the lawn—and then another just inside the first. Each successive circle was smaller and smaller until the mower reached the post and we switched it off.

Success!

From then on whenever the grass needed cutting, I'd set up our contraption. Then while the mower cut the grass, we had dinner and—to our constant delight—watched it go.



Our front lawn was smaller, more of a semicircle, and next to the road that passed our house. If we used the same technique, the mower would run out on the road for half of its circle. Well, hey—we were on a dead-end road and the turnaround was just past our house. The few cars that came by always drove slowly. So we set up our contraption in front, as well. We enjoyed watching the astonishment of drivers when they saw an unattended mower make a half circle on the road. Oh, bliss!

Several years later, we decided we could finally afford to pay someone to cut the grass. It turned out that it's almost as satisfying watching someone else cut my lawn as seeing the mower do it on its own. Either way sure beats doing it myself! ❖