

Bill Kloefkorn, a poet pal of mine in Lincoln, Nebraska once sent the following for an opening to a poem of his named "Late Morning, Almost Noon":

"Not the best time to be trimming the junipers,
my wife reminds me,

it being one week past the middle of August,

but I fear if I give the bushes another hour
they'll overcome us all."

Bill's poem comes back to me while I'm topping the horehound in the yard at the ranch. Mowing a lawn 22 miles from town is not gardening, or for that matter, poetic. Ranch gardening for the solitary male herder is slashing against the fibers and undesirable weeds, hoping to stunt the growth and force rattlesnakes and centipedes into the open.

The mower has to rear in the air to hit tender enough branches to cut the pesky weed. Not so much as Bill says, that the horehound will "overcome us," it's choosing whether every time the grandkids come they track in burrs and dirt on dry days and mud and burrs on wet ones to add a new weave to the carpets.

Mertzon is on a mowing spree, trying to contain a Bermuda grass madness unmatched in growth and cover since babies floated off lost in the thick reed beds in Bible times. Motors chug and clatter, sputter and fuss in the sappy grass until darkness or malfunction forces the operator to park.

Watching the workers switch hands while steering the machines is impressive, considering the resistance of the tall grasses and rank weed beds. Gives the feeling the drivers are waving at the passing traffic. A closer look, however, reveals that whatever hand is freed is to the swat gnats swarming from each new swath. The vicious little beasts are determined to plunge deep into the ear canal, back in and out of the nostrils, and madden humanity revving up the gnat engines to the decibel of a dental drill.

One trait all Mertzon yard men develop is being light of foot. Old boys who tromp around the wool house or the hardware store doing a steady job with all the grace of a young recruit wearing hobnail boots rise high on tiptoes when maneuvering the mowers by fire ant beds on mowing assignments after work.

Go bogging along, thinking about fishing on Spring Creek or going to a roping on Sunday, and clip an anthill filled with hostility and quick to give proof of such. It will put an old boy to hopping and kicking higher than a line of dancers on a Broadway stage.

My yard in Mertzon looked like a prairie dog town after the snakes covered the mounds as long as I believed labeling that claimed 20 bucks worth of ant powder went directly down to the queen's chamber, demolishing the soul and spirit of the whole colony over losing her majesty's life.

After five tries with magic powders, plus one dose of chlorinated swimming pool crystals, I started dusting the ant hills with 10 percent horn fly dust mixed with fireplace ashes. I think using the horn fly dust fooled the drones into thinking the white stuff was a mild flea powder more popular with dog fleas than with the dogs themselves. I reckoned that the queens surfaced for a look and choked on the fireplace ashes.

Once in the past decade, two years passed before the yard at the ranch needed mowing. Wildfires inspired the cutting. After word came that the volunteer fire department in Mertzon in the month of August answered two calls a day in the country fighting grass fires, I peeled the yard slicker than an eel's skin.

The ground squirrel living at the end of the front walk must have thought the drouth had worsened, seeing all the bare ground. She hibernated eight weeks ahead of time before frost; stayed in her den way late, only making aboveground trial runs up to the first of June. Such a long stay in the darkness of her den started the pop-eyed strain of ground squirrels still living around the ranch.

The good rain in late May caused the grass to put on runners or grow tall stems, depending on the variety. My pattern follows the short, easy stuff to the horehound patches, dodging the thick stems. Then upon reaching the horehound, I mow one tankful of gas, or 35 to 40 minutes without stopping.

Mertzon yard men charge 75 bucks a job. That includes a light trim, a few delicate strokes with a leaf rake, and a slight brush with a broom on the sidewalks. Can't say what a job like mine would cost at the ranch. Gas mileage on my mower improved with the advent of hot weather. I have learned to pull over in the shade to crank the engine.