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Does a Robotic Lawn Mower Really Cut It?

Like a Roomba for your lawn, cordless electric robot mowers can work day or night. But can they give your grass that satisfying just-cut look?

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April 12, 2016

Couldn't care less for the "art" of mowing lawns? Give the job to a robot. Robotic mowers resemble a Roomba, except they target grass instead of dust bunnies—traveling around your yard to keep your pasture in check with their spinning blades. Unlike their gas-guzzling, human-steered counterparts, these battery-powered bots are quiet enough to work at night (making about as much noise as a window-unit air conditioner). And because they run automatically on a schedule you set, you can deploy them with abandon.



In fact, a robotic mower performs most effectively when used a few times a week, trimming a small amount each time. That way, the clippings are fine enough to sift back to the ground (instead of sitting on top of the grass to yellow in the sun.)

Robotic mowers do require some labor-intensive set up. Before running one the first time, you must tack down the included low-voltage wire around the perimeter of your lawn, creating an invisible fence. After that, the machines pretty much run on autopilot. They'll leave their charging base (which you've plugged into an outdoor outlet) and hit the field on a set schedule. If they bump into anything—a garden hose, your child's trike—they'll turn around and head a different direction. (A safety mechanism also stops the blade when the bot is lifted.) And when their batteries run low, they return to their base.

We unleashed three robotic mowers on our sloped lawn. These machines take a random path, similar to a Roomba. As a result, they don't produce the pleasing parallel lines that a human does. And although none offered 100% coverage, they did come close. Just expect to do some touch-up with a string trimmer.

Perfectionists will want to wait for this admittedly expensive technology to mature. But for anyone who hates mowing, here are three models to keep your lawn just tidy enough.

For Precision: Robomow RS630



Thanks to a pair of triangular blades that extend to the edges of this 44-pound bot, the RS630 can cut an unusually broad 22-inch swath. Under its cover, you'll find a geared knob for making fine adjustments to the mowing height, which ranges from $\frac{3}{4}$ to just over 3 inches. With a running time of up to 70 minutes, which allows it to tackle lawns up to $\frac{3}{4}$ of an acre, this bot did the best job of cutting right up to our lawn's edges and against a cobblestone border. A user-friendly app for Android and iOS lets you tweak many of the RS630's settings—as well as steer the bot toward a particularly irksome overgrown patch. \$2,100, robomow.com