

# Extreme Mowing

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## Abstract

I mowed my lawn yesterday. It was an exercise in good programming. Good programming practices are not a great mystical art. As the publisher of this magazine is fond of noting, they are usually just common sense packaged with a pretty name. So too it can be for you, applying the common sense skills you use outside of work to the problems that you face throughout the day.

## 1 The Lawn Project

I live on a corner, so my lawn is pretty big. I take at least 90 minute to mow it if I work straight through. Heavy rains over the past few days had turned it into a jungle. I planned to leave work by 5:45 pm so I would have ample time to mow before the sun went down. That did not happen.

I left work at 7:00 pm, with the sun sinking in the sky, and stopped at McDonald's to grab some protein and caffeine. I get tired and crabby if I do not have enough protein, and I figured if I did not eat on the way home, I would have to stop in the middle of mowing. The drive-thru line was long and slow, and I considered just going straight home, but I stuck it out.

At home, I put on my grubby lawn mowing shoes, checked the gas in the mower, and assessed the lawn. I knew I would not have enough time to do the entire lawn before the sun went down, but I could do some of it. Although the front yard was more visible, the back yard was thicker and would be more of a hassle later on, so that is where I started. Usually I mow the entire lawn all at once, going from the front to the sides to the back and around again, but this time I had to limit myself to the back. I set a clear mental boundary on the sides of the house that I would mow up to, and no further.

While I was mowing, my wife and daughter came home from the store. I waved, but kept at my work, making sure I did not get distracted. I knew if I stopped to say "Hi," I would get caught up in something. The girls are important, but this project was time-critical.

By 8:00 pm, the sky was dusky, but I had the back section done. I figured I had about 15 to 20 minutes left before it got so dark that I could not see, so I attacked a long strip by the street to the north. It is separated from the main lawn by the sidewalk, so the difference between mowed and not mowed would not be so obvious. After 10 minutes, I had that part done, had some time, so did the same section on the east. By the time I finished that it was too dark to do any more, so I put the mower away, happy that I had completed half the lawn.

I had applied good programming practices to mowing the lawn, including some key parts of Extreme Programming (XP). I call my methods *XM: Extreme Mowing*.

## 2 The basics of XM

Mowing the lawn was a large deliverable, with not enough staff to do it in the time allotted. The task itself was not much fun, so staff motivation on the project was not very high. If you have not yet been on a project like this, you are probably on your first project.

### 2.1 Small deliverables

The lawn project was like any programming project. It has the three constraints of the “iron triangle”—Time, Resources, and Deliverables. If those do not fit, one of them has to give. I knew I could not mow the entire lawn before the sun went down. I could not add any more resources, like adding someone else to the lawn mowing team. I had to reduce the deliverables. I could not do the entire lawn in the time allotted with just me doing it.

Zealots make much of XP and how it keys on early, frequent tests, and that most odious of argument-starters, pair programming. To me, both as a lead programmer and project manager by day, and an XM lawn mower by night, the first tenet of XP is limiting scope and creating frequent small releases. In XM, I have a similar goal. Once it is dark and I cannot mow, I do not want the lawn to look stupid. It is better to have just part of the yard done than it is to have all of the yard half done.

In XP, I want to be able to release at any time. I make sure that everything that has been done is good and working, so that if I hit some deadline, I will not have a half-working project. Even if I have not finished some sections, at least I will have sections that are done. In XM, I made sure that I never bit off a bigger section than I knew I could do in the time allotted (and in XM, there is no project extensions from the sun).

### 2.2 Focus

I made sure I stuck to the task at hand. I did not get side-tracked by bringing in the groceries or saying “Hi” to Amy & Quinn. I maintained focus while I was in the middle of my subtasks. Because of this focus, if I wanted to stop at the end of each of my three subtasks, I could have.

Programmers, including me, are awful at this level of focus on any project that is not fun. They will go down meandering roads of functionality, or stop with their real tasks in favor of doing ones that are more fun. It is always more fun to work on the graphing module than the data entry drudgery. Down the path of distraction lies the heartbreak of many half-done modules.

### 2.3 Preparation

Finally, I made sure I did the proper preparation. I could have skipped dinner, but I would have had to spend more time later on in my project. I could have not changed into my lawn shoes, but at the cost of a ruined pair of work shoes. I could have not bothered filling the mower with gas, but chances are I would have run out in the middle of a swath. It was tough to do these preparatory steps when I saw the sun setting and my project time ticking away, but I knew it would be a short-term win and a long-term loss.

### 3 Conclusion

Solid programming practices are part hard-won lessons and part common sense. It does not matter whether it is Agile Programming or Extreme Programming or whatever the buzzword or book topic of the month is. If I want to stick a label on it, there is no harm any more than referring to my lawn technique as XM.

### 4 References

*Extreme Programming Installed*, by Jeffries, Anderson & Hendrickson. 0-201-70842-6. Addison-Wesley, Upper Saddle River, NJ.

Model 621 mower with 6.75 HP Briggs & Stratton engine and 21-inch cutting deck. Cub Cadet. Valley City, OH.

### 5 About the author

Andy Lester's XM skills have been improving in the years since he bought a house in the far Chicago suburbs. During the day, he leads a team of Perl and PHP programmers on the e-commerce site for the number one vendor of school library books in the US. Sometimes he gets time to maintain his CPAN modules `MARC::Record`, `HTML::Lint`, and `Carp::Assert::More`.



The Lawnotron 3000 provides 21 inches of viewable screen and cutting swath. Powered by AMD and Briggs & Stratton, this baby has an optional math coprocessor and mulching blade.