..... STRAIGHT FROM THE HORSES MOUTH

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I have this week heard a familiar question. "What in the world is that ugly short plant with the purple flower"? I have had that question brought to me several times over the last several years and it is not just homeowners with lawns that seem to be thick with that particular weed, but farmers also, who are finding it in cropland, pastures and cattle lots. I had a question this week about if it was poisonous to livestock, so I figured maybe we needed to address this issue and at the same time how to control this troublesome plant. This weed is called "Henbit." Let's take a little closer look at it in this week's edition.

Henbit: (Lamium amplexicaule) This member of the mint family (lamiaceae) is a winter annual with upright, square stems and pink-purple flowers. What makes this weed a "Winter Annual" is that it germinates in the fall, overwinters as a green plant, begins growing again in early spring, then completes their life cycle and go to seed in the spring or early summer. Henbit's early establishment allows it to interfere with desirable plant growth. It is also thought to possess chemical qualities that inhibit the growth of some other plants. The flowers are hermaphrodite (have both male and female organs) and are pollinated by bees. The plant is also self-fertile. As an annual, henbit reproduces solely by seed, and each henbit plant is able to produce 2,000 or more seeds. Henbit also spreads by producing roots on lower stems that touch the ground. Henbit is sometimes called red henbit, purple deadnettle, or red deadnettle but is probably more properly just called "henbit".

Normally it is more common to find this weed in lawns but this year we are seeing a lot of it in croplands, overgrazed pastures and cattle lots. I have actually seen a lot of this weed in wheat fields this year. Livestock usually avoid grazing certain plants because of taste, smell, or toxicity. Remember that henbit is a member of the mint family. Apparently the poisonous nature of henbit is minimal since no cases of poisoning have been confirmed in the US. Cattle may graze weeds including henbit and in fact during late winter and spring, palatable winter weeds such as henbit and chickweed can provide high quality grazing on dormant grasses and in fact will have between 15-20% protein. A little henbit will usually not cause any problems. The best policy is of course is to use caution, especially in heavily infested areas. I mention that because of the fact that we are seeing this weed in pastures, this year too. As for toxicity, we're primarily safe. But that being said, it has been considered a causative for "staggers" in sheep, horses, and cattle in Australia. Sheep particularly in Australia have been reported to exhibit hunched back, stiff back legs, tremors or shivering, and in rare cases may die if driven.

Henbit Control In Cropland and Pastures: By now the majority of henbit and purple deadnettle plants have bloomed or matured, consequently, there is probably very little to gain economically by spraying these with a post-emergence herbicide. Cultivation however will take care of these plants. Mature plants will eventually die back as temperatures become warmer. There is of course the thought of thousands of seeds that will be in the same spot in coming years. "*Valor*" may be used in a spring burn-down program with Roundup for burn-down control of henbit and chickweeds and residual control of waterhemp, common lambsquarters and black nightshade. Warning: It must be used 30 days before planting corn, so we are probably past the window of opportunity. It also may be used for pre-emergence and contact activity in soybeans. Now in pastures, a newer product from Dupont works well. "*Cimarron*" not only will get the Henbit but a lot of other weeds in pastures including musk thistle, common mullein, prostrate spurge and even marestail.

Henbit in Yards and Gardens: Henbit, is often confused with creeping charlie, *Glechoma hederacea.* Both have square stems and are in the mint family. Both have lavender to blue tubular flowers, however henbit flowers tend to be more on the purple/lavender range and are clustered at stem tips with clasping leaves below the flower cluster. Henbit can be highly competitive in newly seeded areas and thin or dormant turf. Henbit thrives in cool, moist areas. Growing conditions can be made less favorable by lightening the soil or otherwise improving drainage, especially in shady areas. Heavy, constant shade should be lightened as well where possible. Shady areas should be planted with turfgrass species which do well in the shade and which will provide maximum competition to weed species that invade these areas. Propagation of henbit is through seed. If it is already present in your landscape, you may prevent its spread by removal of the plant before it flowers and seeds. Roots are fibrous, so it is easy to pull small plants up by hand or hand-hoe. If you hoe, be sure to dig at least 3 – 6 inches deep to remove the whole plant and its taproot. Maintaining a regular mowing schedule will also reduce plant populations.

Chemical Control of Henbit in Lawns: There are several effective chemical applications available to the homeowner for control of Henbit. The use of pre-emergent herbicides at the right time of year may help with control of this weed. Use a selective post-emergent herbicide taking care to follow spray intervals if treating newly seeded areas. Optimum control will be obtained when henbit is actively growing and in the seedling to flower stage of growth. It is not easy to control this time of year. The best time for control is in the fall, but we do need to control it now. There are a couple of sprays that work. The most commonly used and probably effective chemical is Trimec. It can be put on your lawns to control henbit, chickweek, and clovers not to mention the easier killed weeds like dandelions. For the more adventuresome, you can mix your own spray. One of the common remedies is 8 parts of 2,4-D mixed with 1 part of Dicamba based herbicide (ie. Banvel. Clarity, or Sterling. Be sure to be careful of flowers and bushes that you want to keep as you could have some drift damage. You may have to apply a couple of times, about 2 weeks apart for best control. If you want to stop the seeds, you need to spray now!