

Yard and Garden - 04-07-2012 - Ted Griess / Extension Horticulture Assistant

When it comes to weed control, an ounce of prevention is certainly worth a pound of cure. Our unusual, early spring has caused confusion for plants and gardeners. Let's face it; the war on weeds began weeks ago. My telephone continues to ring, and the most frequently asked question is, "Should I start applying pre-emergence to the lawn for crabgrass control, or am I too late?"

Crabgrass is an annual grass. Each year it grows from seed. Optimal soil temperatures need to reach a constant 55° to 60° F for germination to begin. This normally does not happen until the latter part of April or early May. That is certainly not the case for this year. Many plants, including weeds, are emerging and a number of shrubs bloomed weeks ahead of the norm.

For example, one such plant is the yellow flowering forsythia shrub. Not only is it one of the earliest harbingers of spring, but for many gardeners, it also serves as a visual reminder to start applying crabgrass pre-emergence. With some degree of accuracy, crabgrass seeds generally begin to sprout about the same time forsythia blooms. Interestingly, forsythia was blooming nearly three weeks ago, and by now, most are finished blooming. Does this mean we are too late for crabgrass prevention?

Perhaps. However, even though we may have missed some early weed prevention, a plentiful supply of weed seeds are yet to sprout. A pre-emergent herbicide prevents germinating weed seeds from developing root hairs, thus destroying the emerging seedling.

Did you know that crabgrass is just one of many weeds plaguing our lawns and gardens? In the top layer of garden soil lie tens of thousands of other dormant weed seeds patiently waiting for the right opportunity to germinate. While early application of a pre-emergent is essential for crabgrass control; different weed seeds germinate at different times throughout the seasons. For example, henbit, that lovely, low-growing, purple-flowering weed we are presently seeing in full bloom throughout the countryside, could have been prevented by applying a pre-emergent herbicide. However, unlike crabgrass which germinates in the spring, henbit is a winter annual, and its seeds germinate in the autumn. The young weed tenaciously survives the winter as a very small plant. With the onset of spring, it rapidly grows in size, produces flowers and sets seeds for the next generation. Before summer officially arrives, the parent henbit plant dies, but not before creating thousands of seeds for the next generation. To prevent henbit seeds from germinating and becoming troublesome weeds, one should apply a pre-emergent herbicide in September.

A few quality pre-emergent herbicides include the following:

<i>Trade Name</i>	<i>Active Chemical</i>
Dimension	Dithiopyr
Barricade	Prodiamine

Pre-M
Treflan
Preen

Pendimethalin
Trifluralin
Trifluralin

Remember, a pre-emergent herbicide does not kill existing weeds. Winning the war against weeds involves two steps, and both target seeds. Step one is to destroy manually existing weeds and prevent them from going to seed. Step two is to prevent weed seeds from sprouting. If one focuses on a battle plan incorporating these two steps, eventually the war does become easier. The key is to make weed prevention a yearly routine.