

Lawn Weeds Abound in Thinned Lawns

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I've had more than the usual number of questions about lawn weeds with homeowners wondering why weeds seem even more prolific this year.

We will always battle weeds in landscapes, but this year they've taken advantage of lawns thinned or stressed by heat and drought and there does seem to be more than usual.

Kentucky bluegrass is a cool season grass that does not like hot temperatures. Some bluegrass lawns have become thin due to extreme heat and drought. This has led to increased weed growth, especially on turf edges near hot pavement.

Perennial broadleaf weeds like dandelion, ground ivy and bindweed have increased in thin turf. For these weeds, September 20 to October 20 is the most important time to apply herbicides if that is your main control method. Hand digging is important all season to reduce blooming and seed production.

The roots or other underground structures of perennial weeds survive the winter to regrow next season. When herbicides are applied to perennial weeds during spring and summer, the foliage may be killed but roots may survive to regrow.

As temperatures cool in fall, plants begin to move stored food into roots. This process increases the amount of herbicide moved into roots to increase control. Since most herbicides cannot be applied at temperatures above 80 or 85-degrees Fahrenheit, fall is also a better time for reducing the risk of damage to nontarget plants.

Once temperatures begin to cool, spot treat the foliage of individual weeds with a liquid herbicide labeled for broadleaf weeds in lawns. Combination products containing more than one type of herbicide tend to be most effective.

Many of the weeds in thinned areas are warm season annuals like crabgrass, prostrate spurge and purslane. As annual plants, these weeds will die this fall. At this time of year, annual weeds are best controlled by hand-pulling, ideally before they bloom and set seed. Removing them allows bluegrass to fill in thinned areas this fall to better compete next spring.

Preemergence herbicides control many summer annual weeds if applied at the correct time, which is not at this time of the year. If you are a do-it-yourselfer, apply preemergence herbicides in early May next year. Due to high weed pressure, it may be helpful to make a second application 8 to 10 weeks later.

If a lawn is dense and mowed fairly high, a second application should not be needed in most years as long as the first application is not made too early. Thin or bare areas can be overseeded, however, it is getting late for seeding now. This is best done by September 15 to reduce the risk of freeze injury to young plants.

If you wait to seed next spring, know that the only preemergence herbicides that can be used along with overseeding are products containing mesotrione or siduron. Other products will kill turfgrass seedlings as well as weed seedlings. Be sure to read and follow label directions.

With weather extremes likely to continue in most years, another option is converting lawns from Kentucky bluegrass to turf-type tall fescue. Fescue is also a cool season grass but it has deeper roots and coarser leaves and is more heat tolerant and drought avoiding.

Next spring, turf-type tall fescue could be overseeded right into a Kentucky bluegrass lawn. The lawn should be mowed lower than usual and then power raked and/or core aerated heavily prior to seeding. This removes plant debris and increases seed to soil contact needed for seed germination.