

Lawn Weed Management

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Spring is here and the annual lawn weed battle will begin. Weed weapons include competition, hand-pulling or digging, and herbicides. I often say we can win weed battles but we cannot win the war. There are too many sources of weed seed including the soil seed bank, wind, and birds flying over.

To win more weed battles ask these questions. Why is the lawn not competing with weeds? This is especially important if weeds are a larger issue in a lawn than most. Ask what is the weed, what control methods are best, and when is the best time to use a method? Positive identification is the only way to know how and when to effectively manage a weed, especially if herbicides are the control method.

While there are many types of weeds, henbit, dandelions and crabgrass seem to most be on our minds in spring. The definition of a weed is an undesirable plant or a plant growing out of place. One person's weed may be another person's desired plant. Henbit, dandelion, and white clover are plants pollinators forage on and some people choose to keep them.

Henbit is the low growing plant in full bloom now with purple flowers. It is called a winter annual because most seed germination takes place in fall. Small plants overwinter to grow and bloom in early spring. Henbit lives for one growing season, coming back from seed each year. After blooming in spring, plants die off in hot weather.

Well managed lawns mowed at a height of three to three and a half inches should compete with henbit and other annual weeds. If henbit is a problem, rather than a random weed that can be hand-pulled and removed before it sets seed, focus on lawn care to increase turf density for long-term management.

Until this is done, other control methods may be needed. If herbicides are chosen, preemergence herbicides applied in fall prior to seed germination work best. Once plants bloom in spring, application of a postemergence herbicide may speed plant death but will not prevent seeding. Hand-pull and remove Henbit in early spring to reduce seed production.

Crabgrass is a summer annual. It germinates later in spring, grows best during summer, then dies in fall. Because cool-season turf, like Kentucky bluegrass, struggles during summer heat, crabgrass becomes a problem in thin, poorly managed lawns. As an annual, it can be managed by improving lawn density and using the recommended mowing height.

When preemergence (PRE) herbicides are used they are best applied close to the start of seed germination to provide the longest period of control. In Nebraska, crabgrass seed begins germination in mid-May after soil temperatures reach 50 to 55 degrees F; with the majority germinating late May into early July.

Crabgrass preventers work by killing seedlings after seed germinates. They do not affect the seed. April 20 to May 5 is when Nebraska Extension recommends do-it-yourselfers make the first application of a PRE for crabgrass. This allows time for active ingredients to disperse in soil and is a better time to begin fertilization when weed and feed combination products are used.

Dandelions are a cool season perennial broadleaf weed. They make their best growth during spring and fall and come back each year from overwintering plants and seeds. While a dense lawn will compete well with dandelion seedlings, established plants are likely to regrow each year.

Digging blooming plants before they go to seed is a good management tool to use in spring. While dandelions can be spot treated with postemergence herbicides in spring, the plant often blooms and sets seed anyway. If herbicides are used, treating individual weeds in fall is most effective in killing plants.