

## **Controlling Weeds in Your Lawn**

by Debbie Lauer, Bell County Master Gardener

All of us have that vision of a perfect lawn in our heads. You know the dream; cool, beautiful, unbroken, lush green grass that makes you want to kick off your shoes and run barefoot through it. In this mental picture there are of course no weeds breaking up our perfect lawn. This ideal lawn can be accomplished but it takes dedication and work and work to achieve. There are several different things you can do to reduce weeds in your lawn and not all of them involve the use of chemicals.

THE best way to keep weeds out of your turf is to grow thick healthy turf. Follow these guidelines for healthy turf and you are also taking steps to reduce weeds without herbicides. MOST important to turf health is to frequent mowing. During the peak growing season in the spring and early summer that may mean mowing twice a week. This one you can not be lazy with. More frequent cutting encourages thicker growth which will choke out weeds. Never let your turf get too tall as this stresses grass and weakens its vigor and ability to grow rapidly.

Next comes watering your turf properly. Lawns need 1-2 inches of water per week during the heat of the summer, 1-2 inches every two weeks in spring and fall and 1-2 inches every month in winter. Water should be applied slowly and infrequently. This method allows the water to penetrate deeply into the soil. Water every 5-7 days unless your lawn "tells" you it needs water sooner. Signs that water is needed are; curling leaves; footprints remaining after you walk across it, and change in color to a bluish green color. Water only after one of these signals appears. This allows the top of the soil to dry out and with it weed seeds sitting on the surface. Meanwhile your lawn will develop deeper roots as it reaches down for water and should stay well hydrated IF you water properly.

Proper fertilizing is the final requirement for turf health. NEVER apply more than 1 pound of Nitrogen per 1000 square feet of turf at any one application. To figure out how much fertilizer that is visit the Bell County Cooperative Extension Office website at <http://bell-co.tamu.edu/>, click on Turf Answers and Tips, and then scroll down to find Nitrogen Fertilizer Calculations "Cheat Sheet". Most grasses need only two applications one in spring and one in fall. Resist the temptation to throw on more Nitrogen. Yes it will boost lush green growth, BUT it forces the grass to grow too quickly and weakens it. It also makes your lawn need more water, require even more mowing, invites disease and insect pests to attack that succulent new growth, and it also FEEDS those weeds!

After taking such good care of your grass there are still going to be some weeds that sneak in. It is estimated that there are approximately 1 Billion weed seeds per acre so recognize that you are always going to have a few. What you need to decide is how to deal with them or just live with them.

There are two weed cycles every year; summer weeds and winter weeds. To PREVENT weed seeds from germinating a pre-emergent herbicide can be applied twice yearly. Timing of this application is critical; after the seeds have germinated this type herbicide will do no good. The fall application of a pre-emergent herbicide for winter weeds needs to be put down BEFORE 15 September; for spring it is not so cut and dried. For a "normal" winter the second application should come in mid February. For winters that are mild and rainy, mid December or mid January applications may be necessary to stay ahead of the summer weeds. Be sure to water in the herbicide per the label instructions.

There are two kinds of pre-emergent herbicides, one for grassy weeds and another for broadleaf weeds. Select the one that targets the majority of your weeds or apply both. Don't apply the pre-emergent to heavily shaded lawns, these lawns are already stressed because of the shade and an herbicide could cause injury. Avoid applying the herbicide under trees and around shrubs to prevent damaging them. Also be sure not to over apply the herbicide for the same reason. Too much is NOT a good thing and you could end up hurting your grass therefore inviting in more weeds. After the pre-emergent is down don't break the barrier. Don't install a sprinkler system or disturb the ground by doing other things such as aerification. Even heavy foot traffic through an area could cause a breakdown of the protective barrier. Dig or aerify first, then put down the pre-emergent.

Even after a pre-emergent application weeds can still pop up. These can be treated with a spray herbicide spot treatment. The key here is to identify the weed you are attacking. In general, broadleaf weeds can be

treated with an herbicide containing the chemical 2,4D. Other weeds are even tougher. Nutsedge or nutgrass requires two applications of a very specific herbicide 30 days apart. These applications need to take place between May 15 and Sep 15. Dallisgrass is even trickier. It needs to be actively growing when it is treated with a herbicide containing the chemical MSMA. MSMA will yellow but not kill Bermuda grass; it will kill St. Augustine. To rid St. Augustine of Dallisgrass you must pull it up. St. Augustine grass is particularly susceptible to herbicide damage so be sure to read the labels of any chemical before you put it on a St. Augustine lawn. If you have a particularly pesky weed pull some of it up and take it to your local nurseryman and ask for advice. There is one final weed removal method; pull it up (preferably before it flowers and goes to seed)!

Every home owner has their own tolerance level with weeds. Before using an herbicide you should consider the necessity and your own tolerance level. No amount of chemicals will keep all weeds out of a poorly cultivated lawn. Chemicals are useful to help you break the weed cycle and good cultivation practices will reduce weeds naturally. Knowing and understanding how to use both techniques should enable you to have that dream lawn. So what if it has a dandelion or two?