

Little Barley Becoming Real Obvious, Again

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

As I've driven around town this week I've noticed it showing up in a lot of lawns! While crabgrass is just getting going, and is apparent by its light green seedlings in lots of lawns, little barley's life cycle is just about over and is becoming obvious as the plants start to die down and turn a tannish brown.

Little barley is related to the grain barley. Seeds sprout and start growing in September and October. It overwinters as a small plant, usually with just three or four leaves. In late winter it starts growing rapidly, starts heading out in April, sets mature seed in May and early June and is dead by early July. If left alone it can grow as tall as twelve to fifteen inches. But if it's constantly mowed off it has the ability to produce seed heads on tillers less than three inches tall.

It thrives in sunny dry locations with little or no competition from other plants. If a lawn is thick and mowed tall, little barley is not a problem. But with the heat and drought stress from past summers, many areas, including lawns, had little or no cover and little barley has flourished! If we have better growing conditions this summer, we'll have less open area and I would expect less little barley next year, but we have an awful lot of seed being produced at this time.

What really makes little barley annoying is that seed. The best way to describe it is like a miniature badminton birdie with a sharp point at the small end and the "feathers" of the birdie are sharp awns. The seed easily breaks off the seed head at maturity. The pointed end makes it easy for the seed to become caught up in clothing (especially socks), pet fur and between the pads on a pet's foot. The backward pointing awns make it very difficult to get out. For pets, these seeds between the paw pads can be painful and cause open wounds.

Other than taking a shop vacuum out and trying to vacuum up the seeds in areas of heavy infestation, there is literally nothing that can be done now. The seed is produced and the plant is dying. About the only thing you could spray that would kill it is a glyphosate product. But the plants are dying anyway and the seed is already produced. In the long run we want to get good thick lawns re-established. But in the short run we need to try to break the cycle.

If you aren't going to do any re-seeding this fall, you can use a crabgrass preventer type of herbicide. While any of them may work, Dimension (dithiopyr) is the only one I could find with it listed on the label. If you are overseeding do not use any weed preventer as it will also prevent the grass seed from growing. It would be best to apply the Dimension in mid August and then water it in within a few days of application. It takes about one half inch of rainfall or irrigation to get it activated.

The best thing to do right now is identify where you have populations of little barley. Mark this down on a map of your lawn so you know where to treat in August. I suppose you could go out and pull up the plants you could find and put them in the trash, but plenty of seeds have already been dropped by the plants.

If you want to be sure you know what the plant looks like, I have a web page with several photos of the plant and the seeds. This web page can be viewed at: <http://gardeningwithchuck.com/LittleBarley.htm> or you can bring samples in to me at the Extension Office, 119 East 9th Street, Junction City for confirmation. You can also email me photos, in focus please, to cotte@ksu.edu.