

Get a Jump on “Sticky” Lawn Issues

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Late every summer I am besieged with homeowners who have issues with sandburs or puncturevine. Both of these very different plants have a bad habit of developing seed capsules with sharp pointy projections. These sticky, or stickery, seeds tend to get into shoes, clothing, pet's feet, just about everywhere that you don't want to have them.

Sandbur is a grass. It dies each year, like crabgrass, and has to start over from seed the following year. It waits for the soil to warm up, just like crabgrass. It's going to thrive in sandy soils, but also in compacted soils and anywhere that grass stands are thin and there is bare soil. When it starts growing in the spring most people are going to be hard pressed to tell it apart from the turfgrasses that are present. In fact, most folks don't know that sandbur is present until they “get the point”!

Puncturevine is a broadleaf vining weed. It too is an annual. It completely dies in the fall and comes back the next spring from seed. It also likes thinly vegetated bare soil. It can thrive in compacted soil and hot dry conditions. The plant has a single taproot and can grow to over ten feet across. It has lots of little yellow flowers and the seed capsule easily breaks into four segments, each segment having two very strong stout spines. Sandburs get caught in your shoelaces and pant cuffs. Puncturevine winds up in the soles of your shoes or flattening your bicycle tires.

Both plants can get started late in the summer and still have enough growth to produce a lot of seed. By the time most homeowners are aware of a problem the weed has already produced seed so you're stuck for another year. The first approach is to keep turf areas thick, mowed tall and healthy. Most crabgrass preventers are fairly effective against sandburs, but often the sandburs are growing in areas where the pre-emergent barrier breaks down quicker or disturbed. Puncturevine is only moderately controlled by crabgrass preventers, or not at all, so I like a multi-pronged approach to dealing with each.

Start with management that keeps your lawn healthy and competitive. Use the crabgrass preventers, especially in areas of known infestations. Puncturevine really likes to be in compacted soils around walking paths and along the edge of roadways. Keep on a lookout for young seedlings of either. If you aren't sure, bring a few small plants in to me and I'll identify them for you.

If you had sandburs or puncturevine last year, you have a high probability of having a problem again this year. Both plants are warm season plants and won't start growing until May at the earliest. In addition to your preemerge treatments, plan to perform monthly post-emerge treatments. The crabgrass killers will work very effectively on sandburs and by treating once a month, the small seedlings will be easily killed. With puncturevine, use one of the dandelion type broadleaf weed killers. Continue treatments clear into September.

As always, read and follow all label directions for mixing and application. Be very careful with the broadleaf weed killers in the summer as vapors can drift off these and curl the leaves, or worse, of desirable plants including roses and tomatoes. Both of these weeds are real pains, but a little time and dedicated effort can help break the cycle and clean up the problem.