

Little Barley Becoming a Big Lawn Weed Problem

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Twenty five years ago, the winter annual grass plant called little barley was a novelty. I had learned it for identification contests in college but it was not commonly found. Fifteen years ago I noticed a definite increase in the little barley populations and five years ago I started getting questions about it. This past year it has become a big problem in lawns, waste areas, road sides, seemingly almost everywhere.

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 late May and 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 last summer, many areas, including lawns, had little or no cover last fall and little barley 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 developed 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 for confirmation.