

Make a Plan to Control Puncturevine

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Homeowners often can come up with some very interesting names for plants. Let's take a plant most commonly known as puncturevine that has the scientific name, *Tribulus terrestris*. It is an annual plant. It has a single taproot, grows no more than a few inches tall, but can spread four or five feet out in all directions from this single taproot. It has a neat little compound leaf and a delicate little pale yellow flower. The plant will often start growing about now, but can even germinate in early August and make seed by the end of September. If it has all summer to grow it can produce a LOT of seed.

The seed would technically be called a four or five lobed bur. Each lobe, or nutlet, contains three to five seeds and at maturity each lobe separates from the others. It is gray and sort of woody and comes equipped with 2 stout spines and several short prickles. It is these spines that bring out some of the more colorful names. The spines get stuck in shoes and pet's paws. They can flatten bicycle tires in short order. Some people call this plant sandbur, which is incorrect as the true sandbur is a grassy plant, and puncturevine is a broadleaf plant. Others call it goat's head, a few call it Mexican sandbur, and I'll guarantee that if you've just stepped on one of those rascals with bare feet you are going to be call it some other names preceded with colorful metaphors!

Like many weeds, puncturevine grows best in full sun with little competition. It is well adapted to hot and dry locations seeming to thrive along the edges of roads and in thin grass areas next to sidewalks, driveways or walkways. From a plant seed perspective, the seeds are quite heavy and unless caught up in an animal's paw or in the tire of some wheeled vehicle, the seeds don't move too far from where they were produced. In other words, if you had puncturevine in an area last year, you're going to have it in that area again this year! Controlling puncturevine in lawns begins with having a thick lawn that is mowed tall and without bare soil. If you accomplish this, you won't have a problem. But along walking paths, and bicycle trails we will continue to have problems.

Crabgrass preventer type products can offer some limited control for puncturevine. But being a large seeded plant, it can often "break" through many of these products, especially later in the season when the effectiveness of the herbicide is waning. We generally need to follow up with routine post emerge treatments. Most of the dandelion type weed killers will be fairly effective in controlling puncturevine. It can be helpful if you can learn to identify the plant when it is small. It may be just as effective however, to plan to treat areas where you had puncturevine last year about once a month through the summer beginning in early to mid June. Be careful with these herbicides as the active ingredients can cause damage to sensitive plants just from the fumes. Spray on a cool calm morning to minimize this risk.

If you suddenly find a puncturevine plant that has started blooming and setting seed you want to carefully pull it up and place it into a bucket for removal from the area. Move the plant carefully to avoid dislodging any seeds that have already formed. If you dislodge some seeds, consider using a shop vacuum to remove them from the ground or turf areas. The seeds are short lived so after controlling the plant for a couple of years you should have greatly reduced the seed load and future problems. Well, at least for a couple of years!