

Feeling Frustrated With Annual Grasses in Your Yard?

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

I've been receiving a lot of phone calls from home owners wanting to get a jump on those annual grasses that were all over their yard this summer. Annual grasses would be things like crabgrass and foxtail but can also include things like sandburs, barnyardgrass, and even obscure things like prairie cupgrass. Because of a dry early season, and then excessive rains for about six weeks in May and June, many of these grasses did very well this year.

Before we can start our plan on how to deal with these, we need to first make sure we fully understand them. These are all warm season annual grasses. Unlike our perennial turfgrasses, which go dormant over winter and then start growing again in the late winter or early spring, annual grasses die with freezing weather. The entire plant dies and has to start from seed next year. The warm season part of that description indicates that it likes the warmer temperatures of summer. The ground needs to become fairly warm before the seeds start to germinate which is usually in late April, May or anytime in the summer months.

All of these grasses have been very busy producing seed heads the past several weeks. They know that they will soon die and the only way that they can exist next year, is by producing seed. All those seed heads make them very obvious now, even though they have been growing quietly in your yards for months already. The seed is already produced. Trying to treat these grasses now will do no good as they will be back next year. The best you can do is mow the seed heads off so they aren't so obvious which will make you feel slightly better.

The next several weeks IS a good time to control winter annual broadleaf weeds. These are the weeds that have all those pretty blooms in our yards in April. Even though they may not be very visible right now, we treat them over the next month because the weeds are small and easy to kill. The herbicides we use on these weeds is a post-emerge (after the plant is up) herbicide. These products have to contact green plant material to be effective. Since these are broadleaf weeds, they are easy to control when they grow in a turf made of grass. Grasses and broadleaf weeds are very different plants and this difference in physiology makes control easier.

Controlling a grassy weed in a grass "crop" is a different story though. The choices to control these grassy weeds AFTER they have started growing are few. We depend on using a pre-emergent herbicide. The pre-emerge herbicide controls the plant at the time of germination or shortly thereafter. We often call this type of herbicide a crabgrass preventer because that is the summer annual grass most homeowners are most concerned with. But these crabgrass preventers also work quite effectively on the other summer annual grasses.

Right now, is not the time to do anything about these grassy weeds other than to note that you have them and where they are located. Work on getting your grass thicker and healthier, control the winter annual weeds and keep mowing it tall. A thick tall lawn is the best first defense against these weeds. Then next spring, usually very late March through mid April, apply your crabgrass preventer and be sure to water it in with irrigation if it doesn't rain within a few days of application. Rainfall is needed to wash these herbicides into the soil and activate them. Some products may need to be reapplied part way through the summer to give season long control. Read the label to make sure you are applying the product in the right manner.