

Controlling Unwanted Brush and Trees

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Many of us have probably heard the old adage that nature abhors a vacuum. There is a great deal of truth in that statement. Mother Nature will try to grow something anywhere that there is adequate moisture, sunlight and nutrients. What grows in a location can be very specific to the available water, sunlight, nutrients, rooting depth, etc. In fact the plants growing on the soil surface, and how they grow, can tell you a great deal about what's below the soil surface.

We live in a prairie. The really interesting thing about prairies, and grasslands in general, is that if you take fire out of them, they start to become forests. There will be a slow and natural evolution to woody plants. It doesn't matter if that grassland is a mile square pasture or a 5,000 square foot lawn, trees will start trying to grow there. They will also grow in fields, flower beds and vegetable gardens. You will need to do something to stop this if you don't want the trees.

In gardens, flower beds, even new landscape beds the best approach is to often just pull the little tree seedlings up or hoe them out. Right after a rain or a good watering most of these seedlings can be pulled fairly easily. You need to keep in mind that these are trees though and they can develop deep roots in a hurry so don't let them get too big. Some of our native trees, like redbuds and many of the oaks, can develop a deep taproot quickly. Desirable trees, like oaks or walnuts could be transplanted into pots for later planting or directly into the area that you want the new tree. Oaks and walnuts do not like to have that taproot disturbed, so if you replant directly into the ground it's best to have it where you want it from the start.

Once the tree seedlings have gotten too large to pull you are stuck with using some sort of herbicide treatment. With the exception of cedars, all of our trees are sprouting species. What this means is that they have the ability to sprout new growth from the crown if you cut it off at ground level. Therefore it becomes necessary, in most situations, to cut the small tree off and immediately treat the cut surface with a herbicide. This treatment needs to be done within a few minutes of cutting to be effective. You can use a herbicide specifically for stump and brush treatment - the label will say as much! You can also use concentrated glyphosate (Roundup). You can use a small brush to paint it directly on the stump or some products have a pinpoint applicator type nozzle. You want to be careful with these so as not to get any of the product on or near desirable plants to avoid damage.

In larger areas, pastures, fence-rows, field edges, even lawns, you may wind up with larger stands of brushy species or a grove of small trees. In these cases a careful application of a foliar treatment is going to be the most effective. Timing is critical for maximum effectiveness and the first half of June is generally the best time to do this. After early July control drops off dramatically as leaves develop thick waxy surfaces that hinders herbicide uptake by the plant. There are many products labeled for foliar treatment of brush. Be sure to read and follow all label directions and spray only when it is cool and calm to avoid drift to non-target plants. We also find that if control is attempted in a pasture that had a good burn this year, so that the brush was top killed and is growing back from the roots, we get very poor control with herbicides the same year it was burned. Wait until a year that you didn't burn to use herbicide controls.

Woody plants will always try to invade our outdoor world. It is just part of the natural process. Many different control options are available, you just have to choose the one that is best for you in your setting!