

Identifying and Controlling Little Barley

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

I felt a little sharp point in my sock the other evening and upon examination I saw that it was a seed of little barley. So that seed was a “pointed reminder” that it was time to talk about this annoying little grass again. As is often the case, the time that you really notice the problem is when it’s too late to do anything about it. But read on and take heed!

The plant in question is a grass known as little barley (*Hordeum pusillum*.) It is a “true” barley and is related to the cereal grass barley (*Hordeum vulgare*). This will become important later on. Little barley is a winter annual. It starts growing in the fall, overwinters as a small plant and then finishes its life cycle the following spring. While it can grow over a foot tall, it is most commonly only several inches tall, often because it is in fringe areas of lawns and keeps getting mowed off. Even though we do keep mowing it off, it will eventually develop a seed head below the height we are mowing and that is where the problem begins.

The seeds of little barley look a little bit like a long and slender badminton shuttlecock. One end is small and pointed. The seed then flares out with several awns pointing in the opposite direction. The point at one end allows it to work it’s way into clothing, animal fur or the pads on the bottom of pet’s feet. The awns pointing the other way sort of serve like a fish hook barb preventing it from falling out. The sharp little awns can break off and continue to cause irritation.

The plant has set seed and is pretty well dead by now. Other than going out with a blow torch and burning off the areas with little barley, there isn’t much you can do right now. Since the plant starts growing in the fall, the crabgrass preventer that you put on your lawn this spring didn’t do any good, as the plant was already established. Spraying it with a herbicide now to kill it won’t do any good, because it’s already dead or dying!

The first step in dealing with little barley, like any grassy weed in lawns, is to not let it get a foothold. It is going to grow where stands of grass are thin and there is bare soil. It often shows up in hot spots next to sidewalks, driveways and curbs and especially in areas that are consistently mowed too short! So mow your grass tall and encourage it to be a thicker healthier stand through all the other management techniques we talk about. You can overseed this fall to help eliminate little barley friendly areas of your yard.

The other option is to use a crabgrass preventer, but apply it in late August before the little barley germinates and start growing. Little barley is not on the label of all crabgrass preventers so you may need to read the label closely to see if it will work. I have found little barley on some products containing the active ingredient surflan. There are other crabgrass preventers that don’t say “little barley”, but they do say “barley - *Hordeum* species”. Little barley is a *Hordeum* species so this should work . But remember that you need to apply it in late August and then water it in to activate it if it doesn’t rain in a couple of days. If you are going to overseed your lawn this fall, DO NOT apply the preventer as it will also prevent your grass seed from sprouting!

If you want to see photos of little barley, including the seeds, I have created a web page that can be viewed at: <http://gardeningwithchuck.com/LittleBarley.htm>. Little barley has been increasing over the past twenty years, but with a little timely effort it can be controlled.