

Dealing With Clover in Lawns

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

I've recently been talking with a lot of homeowners about clover in their lawns. It is apparently a banner year for clover. We can give credit to the early warm up and then the cool and wet conditions. Many clover species really enjoy cool and moist conditions so we shouldn't be surprised. But we also need to realize that many of the clovers have some redeeming factors and understand when and why they may be a problem and when it may be just as well to ignore them and let them grow.

We need to first determine what weed homeowners mean when they start talking about "clover". There are three different plants that will have clover like leaves that we can find in lawns. Yellow woodsorrel has a yellow flower with five petals. It tends to be rather bushy and sparse with a three leaf clover like leaf. This plant is in the oxalis family and not a true clover at all. It is a perennial plant but has a weak root system. Black medic is a low growing plant with a clover like leaf and little rounded yellow flower heads. It is an annual but seems like a very healthy and robust plant. Finally there is white clover. White clover has the obvious white flower, it is a perennial and can form dense stands. It is a very good nectar plant for bees. All three plants can be a challenge to control.

Woodsorrel and black medic are most often going to be problems in lawns where the stand of grass is thin and there is bare soil. Plants are usually individual plants, but you can find a lot of them growing under the right conditions. White clover spreads by rhizomes (underground stems) which allows it to form large patches. White clover, and to a lesser extent the other two weeds, are going to be more likely an issue in lawns with lower maintenance and especially lower rates of nitrogen fertilizer. Since white clover (and black medic) are legumes, they can utilize nitrogen in the air for plant growth and are not limited by low rates of nitrogen fertilization. If white clover is growing in fringe areas and out of the way areas of larger lawns, I encourage homeowners to let it grow for all the value it gives back to the ecosystem.

As with any weed, the first step to controlling these weeds is to not let your lawn become favorable to their establishment. Mow the lawn tall and keep the grass thick. A bare spot in your yard is the friend of the weed. If you do want to control these weeds, then you may need something a little bit more than the standard dandelion killer type of herbicides. You most likely will need a herbicide that contains triclopyr. These products often include words on the label like chickweed, clover, or oxalis killer. Read the fine print and look to see if it controls triclopyr.

Here is the real challenge in controlling these plants. All of these products that you are going to spray can have adverse effects on other plants in the yard or neighborhood. These herbicides don't know the difference between white clover, a rose bush or a tomato plant. Spraying on a windy day can blow mist on to desirable plants causing damage. Spraying on a day when the temperature is over 80 degrees can result in vapors coming off the treated area also damaging sensitive plants (tomatoes are often the most sensitive). If you can plainly smell the herbicide as you are applying it, the vapors are strong enough to curl leaves on sensitive plants. It likely won't kill the plant, but damage will be noticed. A good way around this problem is to wait and treat during October. These plants are still growing actively and other plants are going dormant so damage will be less likely to occur. But if you treat now, do so when the wind is nearly calm and temperatures are below 80 degrees, preferably below 75.