

Little Barley is a Pain in the Paw (and the Socks)

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

There is a weedy grass present in many lawns that is turning yellow and maturing now and creating a real problem for pets and people. The plant is called little barley. The mature seed looks a little bit like a badminton shuttle cock. One end is pointed and the flared open end has little points that causes it to work into fabric, fur or the pads on pet's feet, and then not come out. Photos of the plant and the seed can be seen at <http://gardeningwithchuck.com/LittleBarley.htm>.

Since it is finishing its life cycle now it is dying and trying to apply herbicide to kill it is a waste of time. Little barley appears to have been spreading and becoming more and more of a problem over the past twenty years. There is a strong likelihood that warmer winters and other climate change factors are helping with the spread of this plant. However, it is native to the United States and has likely always been in Kansas, but changes in climate may have allowed it to become more competitive especially in waste areas or mis-managed lawns.

Little barley is classified as a cool season winter annual grass. That puts it in the same plant growth type as winter wheat. Many other grassy plants also have this same growth type including the closely related foxtail barley as well as what wheat farmers often call "cheat" but we run into in yards and gardens and call it downy brome or Japanese brome. The seed germinates and it starts growing in late summer and early fall. It establishes itself in the fall and is likely overlooked or simply noticed as a lush, often soft, stand of grass seedlings. In the late winter and early spring it grows rapidly before developing a seed head. We really notice it as it starts to mature and die down as the seeds become hard and pointed and start getting into everything causing us discomfort. Or in the case of pets, it can become a medical issue as the seeds get imbedded in feet and fur.

Because it is dying now, control efforts at this time are honestly a waste of time. Little barley is going to take advantage of open areas in turf and other bare spots. You will never find it in thick aggressive turf that is mowed at a proper tall height. Proper management of your turf is the first and best approach to dealing with little barley. Of course, if you have a thick stand of little barley, you probably don't have a lot of other grasses and you have a mess.

I would start with trying to get a good stand of grass established late this summer. Plant tall fescue or bluegrass the very end of August or early September. Water it well and get it up and growing as soon as possible. Keep it well watered and fertilize it lightly after about a month. You will still have some little barley but you want to get the grass growing to provide as much competition as possible. Remember, mow it tall - 3 inches for bluegrass, 3.5 inches for tall fescue.

If you have a good stand of grass, or the second year after getting your new stand of grass started, you will need to treat with a crabgrass preventer around September 1st. You want to get the weed preventer activated, with rainfall or irrigation, several weeks before the little barley is going to start germinating. You are trying to break the seed production cycle. The seed is short lived and if you can get two years without little barley you should have the cycle broken. There are only two crabgrass preventers with little barley (or "barley species") on the label; Surflan and dithiopyr. Surflan can only be used on tall fescue and can be hard to find, but dithiopyr is fairly readily available. Be sure, after application, to water the product to activate it if you don't receive at least a half inch rainfall within a few days.