

Weeds in Your Pasture? Don't Worry!

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

I've been receiving a lot of phone calls from pasture managers concerned about all the "weeds" in their pastures and what they can spray them with. Okay, let's just park the sprayers for a while and work through this rationally. Clear back in early March I was warning you that this would happen this year. Why did it happen and why do we not need to worry about it?

If you remember a year ago we were about ten months in to what would be an 11 month drought. Pastures weren't growing at all. In August that all turned around and it started raining. Pastures started growing. Livestock producers desperate for forage turned cattle into the better looking pastures. Even normal grazing by then was going to greatly reduce forage cover. Many cattle stayed on pastures all winter long because forage was at a premium. Even well managed pastures entered the spring season with very little residual vegetative cover.

When we experience a summer drought, many normal processes slow down or stop. The breakdown of soil and surface organic matter in pastures needs moisture and warmth. Without either one the amount of decomposition decreases or stops. When it starts raining again, we often wind up with a big rush of nutrient availability due to the backlog of undecomposed organic matter in the system. We always see a lot of grass growth in pastures after a drought and always credit the rain for that. Rain is only half the equation, the increase in available nutrients is the other half.

When it started raining late last summer we started to get an increase in nutrient availability. These microbiological processes continued, albeit slowly, through the fall and started back up again this spring. So there's the first part of the equation; an increase in nutrients, fertilizer if you will. Then the spring was wet, especially May and now June when we have so much growth occurring in our native prairies. Part two of the equation. We will likely have some very tall native grasses by this fall because of this!

We don't recommend fertilizing native prairies, but why? Mainly because annual "weedy" plants have a better opportunity to use the fertilizer than the native grasses and forbs (wildflowers) that evolved under very low nutrient conditions. You fertilize native prairie and you'll get luxuriant growth of annual, often undesirable, plants. These plants are present every year. Many of these plants produce a lot of seed and that seed can lie dormant for several seasons. Many of these seeds need moisture AND sunlight to germinate. If we have some vegetative cover left it often shades out the soil and the seeds don't germinate. If we don't have a lot of cover, as was the case this spring, the sunlight hits the ground. With abundant rainfall we have a lot of germination and with increased nutrients we have amazing growth.

With good pasture management we will close out this grazing season with good cover, and next year we should be back to normal. The other reason I don't want to initiate pasture wide spraying is that the same herbicides that will control these "weeds" will also kill many desirable forbs. These forbs provide additional forage for livestock. Many of the forbs are also native legumes so they provide nitrogen. A pasture composed only of grass plants is not as productive or nutritious for livestock.

Yes, the pastures may look a mess, they may look ugly. Spray woody brush species, and noxious weeds this year. But please try to ignore the rest of the "weeds", manage the pasture with proper stocking rates and we should get back to normal by next year!