

Little Barley in Lawns

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Little barley is a short grassy annual weed that has been around forever. It is native to Kansas and the Great Plains. Up until about 15 years ago it was a novelty that I would encounter in waste areas, edges of fields, overgrazed pastures, etc. But something started changing about 15 years ago and I started seeing it showing up on the edges of lawns, or hotspots in yards, even invading lawns that were mowed too short. Probably due to the drought of 2017-18 and then a very wet fall of 2018, it has become a major problem in the spring of 2019.

I do have a webpage with good photos of it that you may want to go and look at first. Many people have little barley in their yards but don't know it. So open your web browser and go to <http://gardeningwithchuck.com/LittleBarley.htm> to see what it looks like. While little barley will move into thin areas in your lawn, the real problem it poses comes when the plant has headed and starts to set mature seed.

Little barley seeds are small, about 1/4 to 3/8 of an inch long, and sort of look like a tiny streamlined badminton shuttlecock. The small end is pointed and the larger end has backwards facing pointed sharp awns. As the plant dries down, the seeds easily become detached from the seed head and will get stuck in clothing where they are a real nuisance. But worse than that, the seeds can get in between the pads of pet's feet. They slowly work their way in and they don't come out easily and can result in a limping pet that will lead to a trip to the veterinarian!

While the plant is fairly easy to see at this time of year, there is honestly nothing you can do about it other than to pull the plants up or burn them down with fire. The latter is not practical and certainly not legal in town! What you need to do now is to take photos around your yard of where the plant is located so you can remember where it was when it is time to treat. You can also make sure that you are mowing your lawn 3 to 3½ inches tall and doing everything you can to keep your lawn healthy and competitive.

Little barley is at the end of its life span right now. The plant is dying and dropping mature seed everywhere. Once it's dead the plant just sort of disappears to nothing. But the seeds are still there and will get picked up by clothing and pets to be moved around. The seed will germinate in late September and October. You likely won't notice it then but the time to stop it is before it starts.

If your lawn is real thin you may want to consider overseeding the first of September to get fescue or bluegrass up and going. This will provide shade and inhibit the little barley seed from germinating. If you aren't going to overseed or reseed then there is the option of using a preemergent herbicide.

There are two herbicides that can be used to control little barley. Surflan specifically mentions little barley on the label but can only be used on warm-season grasses (bermudagrass, zoysiagrass and buffalograss) and on tall fescue. But not on bluegrass. The premerge herbicide Dimension (dithiopyr) is labeled for barley (*Hordeum* species). Little barley is *Hordeum pusillum* so you can use Dimension for little barley control. The active ingredient, dithiopyr, is found in quite a few products including "store brand" products. Read the label closely to see what the active ingredients are. Both products need to be applied and watered to activate in early September.

We aren't sure why little barley is increasing so much, but we do know it can be a nuisance and a health problem for pets. So mark your calendar for early September and get a plan in place to deal with it!