

All Those Pretty Flowers

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

I see a lot of yards around town, including my own, that has a lot of really pretty flowers. There are yellow ones and purple ones and little blue and white ones. Oh, these aren't in flower beds, they are literally in the yard! Many homeowners are going to call these weeds. They are all up in arms and wanting to get out there and spray them NOW! Unfortunately, to turn an old phrase, the horse has left the barn and there's no need to close the door now.

For reference purposes, the yellow flowers are dandelions, the purple flowers are henbit, the little blue flowers are speedwell and the little white flowers are chickweed unless they are in a clump with dark green grass like leaves and then they are star-of-Bethlehem which we won't talk about. Call me for control options on that one. Dandelions are technically perennials, but all the others are annuals, specifically winter annuals. These all, including the dandelions, likely germinated and started growing last fall. While the dandelion will continue to grow after blooming, the other three are already starting to make seed and then they will die. By early June they'll be slowly withering away to nothing only leaving behind a pile of seed.

One of the things that makes a plant troublesome to the point that many call it a weed is its ability to bloom and quickly set viable seed. Some trees can take all summer to create a viable seed. Some of these plants can do it in less than two weeks. Which means that going out now, after they have started blooming, and spraying with the strongest herbicide you can, the plant is already making seed and other than burning everything away with a blow torch, you aren't going to stop it. Once you see the blooms, it is too late. Not only that, but a full grown, mature plant is much harder to control than a small seedling that has just a few leaves and not much of a root system. It's that way with any plant we are trying to control.

About now, some of you are likely saying, "But I treated my lawn last fall and I still have those blasted weeds!" There are many things that can cause herbicides not to work or appear not to work. Application failure. Not applying the proper amount of herbicide to the correct lawn area. Rain too soon or too long after an application.

The most common issue, though, is applying the herbicide too early in the fall. The herbicides we use are generally only going to work on plants that are up and growing at the time of the treatment. While all of these start germinating and growing in late August or early September, the seed continues to germinate on in to October. When these seedlings first germinate and start growing in the fall they are quite small and easily overlooked. If you aren't looking for them you will likely never see them. They'll get up to a few leaf stage, get a good root system established and then get ready to go into winter. These plants have a very low threshold to start growing so warm days in January and February will get these plants active and henbit especially can be blooming by late February.

I prefer to wait to treat these weeds until the latter half of October or even early November. We often have warm enough weather and good enough growing conditions that we can treat well into November. By then the soil is cool enough that germination of seeds is pretty much over. If you spray in September, you'll get some of the seedlings, but miss a lot of them so they'll be blooming in March and April. Be sure to read and follow label directions on whatever liquid or dry product you choose to treat with. Pay close attention to make sure that you are applying the right amount of product for the square feet you have to treat!