

Get Ready To Weed and Feed Your Lawn

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Many homeowners develop what I call the “busy bee syndrome” during late September and early October. Those crisp autumn days, along with shortening hours of daylight, stimulate some innate need to be out doing something in the yard. Bees are busy getting ready for winter and I think homeowners often feel that they need to do the same with their lawns. So they get out there sometime entirely too soon after Labor Day and apply the weed and feed treatment to their yards. They feel great that they got it done and then the following spring they find their lawn a blooming mess and are totally at a loss to understand why!

Most of us have, or try to have, cool season lawns like tall fescue or Kentucky bluegrass. As the weather cools off in September these grasses get busy growing but more so underground as in making larger root systems, generating larger crowns and producing more leaves. So fertilization in the fall helps stimulate the grasses to grow more which will translate into deeper green lawns next spring that start growing a little bit sooner. Companies that produce and sell weed and feed products start pushing these things in late August. While I encourage fertilizing cool season lawns in early September, this is way too early for weed and feed applications. September applications should be fertilizer only and the winterizer type of products are great for this!

Weed and feed products are just as their name implies. They contain a standard high nitrogen fertilizer and then herbicides designed to control broadleaf weeds. Unlike the crabgrass preventer that we apply in the spring that do in fact prevent plants from getting established, the herbicides in weed and feed products are designed to kill weeds that are actively growing. In fact if the weed doesn't germinate and start growing until a week or two after the application is made, it will be unaffected by the herbicide.

The weeds we are trying to control this fall are the ones that bloom early in the spring. They are called winter annuals and include henbit, chickweed and speedwell. While a perennial not an annual we also use fall applications to control dandelions. All of these plants are sprouting now from seeds produced in the late spring before the plants died. They really started sprouting about three weeks ago after that week of rainy and cool weather. Those two things were just the trigger that was needed to get those seeds sprouting. The problem is that they will continue to sprout for another week or two so we don't want to be in too big of a hurry to apply any weed control products. If the weather is warm enough, seeds could even sprout into early November.

I would probably hold off another week though just to get as many seeds sprouted as possible. As long as daytime highs are above 50 degrees you can continue to apply weed control products well into November and even December. We do want to control as many of those weeds now as possible because they are far easier to kill in the fall when they are small. Once the weeds come out of dormancy in February and March they grow very fast and are much harder to kill. In fact once they start blooming they will produce viable seed even if you spray them then.

One consideration though is if you reseeded this fall or did extensive overseeding. While the weed and feed products are designed to control broadleaf plants, young grass plants can be damaged by them. Our general guideline is to wait until the new grass seedlings are big enough to have been mowed at least twice and three times is better. If it was a late seeding this fall you may just have to wait until spring and use a weed and feed product at that time.