

Little Barley

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

There is a grassy weed that can occur in lawns and grassy areas anywhere that is becoming quite visible now. It is Little Barley and while little is part of it's name it's becoming a big problem, especially for pet owners. If left unmowed it may get twelve inches tall, but in most yards it'll just be a couple inches tall but still sending up a seed head. It is that seed head that is really the problem, or more correctly the individual seeds. The seed looks like a tiny badminton shuttlecock. But the small end and the ends of the veins on the big end are sharp and they have the bad habit of working their way into socks or between the pads on pet's feet. Once they are in any of these locations they do not come out easily and will start to cause a great deal of irritation and even injury that may require veterinarian care!

The plant is a distant cousin of the crop plant barley. Fifty years ago it was a bit of a novelty but over 25 years ago I noticed it starting to proliferate around our area and now it is found in many locations. It is native to the USA and while now found nearly coast to coast it was likely only a plant of the southern states a century ago. The plant has a distinctive wheat or barley like seed head, maybe one to two inches long. Right now those seeds are starting to mature going from green to tannish white in color. Even before they are fully mature the seeds become hard and will start to fall off the head. Close up photos and even more information can be found at <http://gardeningwithchuck.com/LittleBarley.htm>.

While it is now becoming plainly visible, there's truly nothing you can do about it now. The plant is near the end of it's life cycle and will be completely dead in a few more weeks. No matter what you do, it is making seed and you can't stop that other than plowing everything under which is a bit drastic! The seeds germinate and start growing from the very end of August through early October. At that time it's going to be virtually unnoticed, just another little green sprig. In fact until it starts to develop seed heads it's going to go unnoticed by most homeowners. To control it you need to apply a crabgrass preventer in the first half of August and then water it in to activate it before the little barley starts to germinate. Not all crabgrass preventers have it on the label. I do know that surfan and Dimension (dithiopyr) have little barley or barley species on their labels so can be used. But remember, it needs to be watered in with at least a quarter inch of rain or irrigation to be activated.

The other method to reduce how much of it you have is to improve the stand of grass in your yard. Like many weedy annual grasses, little barley is going to be primarily found in areas that have thin grass or no grass. Taking steps to thicken your lawn and reducing how much bare soil is visible is a good first step. Mowing taller is the first step in this process. Most of our lawn grasses are going to do very well being mowed at 3 to 3.5 inches tall. You can also overseed thin areas this fall but if you are going to do that, DO NOT apply a crabgrass preventer. The crabgrass preventer can't really tell the difference between crabgrass, little barley, fescue or bluegrass. It's honestly a chicken or the egg sort of things trying to decide between reseeding part of the lawn or applying the crabgrass preventer to stop the little barley.

Little barley is literally a pain in the paw. Sadly, about the only option right now is to go out and start pulling up every little seed head you see in the yard. Which I rather suspect nobody is going to do. But there is hope and help in the long run!