

Don't Be In a Hurry to Treat for Weeds

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Many homeowners wait until they see the pretty flowers in their yards in March and April to treat for weeds. By spring time, however, the plants are approaching maturity. If they are blooming then they will soon be producing seed, even if you spray as soon as you see that first bloom. Being larger mature plants, they will be harder to kill with herbicides. They will die, but they'll put up a fight. You've missed the best time to treat them.

So let's back up the clock, or the calendar in this case. Let's move from spring time back to the previous fall. Most of these weeds are annuals with the exception of dandelions. Dandelions are a perennial but for all intents and purposes we can treat them like annuals. These plants that bloom early in the spring are called winter annuals. They germinate and start growing in the fall (now), overwinter as a fairly small plant, start growing in late winter or very early spring, growing rapidly and blooming often as early as March. By early June, or before, the plants are dead.

Let's talk specifics right here about what we are primarily dealing with. Dandelions everyone knows with their yellow flowers and puffy seed heads. But we also have henbit, a low growing plant that can have an abundance of purple blossoms, speedwell is also low growing and has tiny little blue-violet flowers with a white center and chickweed with it's little white flowers. As I said earlier, dandelions are perennials but all the others sprout in the fall (as do seedling dandelions) and die before the heat of summer the following year.

In the fall, as these weeds germinate with cooler weather and rainfall or irrigation, they are easily overlooked. They don't grow very large, they don't have a lot of leaves, but they are busy developing a good root system. The rapid growth phase will occur after winter dormancy. However, at this stage of growth they are easily controlled by herbicides. The challenge with fall weed control is that the products we use are only going to work on weeds that are up and growing. Many of these weeds are just now getting around to germinating. If a homeowner gets into too big of a hurry to treat with a weed and feed product, the herbicide is applied before the weeds are even up. Next spring the lawn may well have weeds and the homeowner can't figure out what went wrong because they know they treated for the weeds.

These plants will continue to germinate for a couple more weeks yet. I strongly encourage homeowners to not do their fall lawn weed treatment until after October 15th and probably even better to wait until the last week of October. Herbicides, both granular and liquid products will work in cooler fall weather allowing us to treat even well into early November most years. Since the plants are growing slower in the cooler weather the herbicides will also work slower. Don't worry if you don't see activity for a week or two. The weeds are dying, just more slowly. If we have an extended fall a few weeds may pop up but these can be treated with spot treatments in the early spring.

Ultimately, the best way to deal with weeds in a lawn is to have a thick lawn that is mowed tall. If there is no bare soil, if the sun is prevented from shining on the soil surface, you will have far fewer weeds, So keep mowing tall throughout the autumn. Work to thicken up that lawn and as the lawn improves, it will do a better job of preventing weeds from getting started!