

Start Now to Prevent Summer Crabgrass

It's been demonstrated time and time again that actions we take or don't take in the early stages of a do-it-yourself project can have a tremendous effect on the success of the project. Consider lawncare for example. If one of your New Year's resolutions was to have a lawn with fewer weeds in 2024, your actions (or lack of) over the next few weeks will influence how successful you are at achieving that resolution. Please read on to learn why.

Crabgrass is probably the most common warm season weed grass in our area, and serious lawncare enthusiasts who strive for a pure stand of turfgrass may consider crabgrass at the top of their "Most Unwanted Weeds" list. With its rapid growth rate and markedly different appearance that



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detracts from the uniform appearance of cultivated turfgrass, along with the fact that it dies at frost leaving patches of brown instead of green turf, it's no wonder why some view crabgrass as the enemy and engage in annual battle against it. Knowing about your enemy helps to identify its weaknesses which helps to ensure success in your fight against it. With that in mind, consider the following facts about crabgrass.

I'll start with the name. Why is crabgrass called crabgrass? Does its presence in the lawn make people crabby? Maybe, but I've known some crabby people who didn't have crabgrass. While its presence does aggravate some, crabgrass is said to get its name because it grows low to the ground with stems that radiate out from the center of the grass clump, resembling crab legs.

There are many species of crabgrass but the two you're apt to find in your lawn are large crabgrass (*Digitaria sanguinalis*) and smooth crabgrass (*Digitaria ischaemum*). Crabgrasses are thought to be the first cultivated grains and were grown for food in some parts of the world thousands of years before they were considered weeds. Forage crabgrass varieties are cultivated as feed for livestock today. The U.S. Patent office introduced large crabgrass into the U.S. as a forage crop in 1849. Immigrants from Poland and central Europe are credited with bringing crabgrass seed with them in late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Crabgrass grows as an annual in our climate which is a key factor in a crabgrass control program. Since crabgrass is an annual and annuals have to repopulate from seed each year, preemergence herbicides, sometimes called crabgrass preventers, are a good choice for crabgrass control. Preemergence herbicides work by preventing newly germinated seedlings from developing into mature plants by interfering with

root formation. Time of application and application rate are key to crabgrass preventer effectiveness. The product needs to be applied before crabgrass seed begin to germinate. Crabgrass seed typically begins to germinate when the temperature in the upper soil level reaches or exceeds 55°F for four consecutive days and nights. This temperature threshold typically occurs here in the mid-February to mid-March time frame. Last year I observed emerged crabgrass seedlings on March 8 in Rockvale. The product also needs to be applied at the rate listed on the label to ensure enough is spread over the area to provide control. All preemergent products have a requirement for at least 0.5 inch of irrigation or rain within 24 to 48 hours of application to move it into the upper soil zone where it will form a protective barrier against germinating seedlings.

Generally, these herbicides will provide 12-16 weeks of crabgrass control depending on application rate. Making a split application where the product is applied twice at a lower rate can extend the period of residual control. Product labels will offer instructions for making both single and split applications. Preemergence herbicides can be applied to turf areas alone or as a fertilizer and preemergence mixture with equal effectiveness.

What if you've planned to apply crabgrass preventer but weather, life events, or family and job obligations keep you from doing so before crabgrass begins to emerge? In this case consider applying a preemergence and postemergence herbicide together. This combination should provide control of the emerged crabgrass seedlings and prevent additional germination. A reference detailing available options for crabgrass control is UT Extension publication W146 Crabgrass Species Control in Turfgrass which is available at www.tennesseeturfgrassweeds.org under the Fact Sheets tab. And remember, we, your county Extension agents are here to answer questions you may have about weed control and other lawn and garden topics so give us a call at 615-898-7710. You can email me directly at mmotel@utk.edu if you prefer.

If you're one who views crabgrass in your lawn as a good thing because it's green during the summer months and it's free, you're good to go, no further actions required. But, if your goal is a pure stand of turf, free of weeds of any sort, you'd best get busy and prepare to apply a preemergence herbicide soon. And if you're a lawn enthusiast leaning toward the extreme who gave your sweetheart 2 bags of premerge for Valentine's Day, I urge you to make your application as soon as you have recovered sufficiently to do so.

Programs in agriculture and natural resources, 4-H youth development, family and consumer sciences, and resource development. University of Tennessee Institute of Agriculture, U.S. Department of Agriculture and county governments cooperating. UT Extension provides equal opportunities in programs and employment.

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