When chickweed is finished flowering, it releases seeds that stay dormant in your yard all summer.

Obnoxious Lawn Weeds – Fall's the Time to Kill 'Em

Research has shown that fall herbicide applications provide the most effective weed control.

Story and Photography By Douglas A. Spilker, Ph.D.

Maintaining a beautiful lawn in the Midwest is a challenge. Lawns go from too wet to droughty, and suffer very cold winters to extremely hot summers. This creates stress on area lawns. The result can be a thin lawn, which allows weeds to get a foothold.

Some common weeds like dandelions and plantain can be easily controlled with common herbicides, but some of the more challenging weeds, like henbit, ground ivy, and clover, require extra effort to control.

MAKE THE GRASS HAPPY

The most effective method of deterring lawn weeds is to maintain dense, vigorously growing turf. Weeds are often an indication of problems in the grass plant environment, and killing the weeds without correcting the underlying problem will lead to unsatisfactory results. For example, a problem with prostrate knotweed is an indication of soil compaction. Control of knotweed without correction of the soil compaction will only lead to bare areas that are again invaded by weeds. White clover and buckhorn plantain are signs of low soil nutrient levels.

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

Before taking action, know which weeds you are trying to control, and whether they are annual or perennial in life cycle. If you are not sure, get help from your local garden center or a university website. For best control, it is imperative to target weeds at their most vulnerable stage, so it

Henbit, a member of the mint family, may not look like a weed with its tiny purple orchid-like flowers, but it spreads quickly in home lawns if not controlled.

is very important to make herbicide applications at the right time of year.

Annual grassy weeds (for example, crabgrass and foxtail) are best controlled using a pre-emergence herbicide in the early spring. These products attack the weed seed as it germinates, thus preventing establishment.

Chickweed and henbit are winter annual weeds and appear in the cooler temperatures of fall and early spring. Then, when they are finished flowering, they release seeds that stay dormant in your yard all summer until conditions are cooler. Apply a pre-emergence herbicide in the fall to create a barrier against germination in the spring. If you still have a problem in the spring, the use of a post-emergence herbicide may be necessary.

Perennial broadleaf weeds are the most difficult to control. Their extensive root system is loaded with stored food that gives them a second chance for survival after treatment. Perennial broadleaf weeds can be treated either in spring or fall, but they must be actively growing for best control. If you have struggled to control weeds such as ground ivy, wild violet, black medic, dandelion, or white clover throughout the spring and summer, fall is the best time to treat so they do not reappear in spring.

WHY FALL WEED CONTROL?

In the fall, perennial weeds begin moving food to the roots for winter storage instead of to the leaves for continued growth. Herbicides applied at this time are translocated to the roots as well, killing the entire plant instead of just the top growth. The downside of fall broadleaf weed control is that you really do not get to enjoy seeing them twist and shrivel before they die (which often accompanies herbicide applications). However, next spring the weeds will have disappeared.

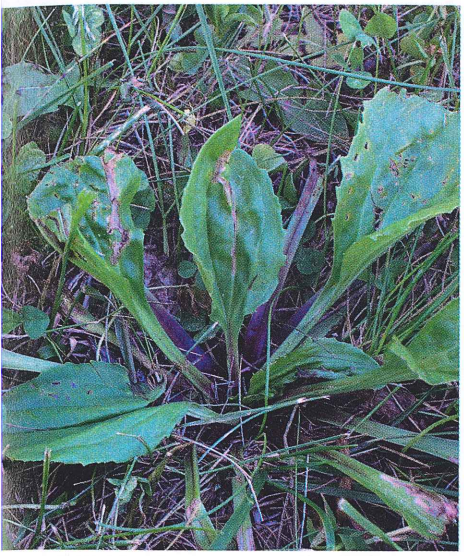
As long as temperatures are above 50 F, fall weed control can be very effective. Annual weeds like crabgrass, foxtail, knotweed, and purslane only live for one summer and naturally die at first frost, so fall treatment is unnecessary.

Many products are available for broadleaf weed control and may contain active ingredients such as 2,4-D, carfentrazone, sulfentrazone, quinclorac, or triclopyr. These products are selective and will not damage grass. After making the herbicide application, do not mow for two to three days to allow the plants absorb the chemical. Add a spreader-sticker to your tank-mix to improve control of weeds with slick leaves such as ground ivy. Be sure to read and follow all labeled directions and wear appropriate personal protective clothing.

DID YOU GET MY DRIFT?

As with any pesticide product used in the landscape, caution should always be taken before applying. Herbicides easily drift onto desirable plants, so treat when winds are calm, commonly in the morning. Larger spray droplets are less likely to drift than a fine mist. When possible, use a granular product instead of a spray, as it is less likely to drift.

Another good reason for fall herbicide applications is that they can be applied when many of the trees and shrubs are starting to go dormant and dropping their leaves, and are less sensitive to non-target drift.



For the control of violets in the lawn, a spreader-sticker should be added to the spray mixture to help "stick" it to their glossy leaves.

Top Left: There is a strong urge to dig up deep-rooted weeds like plantain, but they will re-grow from root remnants. Top Right: Ground ivy or creeping Charlie is a persistent weed that forms a mat and chokes out grass.

Those of us who like unblemished lawns may find it impossible to hold off digging or treating those "obnoxious" perennial broadleaf weeds during spring and summer. However, research has shown that fall applications provide the most effective control. Since we never know what spring conditions will be, take advantage of this fall's weather to get a jump on next year's lawn weed control.

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What is a spreader-sticker?

Spreader-stickers are combination products added to spray mixtures to improve the effectiveness of pesticide applications. The "spreader" component reduces the surface tension of water so the spray droplets do not bead up, creating uniform spray coverage. The "sticker" component increases the adhesion of spray droplets to the leaf, reducing loss by rain or dew. However, these products should not be added to all spray mixtures. Because of different interactions between pesticides and spreader-stickers, pesticide labels will tell you whether to use a spreader-sticker and the type to use. In some cases, a spreader-sticker is already a part of the product, and the label will state specifically not to add a spreader-sticker. In these cases, adding more spreader-sticker could cause leaf burn or poor performance.