

Controlling Summer Annual Grassy Weeds in Lawns

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As we enter the summer season, you might notice some new outlaws sauntering onto your lawn. Gone are the turf weeds of late winter and early spring, such as hairy bittercress and chickweed. A new crop is in town, the “summer annuals.” What are summer annual turfgrass weeds, and what can you do about them? This Article discusses some of the more common summer annual weeds found in our lawns that have a grass-like appearance, sometimes referred to as “annual grasses” or, as here, “grassy weeds.”



photo: University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

Crabgrass

Summer annuals germinate in spring and grow until the first frost, completing their life cycle in one season. The self-seeding grassy weeds discussed here produce copious quantities of seed that, once dispersed, remain dormant in the soil in winter, ready to sprout when warm weather returns. While we might not ever be able to beat these formidable yard nuisances, we can control them.

Types of grassy weeds

Crabgrass (*Digitaria sanguinalis*, *D. ischaemum*) is readily distinguishable from desirable turfgrasses due to its scraggly growth habit and flat, relatively wide blades. It is a prolific self-seeder. Numerous sources accept the notion that one plant can produce up to 150,000 seeds per year. The seeds germinate, if exposed to light, when spring soil temperatures reach the mid-fifties. When summer temperatures arrive, crabgrass—as a warm season grass—is very competitive against the cool season, less-heat-tolerant turf grasses common in our region.



photo: Kansas State University

Goosegrass



photo: University of Illinois

Barnyardgrass

Crabgrass lookalikes include goosegrass (*Eleusine indica*). Goosegrass sprouts about a month later than crabgrass because its seeds require somewhat warmer temperatures for germination. If you successfully reined in your crabgrass early in the season, only to see it mysteriously reappear, you might in fact be looking at goosegrass. Goosegrass features a tight center rosette and silvery or whitish flattened sheaths. Viewed from above, it looks like spokes from a central hub.

Barnyardgrass (*Echinochloa crus-galli*) is a tufted, erect grass that germinates around the same time as goosegrass (soil temperatures of 60 to 65 degrees). It is an even more prolific self-seeder than crabgrass; a healthy plant can produce from

750,000 to one million seeds. In a lawn, it will look coarser than the turfgrass, with blades protruding from a central crown. It prefers open, unshaded areas, and is intolerant of dense shade. It occurs in both moist and drier habitats and tolerates a variety of soil types.

Another crabgrass lookalike, the foxtails, including yellow foxtail (*Setaria pumila*), features long leaf blades and erect, red-tinged stems. It is the last of the grassy weeds discussed here to germinate, requiring soil temperatures of about 65 degrees. Foxtails can grow in moist or dry soils and tolerate a wide range of environmental conditions. Don't fret if you're not sure which of these weeds is what because most are controlled in the same way.

Another grassy weed is Japanese stiltgrass (*Microstegium vimineum*), but it is distinguishable from the weeds discussed above. While most grassy weeds thrive in sunny, hot conditions, stiltgrass prefers moist shade. Stiltgrass is an invasive species in Virginia and stands out for its bamboo-like, stalky appearance, although in lawns its seedlings are nondescript and are less easily identified.



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Japanese Stiltgrass

photo: North Carolina State University

Control of grassy weeds

If your weeds are few and far between, pluck them by hand. Summer annual grassy weeds (especially stiltgrass) are among the easiest to pull because they usually lack creeping stems that root. Some might think that a close buzz with a mower (fitted with a catch bag) will nip off the seed heads of a mature plant, but crabgrass can produce seed even in very short turf. Also, mowing low will expose seeds already in the soil to sunlight, encouraging germination.

Chemical controls are also available. Look for products with the active ingredients mesotrione, fenoxaprop, fluazifop, or sethoxydim, which will control most of these weeds. Quinclorac controls crabgrass, but not goosegrass. (Pre-emergent controls are another option, although summer is not the season to apply them. Those controls must be applied before seeds sprout. Crabgrass pre-emergents should be applied in our area in mid-March.) The more mature your grassy weeds, and the denser and more prevalent they are, the more difficult it will be to control them with chemicals. Repeated applications may be required. As with any pesticide, users of herbicides are required by law to follow the product label.

The best control is to maintain healthy turf in the first place. Vigorous turf inhibits seed germination by shading seeds already present, while turf struggling in poor soil or shade gives these weeds an opportunity to germinate — giving space and sunlight settle in. Avoid fertilizing your lawn when weeds are sprouting; you don't want to feed them. Also, water your lawn, as necessary, with deep, infrequent watering, which aids turfgrasses with deeper roots, and avoid light, infrequent watering that will benefit short-rooted weeds.

References

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