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News Release

Controlling Common Winter Weeds

Winter is the time of the year that you really notice any weeds in your lawn, especially if you have one of the warm season grasses like bermudagrass, zoysiagrass, or centipedegrass that are dormant now. A couple of weeds I have decided to wage war on in my bermudagrass yard are wild onion and wild garlic. I detest the aroma I get from those weeds when I begin mowing in the spring.

Wild garlic reproduces by seed, aerial bulbils, and underground bulblets. These underground bulblets make this weed more difficult to control. Wild onions reproduce by seed and aerial bulbils only. These weeds can be controlled by pulling or hoeing, regular mowing and by applying herbicides. Multiple applications of herbicides are usually necessary to eliminate the bulblets underground. The activity of the herbicide is dependent on several things: temperature, timing, and moisture.

Temperature is very important in getting the maximum benefit from your herbicide. The phenoxy herbicides, 2,4-D, and 2,4-DP, are effective on wild onion or wild garlic. Another hormonal herbicide like the phenoxy is dicamba. These materials need to be applied when the daytime temperature is above 60° F for several days. These same herbicides should not be applied when daily temperatures exceed 85° F.

Timing is important in determining the best time to control a weed or when the weed is most sensitive to control measures. Wild onion and wild garlic are both perennials and can persist for many years in the same location. If a herbicide is used, it must be a post emergence material. Weeds should be small and sprayed before bloom to get good control. The two windows of opportunity are in November or December and then again in January or February. The first application should be applied in November or December to kill above ground weeds and to disrupt the reproduction of the underground bulblets. The second application should be made in January or February to kill plants missed by the first application. It may take a couple of years of spraying to rid the yard of these pesky weeds.

Another item having an effect on herbicide activity is moisture. The weeds must have adequate moisture to be actively growing. Weeds that are actively growing are more susceptible to herbicides. Also 2,4-D and dicamba should remain on the weeds for at least 12 hours before rain or irrigation.

Always read the label before applying a pesticide. Check the label to be sure the product is labeled for the type grass you have. Calibrate your sprayer before application. This can be done by spraying a known area (square footage calculated by multiplying length x width) with water and measuring how much water was left in the tank so you know how much was used. Once you know approximately how much water it took you to spray the area then you can calculate how much material to mix in the spray tank. Do not apply more than the label says because it is against the law and because you might damage your lawn or your neighbors! Centipedegrass and St. Augustinegrass are especially sensitive to over application. Only apply herbicides when there is no wind, because wind can cause the herbicide to drift to non-target plants.

There are some times when you should not spray a herbicide on your grass. Do not spray your lawn with a herbicide during “green-up”! “Green-up” is the transitional stage a grass goes through as it comes out of dormancy and begins growing again. This is usually about a three-week period where the grass is very vulnerable and could be severely damaged by a herbicide application. Another time you should not spray a herbicide is when the grass has been recently seeded, sprigged, or sodded. Do not apply any of these herbicides in the root zone of any desirable ornamentals, especially dicamba! Dicamba can potentially kill trees or shrubs when sprayed in the root zone of these plants. Remember the root zone can potentially extend out to one and a half times the drip line or more.

If you missed the fall application of these products, you will not eliminate wild onion or wild garlic if you spray now. Although you will not eliminate it, you can knock out the adult plants so you won't have to tolerate the odor when you start mowing. Another weed in lawns we get calls about in the spring is called henbit. It has tiny purplish flowers and scalloped appearing leaves attached directly to the main stem. A three-way mixture of 2,4-D, mcpp, and dicamba should be sprayed as soon as the temperature permits. Once you see the blooms it is too late to spray. This also applies to a weed called lawn burweed, awed with little burs that are painful if stepped on. This plant blooms around the first of April so it needs to be sprayed around the end of February or the first of March.

For more about this topic or other horticulture related information, please contact Charles Pinkston, Regional Extension Agent-Home Horticulture, Home Gardens and Home Pest Management at the St. Clair County Extension Office at (205) 338-9416 or email pinksch@auburn.edu.

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