

Compiled by Jane Morse, UF/IFAS Extension, Pinellas County

It is important to know that weeds don't create a void, they *fill* a void. If weeds are a recurring problem in your lawn, follow these steps to have a healthy, thick lawn that will out-compete most weeds:



**Right Plant, Right Place.** Bahiagrass is drought-tolerant and best suited for sandy, acidic soils. St. Augustinegrass is salt-tolerant and better suited for mildly acidic to alkaline soils that are moist. Also choose grasses based on the amount of care that you are willing to provide. Bahia has a low maintenance level, St. Augustine a moderate level, while Zoysia and Bermuda have a high maintenance level. For areas of dense shade choose a shade-tolerant ground cover or use mulch.

If you are thinking of raising the canopies of your trees to allow more light, remember that trees need 2/3 of their height covered with leaves. Improper thinning results in leaf canopy only at the edge of the crown (lion-tailing). This situation can make trees more likely to have wind damage and other stresses.



**Mow at the right height.** Set those mower height adjustments high for St. Augustine and Bahiagrass which should be mowed at a height of 3.5 to 4 inches. Dwarf St. Augustinegrasses (Captiva, Delmar, Seville) are mowed at 2 - 2 ½ inches. Bermuda is mowed at ½ to 1 ½ inches and Zoysia at 1 - 2 inches. Proper mowing height and frequency will get rid of many annual weeds.

**Mow often.** Only 1/3 of the leaf blade should be removed each time the lawn is mowed. Repeatedly removing too much of the grass blade (more than 1/3) will eventually kill the grass. Keep the mower blades sharp for the best cut. Mow when grass is dry.

Did you know? Lawn mowers and other small-engine equipment can emit at least 10 times the amount of smog-causing gases as a typical car. Cleaner options include propane, solar or electric equipment, or new cleaner gasoline equipment entering the marketplace. Regular engine maintenance cuts down on emissions. Preventing gasoline spills and overfills is an easy and effective way for power equipment owners to prevent pollution. Even small gasoline spills evaporate and pollute the air. Noise pollution is another consideration.



**Water only when grass shows wilt.** When 30-50% of the lawn starts to show symptoms of wilt (i.e. folded leaf blades, bluish-gray color, foot-prints that last for more than a few minutes, AND soil is dry), water the grass (unless rain is expected in the next 24-hours). Apply ½ to ¾ inch of water each time the lawn is watered. Constantly wet lawns promote sedges, spurge and dollar weed, as well as root rots. When watered and mowed correctly the grass will develop a deep root system making it more drought tolerant. To reduce disease development

water plants in the early morning when dew is still present (after 2 AM).



**Fertilize correctly.** Lawns that have been over-fertilized (especially with quick-release fertilizer) are much more prone to getting chinch bugs, brown patch, grey leaf spot, pythium blight, powdery mildew and thatch. Under-fertilized lawns are prone to getting take-all root rot, dollar spot and rust. If the lawn gets attacked by insects and/or diseases large areas may die off, leaving a perfect place for weeds to sprout. Follow the University of Florida fertilizer recommendations for your type of grass (local ordinances may prevent this). Ask your Extension Service for a copy of the publication, or see this website for information:

<http://yourfloridalawn.ifas.ufl.edu/>

**Scout.** Watch the lawn closely for symptoms of disease or insect attack. Keep track of any problems on a calendar and note the location where symptoms first appeared. Knowing when to expect a certain disease or insect (i.e., chinch bugs, brown patch, etc.) will help to catch problems early before too much damage can be done. Pest problems could be greatly lessened or non-existent when proper maintenance steps are used. Using these steps will lessen the need for pesticides (pest killers) and help to keep our environment clean.

**Herbicides (plant killers).** If crabgrass or other weeds have taken over your lawn, early to mid February is the time to apply a pre-emergent herbicide. Better control of weeds is usually obtained with pre-emergent (before weeds appear) herbicides rather than post-emergent (after weeds appear) herbicides. Pendimethalin (sold as Pendulum®, Pre-M®, Turf Weedgrass Control®, Halts Crabgrass Preventer®); dithiopyr (sold as Dimension®); or benfen + oryzallin (sold as XL®) provide excellent control of crabgrass and are safe at the recommended rate on mature, actively growing grass (Bahia, Bermuda, St. Augustine and Zoysia). Apply a pre-emergent herbicide when daytime temperatures reach 65 to 70 degrees Fahrenheit for 4-5 days in a row, or usually about the same time that azalea plants start blooming in the spring. Follow up with another treatment 6 to 9 weeks after the first treatment.



For broadleaf weed control use a three-way herbicide mixture such as Trimec®, Ortho's Weed-B-Gon®, or Spectracide Weed Stop®. Repeat treatments spaced 10 to 14 days apart are usually needed for good weed control. Follow the label directions exactly when using any pesticide. Make sure the product is labeled for your type of grass.

Sedges, rushes and dollarweed thrive in soils that remain wet for long periods of time due to poor drainage, excessive rainfall, or over-watering. Sedge, rush and dollarweed control starts with decreasing the soil wetness. Cut back on watering, or provide proper drainage in non-watered wet areas.



**Other choices:** Instead of a high maintenance lawn that uses lots of water, fertilizer, chemicals, energy and time, try increasing the size of planting beds, growing a native wildflower meadow, or just mowing the lawn and not worrying about "weeds" (because it is all green anyway). Many beautiful native wildflowers have been labeled lawn weeds. While native wildflowers provide food and nectar for insects such as butterflies and bees and naturally thrive in Florida's climate, lawns do not.

Information for this fact sheet was obtained from these publications: "Weed Management in Home Lawns" which can be found at this website: <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/EP141> . "Let Your Lawn Tell You When to Water" found at: <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/EP054> ; "Pruning Landscape Trees and Shrubs" found at: <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/MG087> ; and "Your Yard and Clean Air" found at: <http://www.epa.gov/otaq/consumer/19-yard.pdf> You can also get copies of these publications from your local Extension Service.