

Crabgrass Management is Difficult!

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This yard is rich in weed diversity. Blanket crabgrass covers the lower front right (going clockwise), some St. Augustinegrass, some green kyllinga (a perennial sedge) at 11 o'clock and some oxalis at 1 o'clock.

Some homeowners are getting that typical winter surprise...large brown areas in what they thought was a perfectly green and healthy stand of turf! When temperatures dip to around 40 degrees and lower some of the crabgrasses are browned out. It is one of those classic scenarios, where you never miss what you took for granted until its gone! So it is with crabgrass herbicides. We were spoiled by the very effective results that a herbicide called Asulox provided as a POST-emergent (after the weed has sprouted) application. Asulox was a very effective product for almost ten years or so. About 1999 the product was taken off the market because the required EPA re-registration data were going to be too costly for the manufacturer, Rhône-Poulenc now called Aventis, to generate for a relatively small market item. Since then, the public and landscape maintenance companies have been suffering from Asulox withdrawal. An immediate replacement for Asulox hasn't been recognized, but there may be some possibilities.

Several different chemicals or combinations of herbicides are being evaluated that may suppress this group of weeds. One expensive product contains cinnamon bark powder and

baking soda. It recommends two applications to be effective. I tried this product and it didn't go very far. It provides top kill, but doesn't get the roots, so the plants resprout. Personally, I think that one might get more for their dollar if it is used on your breakfast roll, but don't try it! Another product called Prograss (ethofumesate) is available to professionals, but it takes two applications and it may cause some turf injury as well.

In south Florida we have about five species of crabgrass. Some are perennial and some are annual. The seeds seem to germinate year-round! One estimate says that each crabgrass plant can produce over 700 tillers and over 200,000 seeds. This makes crabgrass the cockroach of the weed domain!

Thus, crabgrass management boils down to these onerous options:

1. Keep your turf vigorous. A thick turf will shade out or reduce crabgrass invasions. Don't overwater, some crabgrass species and dollarweed and nutsedges love the extra water. Often the first foothold of a crabgrass invasion is in a low, moist area. During cooler weather, when St. Augustinegrass growth is slower, it probably only needs watering two times per week, apply about 1/3 to 1/2 inch of water each time. Don't scalp your lawn when you mow it. Floratam St. Augustine should be mowed at 3 to 4 inches. See turf care fact sheets at: <http://turf.ufl.edu/residential/residential.htm> .
2. Raise your crabgrass tolerance threshold! Accept the fact that there will be some crabgrass in your lawn. Just attack it before it takes over large areas.
3. You may choose to R&R, apply Roundup (glyphosate herbicide that kills anything green) and renovate (with sod) during the rainy season or in the winter R&R means ripout and resod. Sod will establish better if you wait and do the job once we are into our rainy season.
4. Attempt the use of preemergents. This means about 3 extra applications per year and the results will never be as good as up north because the preemergents break down within a short period (3 to 6 weeks or so) in our heat and rainfall. Preemergents are effective in that they "pre"vent the crabgrass seeds in the infested areas from sprouting.

If more preemergents are used, avoid applications near the root zones of palms. There is a report circulating that there had been some decline of palms, which are a giant, woody grass, in areas where preemergents had been applied. Also, some preemergents may stunt root growth of St. Augustinegrass and cause some turf quality problems. So do not use with new sod or new plugs until well rooted (on the ground for a couple of months). Pendimethalin if available, is an option. Watch out for orange-yellow staining with this product. Atrazine has some pre as well as postemergent activity, but some formulations can't be used during the hot months of the year. Always read the label and be certain the product is labeled for the type of turf you have and carefully follow the recommended application doses to avoid harming the turf or other plants.

Stay tuned for updates and take it easy on your lawn care technician. Even the professionals are having a tough battle without Asulox.

For more information on home gardening, contact the Collier County Extension Service, Master Gardener Plant Clinic, at 353-2872. If you have a specimen that you want identified, the Extension Plant Clinic at 14700 Immokalee Rd. is open Monday, Wednesday and Friday, 9 a.m. to noon and 1 p.m. to 4 p.m., call 353-4244. The downtown clinic is at the Main Library at 650 Central Ave. and is open Thursdays, 9 a.m. to noon; call 261-8208 to confirm.