UF IFAS Extension
UNIVERSITY of FLORIDA

Commercial Horticulture
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Controlling Weeds in Lawns

It may be surprising to learn that a lawn properly watered, fertilized and mowed usually doesn't have many, if any, weeds. Factors such as shade, insects, diseases and improper watering, mowing, and fertilizing can all lead to a weak, sparse, weed-filled lawn. Any bare spot is an invitation for weeds to take over. Relying on herbicides to control weeds is just a temporary fix if the true causes of a weakened lawn are not corrected.

Follow these steps to have a healthy, thick lawn that will out-compete most weeds:

Start off with the right grass. Bahiagrass is best suited for sandy, acidic soils that are subjected to drought. St. Augustinegrass is better suited for mildly acidic to alkaline soils that are subjected to salty conditions. Also choose grasses based on the amount of care you are willing to provide. Bahiagrass has a low maintenance level, St. Augustinegrass a moderate level, while Zoysiagrass and Bermudagrass have a high maintenance level. Choose shade-tolerant ground covers, shrubs or mulch for areas that receive less than 8 hours of sun. The most shade tolerant cultivars of St. Augustinegrass (Bitterblue, DeltaShade, Captiva, Delmar and Seville) can survive on 5 hours of sun.

Mow at the right height. Standard St. Augustinegrass mow at 3.5 to 4 inches, dwarf St. Augustinegrass (Delmar, Jade, Seville) 2 to 2.5 inches; Bahiagrass 3 to 4 inches; Bermudagrass ½ to 1 ½ inches; Zoysiagrass 1/4 to 2.5 inches (cultivar dependent).
Proper mowing height and frequency will get rid of many annual weeds, and taller grass blades also help to shade out weeds.

Mow often. Only 1/3 of the leaf blade should be removed each time the lawn is mowed. The shorter it is mowed, the more often it needs to be mowed. Repeatedly removing too much of the grass blade (more than 1/3) will greatly weaken and can eventually kill the grass. Weakened grass allows weeds to take root. Keep the mower blades sharp for the best cut and mow when the grass is dry.

Water only when it needs it. In the morning or late evening check the lawn for wilt. When 30% of the lawn starts to show symptoms of wilt (i.e. leaf blades are closed, bluish-gray color, foot-prints that last for more than 10-15 minutes and dry soil), water the grass (unless rain is expected in the next day). Apply ½ to ¾ inch of water and then wait for symptoms of wilt before watering again. Overly wet lawns promote sedges, spurges and dollar weed, as well as root rot. When watered and mowed correctly the grass will develop a deep root system and will not require water as often. It is best to water lawns in the early morning when dew is still present. Watering late in the evening promotes disease development. Continued…

Fertilize correctly. Lawns that have been over-fertilized are more prone to having chinch bugs and other insects, brown patch, grey leaf spot, powdery mildew and thatch. Under-fertilized lawns are prone to cercospera leaf spot, dollar spot and rust. If the lawn gets attacked by these insects and diseases, large areas can die leaving a perfect place for weeds to sprout.

Fertilize lawns in the spring as soon as it begins to grow using a complete fertilizer containing slow-release nitrogen. Apply 1 pound of nitrogen to 1000 square feet of lawn (divide 100 by the first number on the fertilizer bag to get the pounds of fertilizer to apply over 1000 sq. ft.). You may want to apply fertilizer again just before June 1st; between June 1st and September 31st nitrogen and phosphorus fertilization is banned. Apply ferrous sulfate or a chelated iron source along with manganese sulfate in July.

Scout. Watch the lawn closely for symptoms of disease or insect damage. 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 much damage is done. Pest problems (insects, weeds, diseases) should be greatly lessened when proper grass selection and maintenance practices (mowing, watering, fertilizing) are used. Using these practices will lessen the need for insecticides, fungicides and herbicides and help to keep our water and environment free of chemicals.

Protect our water and environment. Florida has very porous sandy soil. Chemicals and fertilizers easily pass beyond plant roots and go directly into our ground water, especially in over-watered lawns. Applying more water than is needed (1/2 to 3/4 inch) is wasteful and promotes water pollution. Always correctly identify a pest before treating the lawn (no guessing) and keep all pesticides and fertilizers at least 10 feet away from any water body. All grass clippings, chemicals or fertilizers that end up on a hard surface (driveway, sidewalk, or road) should be swept back onto the lawn; otherwise they are carried to storm drains and then directly to a water body. Leaves are not allowed down storm drains – use leaves in planting beds or bag them.

Resources: http://hort.ufl.edu/yourfloridalawn/

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