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Broomsedge

The oft quoted adage “the best defense is a good offence” has been credited to a variety of political and military leaders, and football coaches. Almost every leader, thinker and pontificator from Julius Cesar to Bobby Bowden has had some version of this strategic concept.

The concept has been repeatedly employed and proven in a variety of situations. Simply put, the defender repels the attacker by attacking first.

Long before this concept was tried on the fields of competition, one plant in Wakulla County confirmed the efficacy of this policy.

Andropogon virginicus is a species of grass known as broomsedge. It is a common site in pastures, fallow fields, and under pine trees. It stands are commonly isolated clumps, apparently a social outcast in the plant world.

The truth, however, is a somewhat different. Broomsedge employs allelochemicals to hinder its leafy competitors and establish itself as the dominant species on its plot.

Allelochemicals are a biological phenomenon by which organisms produce one or more compounds which effect the growth, survival, and reproduction of other like organisms. There can be either positive or negative allelopathy depending on the needs of the plant in question.

In the case of broomsedge, negative allelopathic effects are an important part of plant defense against opponents which may consume nutrients or repel a colonization attempt.



Broomsedge is a perennial grass easily identified from its narrow clumps of stems up to about a yard in maximum height. Its stems and leaves are green when growing but turning purplish to orange in the late summer and autumn.

In late autumn and winter the tufts turn to a light straw color and resemble a broom. The extremely pliable texture of the leaves negate any likelihood they were ever used as brooms.

This native plant produces large amounts of seeds small enough to disperse on the wind. This prolific seed producer has a high germination rate and an excellent seedling survival frequency.

This grass is successful in a wide range of habitats even thriving in poor soils. It favors acidic soils like those in parts of Wakulla County under pines and oaks, or heavy clay.

This species is tolerant of fire the typical Florida wild-land fire cycle. It grows back quickly and more abundantly after a burn.

Broomsedge is considered weed pest by livestock producers who work to rid their pasture of it. It is less palatable and nutritious to cattle than most other grasses.

One frequently used technique to suppress broomsedge in pastures is to spread lime. Over time lime raises the soils ph and makes for a less inviting environment for this plant.

The one commercial use attributed to this plant was as a packing material for bottled goods, including alcoholic beverages, before the advent of synthetic materials. As such, broomsedge was introduced as an invasive exotic to other parts of the world and became commonly known as whiskey grass.

To learn more about broomsedge in Wakulla County, contact your UF/IFAS Wakulla Extension Office at 850-926-3931 or at <http://wakulla.ifas.ufl.edu/>, and leave your comments and questions about the article.