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GARDEN NOTES

KILLING CRAB AND BURMUDAGRASS

By Dennis Hinkamp

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Many people confuse the nefarious Bermudagrass with the evil crabgrass. Both are weeds, but one is simple to control while the other takes a declaration of war to slow its growth.

“Crabgrass is an annual,” explains Jerry Goodspeed, Utah state University Extension horticulturist. “It has wide blades and a fibrous root system. If the soil is a little moist, a simple tug pulls the plant right out of the ground. Bermudagrass, on the other hand, requires a tank, a chain and a small squadron to extract and the roots are still left behind.”

As an annual, crabgrass is somewhat simple to control, he says. It will die out in the fall once temperatures reach the freezing point. It is a little unsightly now, but that's better than a bill for replacing the whole lawn.

Tolerate crabgrass the rest of this season, then next spring pick up a bag of lawn pre-emergent at the local garden center, Goodspeed says. Around the first of April, put it on the lawn, making sure you follow all label directions carefully. This helps control crabgrass and other annual weeds throughout the year. It must be applied before the crabgrass is up and growing, so putting it on now does no good.

Bermudagrass is easy to recognize from its wiry, really ugly appearance, he says. It is a perennial with rhizomes and stolons. Rhizomes are stems that grow underground and send up a new growth of grass every few inches. Stolons are often called runners. They creep along the top of the ground, rooting every few inches. Bermudagrass uses these vegetative growth methods to spread throughout a lawn very quickly.

“Now, if Bermudagrass has taken up residence in your yard, screaming and having a fit of anger may well be in order,” Goodspeed says. “This nasty grass is not as easily eliminated as crabgrass. One simple treatment of a pre-emergent won't even phase Bermudagrass. This spiteful weed is a perennial in the true sense of the word. It takes a lot more work to control it, and true dedication to eliminate it.”

There are four options once Bermudagrass has been detected in the lawn, he says. The first is to simply live with it, acting like it is any other turf growing in Northern Utah. This is not a defeatist attitude, but a more realistic approach. The second option is to attempt to exterminate it from the yard. This approach includes spraying out everything in the lawn area and starting all over. Normally this takes about three applications of a non-selective herbicide (such as Round-

up). This approach works best when the lawn is healthy and sassy in July and August. All of the Bermudagrass must be killed for this option to be effective, Goodspeed adds. Once it is dead, the lawn can be replanted, which is both expensive and labor-intensive. The sad part, too, is once it is eliminated there is no guarantee it will not return in a year or two.

The third option is a combination of good cultural practices and a little selective herbicide, he says. Mow the lawn as high as the mower will go (around 3 inches). This helps shade the sun-loving Bermudagrass and weakens it. Next, make sure the good grass is healthy through proper fertilization, watering and annual core aeration.

“Maintaining the lawn properly will make Bermudagrass mad, which is good,” he says. “Next, starting in June, apply Turflon Ester once a month to the lawn. Turflon Ester is a selective herbicide that weakens Bermudagrass and, if applied properly, does not damage cool season grasses such as Kentucky bluegrass. A regular application suppresses Bermudagrass; and, in some cases, eliminates it from a healthy lawn.”

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