

Preventing the Spring (and Summer) Weed Flush in Lawns

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Many landscape problems are more easily prevented than cured. This is especially true with weeds. We have two types of weeds that grow in four seasons. Winter weeds come up in fall and grow through winter into spring. Summer weeds germinate in spring and grow through summer into fall. Weeds are a four-season problem in middle Georgia!

In the spring, many gardeners will be concerned because their lawn looks like a shaggy dog with the mange. The winter weeds will have taken over their landscape. To solve this March/April problem, you need an October solution. Apply pre-emergence (preventative) herbicides around October 1 and again 60 days later. The latter application is to prevent late emerging weeds. These will prevent many weeds from coming up or getting large. Once these weeds get to the size they are in March and April, they can be close to impossible to kill.

To prevent summer weeds, apply pre-emergence herbicides in early to mid-February and again 60 days later if the weather permits. Read the herbicide label for restrictions as to when and how the herbicide can be used. Summer weeds can include crabgrass, lespedeza, goose grass and others.

What pre-emergence herbicide should you use? That will depend on the kind of weeds you had last year and will expect this year and the type of lawn grass you have.

Atrazine prevents broadleaf weeds better than grassy weeds. It will control annual bluegrass but will not control crabgrass well. It is excellent for lespedeza, annual bluegrass and many broadleaf weeds.

Atrazine can be used on zoysia, centipede and St. Augustine lawns. It can also be used on Bermuda grass if it is fully dormant (brown). Atrazine also kills some weeds after they emerge. This means it can be used as a post-emergence weed killer after weeds emerge. For this reason we can delay application of this herbicide slightly beyond the dates mentioned above. Atrazine can be used only so often so be careful to follow label recommendations.

On all warm season grasses, you can use other pre-emergence herbicides besides Atrazine. These are better at preventing grasses (especially crabgrass), but will prevent some broadleaf weeds. They include Halts (pendamethalin), Surflan (oryzalin), Balan (benefin), dithiopyr, and XL (benefin plus oryzalin). These weed killers should be applied before weeds emerge. If applied after weeds emerge we expect poor weed control. So we need to be very careful to use the timing mentioned earlier.

Pre-emergence herbicides may slow your lawn grass from growing back in bare patches. You may want to wait until the lawn is fully grown-in to use them. They will also prevent ryegrass from germinating. Do not use them on turf that is less than a year old and avoid applying them to weak turf or during lawn green up in the spring. Be cautious. Read and follow all label directions. Each herbicide may have special guidelines you must follow.

It is difficult to find a good time to apply Weed and Feed products. They should not be applied in the fall since it is too late to fertilize when herbicides should be put out. In the spring, we face a similar dilemma. Weed control should be begun in February while fertilization should wait until April. I suggest that you put out your fertilizer and weed control separately. If you still want to use Weed and Feed, apply it around April 1.

Perennial weeds like dandelion, Florida betony (rattlesnake weed), poison ivy, certain vines etc. are not easily controlled with pre-emergence herbicides. Use post-emergence herbicides repeatedly about every 4 to 5 weeks to kill these. Diligence and persistence are the keys to killing perennial weeds in the landscape.

As with any pesticide, read and follow all label directions. No weed control program will kill them all. Learn to accept a few weeds. Kill some of the escaped weeds with a post-emergence herbicide. Contact your local County Extension Office for more information.