

Fighting Winter Weeds

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Controlling weeds in southern grasses during the winter months can present several problems to the homeowner. As our temperatures begin to fall going into winter, warm-season turfgrasses will stop their normal growth patterns. This slowing of growth will eliminate the competition that our lawns provide for weed control. Warm-season grasses cannot choke out winter weeds because they are not growing during the winter.

Because of this, germination of winter weeds is highly visible during the winter since you have a good contrast between the green weed and the brown turfgrass. This can be rather unsightly. If there is a heavy infestation of winter weeds in your lawn, they can also slow turfgrass regrowth in the spring by shading the grass.

There are three steps involved in proper weed control: (1) proper weed identification, (2) proper herbicide selection and (3) proper application and timing of application. Before any type of chemical control is applied to control a weed, it is very important to know what weed you have. Weeds are broken into two categories, broadleaf weeds and grassy weeds. Rushes and sedges form their own category. Broadleaf weeds generally have a broader more rounded leaf than the grasses. They also have netlike veins in their true leaves and will have colorful flowers. Several examples of broadleaf weeds in our area are Florida betony, henbit, clover, dichondra and burweed. Grasses will have rounded, hollow stems and parallel veins in their true leaves. Two examples of winter grassy weeds are annual bluegrass and annual blue-eyed grass. After you have determined which weed you want to control, the time comes to choose the proper chemical to apply. Weeds can be controlled by two methods of application. One is by applying a herbicide before the weed germinates. This type of herbicide is termed a preemergent herbicide. These chemicals will generally be applied around the first of September in our area for controlling winter weeds and March for controlling summer annual weeds. If the weed has already germinated and is growing, you can make a postemergent herbicide application. The best time to apply a postemergent herbicide is during a warm period when the weed is actively growing. Extremely cold temperatures can hamper the effectiveness of the chemical.

There are different chemicals for each of these applications and it is important to apply them in accordance with the label directions. For a specific chemical recommendation for your area, contact your local County Extension Office. To avoid using herbicides, hand weeding works on small scale areas while assuring a healthy turfgrass through proper cultural practices aids in reducing seed germination. Whatever method of weed control you use, remember it is unwise to expect a perfect, weed free turf. Accepting a few flaws in our landscape will reduce the amount of pesticides used and help protect our natural resources.