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Strong-willed weeds

Floridians face all kinds of lawn and garden invaders, but these three are the acknowledged worst

By Tiffany Yates

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There are three sure-fire topics guaranteed to touch off people's emotions and turn a discussion heated.

Religion.

Politics.

And weeds.

Ask the average homeowner about his or her backyard battles with the insidious invaders and you're bound to get some colorful language. In Florida particularly, with its temperate climate and year-round growing season, it seems there's no respite in the war between human and herb.

"Turf is something that people feel very passionate about," explains horticulturalist Tom Becker, with the Lee County Extension Office. "If you have grass, you'll have weeds."

But that fact doesn't stop avocational gardeners from longing for a virgin expanse of lawn unsullied by the opportunistic weeds just waiting for the right conditions to germinate. Seeds can lie dormant for years...then burst into life given the right temperature or levels of sunshine or water. "It'll come up months, years later...it's hideous," says Collier County's Doug Caldwell, commercial landscape horticulture agent with the extension office.

Though there are countless species of weeds found in local yards, they all fall into three categories: broadleaves, sedges, and grasses. And three of our area's worst offenders fall neatly into each category: dollarweed, nutsedge, and crabgrass.

Dollarweed

Dollarweed (*Hydrocotyl umbellata*) sometimes called pennywort—is a broadleaf weed readily identifiable from its round leaves with a stalk attached to the center, what's often been described as a dinner-plate appearance. It spreads with underground runners, and can be a challenge to pull up because of its tendency to break off. It generally proliferates from November through April.

"During the winter it seems to really go wild," says Caldwell.

Like all weeds an opportunist, dollarweed is tenacious and aggressive — "Once it's in, it's in — and it's spreading," says Cathleen Feser, urban horticulture agent for the Collier County Extension Office.

One of the best ways to ensure a healthy dollarweed population is to overwater your lawn—the plant

thrives in moist areas. “Dollarweed is a sure sign of a lawn that’s being overirrigated,” says Becker. A good rule of thumb—to control all weeds in general — is to keep irrigation levels at about ½ to ¾ inch per week, or about 45 minutes twice a week.

Many broadleaf weeds, including dollarweed, are well controlled by Atrazine (see chemical information at the end of this story), a selective postemergent (after the weed has begun visibly growing) herbicide that won’t harm most grasses.

“Atrazine has been the workhorse for broadleafed weeds,” says Caldwell. It comes in both granular and liquid forms.

Nutsedge

You’ve seen it: grassy-looking thatches of triangular leaves with distinctive stalky seedheads growing tall out the top. Nutsedge is a perennial that gains its foothold in wet or waterlogged soil, but then — irritatingly — can tolerate normal watering conditions or even drought once established.

Homeowners are by no means alone in their war with the demonic little plants, which grow around the world and breed frustration globally. They are liable to resist hand-pulling by breaking off at the root, leaving tubers intact, and to thwart herbicides by succumbing only from the ground up, leaving the root ready and able to sprout again.

The two most common Florida varieties are the purple and yellow nutsedge (*Cyperus esculentus* and *C. rotundus*), both of which thrive in overwatered or poorly drained moist soil, and tend to turn brown and dry up in winter. Torque back on your watering schedule to discourage nutsedge, and address drainage issues where possible.

Caldwell recommends attacking nutsedge with a postemergent weed killer, as pre-emergents require a number of applications and “can get a little pricey,” he says. Read labels to make sure the herbicide is specific to sedges, and won’t harm or stunt your type of grass.

UF’s IFAS Web site recommends the herbicide bentazon (see chemical information at the end of this story) for yellow nutsedge, a contact weed killer that kills only the aboveground portion of the plant.

Crabgrass

You very likely have patches of it in your yard — spidery or crablike oases of green creepers. Crabgrass (*Digitaria* spp.) is warm-season annual grass that thrives on the full sunlight Florida offers all summer long, with five species that are prevalent in our area. With one estimate saying that each crabgrass plant can produce over 200,000 seeds, the University of Florida IFAS Extension Web site calls it “the cockroach of the weed domain.”

“Some of it’s really kind of cute,” argues Caldwell with undisguised fondness. “It’s a dwarf grass.”

Still, most homeowners don’t want it fraternizing with their pristine St. Augustine or Floratam. Even those who can live with its presence when it blends in with the green might take offense to the bare brown patches it leaves in winter, as the grass tends to turn purplish and then die off below 40 degrees.

Crabgrass can be curbed by a postemergent herbicide like Roundup. Once it has died off and the area is safe to replant, lay down new sod in the bare patches to discourage new germination. Caldwell calls this

method of attack “R and R”: Roundup and replace.

He also recommends spot-treating crabgrass areas, rather than spreading an herbicide over the whole lawn. Then fertilize the grass to get it to grow into the areas where crabgrass had a foothold. “With time it’ll fill in—but it’ll be a little bit of a race,” he admits.

Lower your tolerance threshold for the weed as much as possible, advises the UF IFAS Web site:

“Accept the fact that there will be some crabgrass in your lawn. Just attack it before it takes over large areas.”

Overall defense

With weed control, most experts agree that the best method of combat is prevention—and the best way to prevent weeds from encroaching on your turf is by maintaining the health of your lawn so that the opportunistic invaders don’t find a foothold.

“The health of the lawn is so important,” says Lee County’s Tom Becker. “If the turf dies out, the weeds come in.”

This includes selecting the proper turf for your yard. Bahia and Bermuda grasses, for instance, don’t do well in shade, resulting in a thin, weakened lawn that allows weeds a foothold.

Sharpen your mower blades regularly — dull blades increase recovery time for the grass, thus allowing weeds to invade. And don’t mow too frequently or too rarely, both of which stress the grass. Clip your lawn to about 3 to 4 inches in height — setting the mower to clip shorter stresses the grass, and can allow light to penetrate to dormant seeds and encourage weed growth.

“Mowing is a bigger factor than we probably give credit for,” says Becker of maintaining a healthy lawn.

Make sure mowers and other equipment are washed off before moving to different areas to avoid spreading weed seeds — this is especially pertinent for those who use a service, where equipment can drag seeds from yard to yard and contaminate an otherwise weed-free lawn.

As mentioned before, don’t over- or underwater your grass. The healthier your turf, the less likely weeds can gain ground. A lawn stressed by pests, or by foot or vehicle traffic is also an open door for the aggressive weed population.

In addition, fertilize judiciously, and use a product appropriate for your grass, being careful to follow the product instructions. Warns Collier’s Feser: “Don’t forget when you’re fertilizing your lawn, you’re also fertilizing your weeds.”

In ornamental beds, keeping a thick layer of mulch down is crucial.

“That, I believe, is the most underutilized practice,” Becker feels. With organic products, such as cypress or eucalyptus mulch — replenish at least once a year to make sure the level stays at least 2 inches thick, and preferably 3 to 4 inches thick, Becker recommends. Even stone beds require replenishment; the rocks can work their way into the soil and begin to expose it. “Wherever there’s any kind of exposed soil, weeds will germinate,” says Becker.

When you do see weeds, address them immediately. According to the IFAS Web site, “The younger the weed seedling, the easier it is to control.” The key is identifying your specific weeds and selecting the right product to attack them.

“We don’t want you to use an herbicide until you know what the weed is,” says Becker. Head out to a garden center to buy an herbicide and you will be faced with literally dozens of differing products. “It’s pretty overwhelming,” he admits.

Becker advises calling the Lee or Collier county extension offices for help in identifying your particular problem plants. Knowing exactly what you’re trying to kill; reading the fine print to make sure the product is safe to use on your grass; and following application instructions is the key to success.

When hand-pulling weeds, it’s best to do it when the ground is moist or wet, which makes it easier to get the taproot. And get them up before they flower; otherwise, says Becker, “It’s almost too late to stop any further spreading of the seeds.”

If you just can’t get ahead of the leafy invaders, Becker suggests converting particularly troublesome areas—such as those with poor drainage and perpetually moist soil—into alternate landscaping. He recommends using “rain gardens”—planted areas of wetland and other water-loving plants to create a feature in the yard, rather than an eyesore.

Classes offered by the Lee County extension office’s Florida Yards and Neighborhood program teach concepts such as water efficiency, fertilization, choosing the right plants for the right place, etc. Call 461-7515 for more information.

But as both county extension offices agree, with weeds sometimes acceptance is the path of least resistance.

“There will always be weeds like there will always be insects,” says Feser. “I don’t know how realistic it is to try to rid your entire yard of weeds.”

Caldwell agrees: “In southwest Florida, weeds are never gone. It’s a continuous battle.” It may just come down to lowering your threshold of weed acceptance, he feels after five years of unsuccessfully fighting weeds in his own yard, and simply looking on the bright side: “My lawn’s just as green as the neighbors’!”

Information on chemicals in this article

Bentazon: As of 1985, bentazon and its sodium form were under special review by the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for data evaluation and development of a regulatory position. Products containing bentazon must bear the signal word “Caution.” It can cause moderate reactions from skin contact and diarrhea, trembling and weakness if it is ingested.

Atrazine: Atrazine has been classified as a Restricted Use Pesticide (RUP) due to its potential for groundwater contamination. It causes reactions on skin contact and if ingested and is considered slightly toxic to aquatic life, according to Extonet.

Glyphosate (Roundup): It is a General Use Pesticide (GUP) and is considered slightly toxic to wild birds.

Source: Extonet, an Extension Service toxicology network of universities in four different states and the USDA. For more information on both chemicals, see this Web site: extonet.orst.edu

Help by the yard

If you'd like to know more about how to keep your yard a little more weed-free or a little less work to maintain, here are some organizations that want to help you.

Collier County Extension Office: 353-4244 or 353-2872 (Master Garden Plant Clinic) or Web site: collier.ifas.ufl.edu; collier.ifas.ufl.edu/Horticulture/lawncare.htm

Lee County Extension Office: (239) 461-7504 and (239) 461-7515 or Web site: lee.ifas.ufl.edu

Florida Native Plant Society, which offers planting alternatives: www.fnps.org

Florida-Friendly landscaping: www.floridayards.org

To get specific information on herbicides, go to:

edis.ifas.ufl.edu/EP141

edis.ifas.ufl.edu/EP296

extonet.orst.edu

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