Believe it or not, I was excited about the freezing weather we had this past week. Because we weren't expecting a severe freeze, I knew most of my plants would only experience minor damage. Small, tender plants, such as weeds, had a better chance of being damaged by the cold, and for that, I was hoping.

Weeds are defined as unwanted plants or plants growing in the wrong place. Weed management in our lawns can be a difficult task but not impossible. It all starts with maintaining a healthy lawn, the proper identification of weeds and an understanding of their growth habits. These are important for a successful weed-control strategy. Weed control should be a carefully planned and coordinated program instead of a hit-or-miss operation.

The best control method for weeds is to prevent them from taking root in your lawn at all. This can be done with proper management practices that also encourage dense, flourishing turf. A healthy lawn shades the soil so the sunlight cannot reach weed seeds waiting to sprout. It also minimizes the space available for weeds to become established.

Proper fertilizing; watering, mowing and pest-control measures are required to produce healthy turf. If grass is underwated, overwatered, overfertilized or mowed too low or too infrequently, it is weakened and does not stand a chance against the weeds. Turf damaged by insects or compacted by foot or vehicle traffic is also susceptible to weed invasion.

However, sometimes, no matter how healthy our lawns are, those sneaky weeds will find a way to creep in. There are two common weed-control methods: manual or chemical control. You may need to use one or both to eliminate the intruders. Manual control means, "by hand." That's pulling the weeds out of the ground with your hands or with a hoe. This method is great if only a few weeds are present. It's simple to do and it's cheap. If weeds are a major problem in your lawn, then this method may not be for you. But don't worry, as there are alternatives.

Herbicides can be used to kill selected plants. They are safe and effective if the product-label instructions are followed properly. Instructions include proper timing of the application and using the herbicide at the proper rate. Two types of herbicides can control weeds: pre-emergence and post-emergence. Pre-emergence herbicides prevent weed-seed germination. Proper timing is important. The pre-emergent must be applied before the seeds germinate or they will be ineffective. In general, they should be applied now--late February to early March. Any later, the weeds will have sprouted and you will have to eliminate the weeds with a post-emergence herbicide.

Post-emergence herbicides are available as selective or non-selective. Selective herbicides control certain plant species without affecting others, such as broadleaf plants (net-like veins and showy flower) versus grass plants (hollow, rounded stems and parallel veins). Nonselective herbicides control all plants, regardless of species. Sometimes a nonselective herbicide is the only thing that can be used to control some varieties of weeds, included grass weeds.

When using herbicides, it is very important to have the right chemical for the right type of grass. St. Augustine and Bahia grass require different chemicals.

For pre-emergence control of broadleaf weeds in St. Augustine grass, use products that contain Atrazine or Isoxaben. For post-emergence control of broadleaf weeds in St. Augustine, use Atrazine. Grass weeds can be prevented in St. Augustine with the pre-emergence herbicides Agrazine or Benefin. Once germinated, only a non-selective herbicide used as a spot treatment will work to control grass weeds.

For pre-emergence control of broadleaf weeds in Bahia grass, use products containing Isoxaben. Using Atrazine, as listed for St. Augustine, may cause Bahia grass to turn brown. For post-emergence control of broadleaf weeds in
Bahia, use 2,4-D or Dicamba. Grass weeds can be prevented in Bahia grass with Benefin, a pre-emergence herbicide. Grass weeds that have germinated in Bahia grass can only be controlled using a non-selective herbicide.

When using any herbicide, always read the label and follow directions. Some chemicals cannot be used when temperatures exceed 80°F, while some products need to be watered in after application in order to take effect.

Information for this article was taken from the University of Florida/IFAS publication "Weed Management in Home Lawns." For a free copy and for answers to other gardening questions, contact the Osceola County Master Gardeners Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. at 321-697-3000.

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