

THE MYSTERY OF CRABGRASS

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Crabgrass, just like any other weed, is just a plant out of place. However, as crabgrass often grows where our turf is weakened, reviewing the biology and management of this summer annual/occasional perennial can be a helpful. There are many types of crabgrass in our turf, and they all tend to mess up our lawns. Let's take a look at crabgrass and take the mystery out of this miserable pest.

There are several types of crabgrass in our area including India crabgrass, Blanket crabgrass, Southern crabgrass, and Tropical crabgrass. They vary in size and shape and range from hairy to smooth



India Crabgrass

Digitaria longiflora

leaves. Some prefer moister areas, some prefer it dryer. All tend to grow in a flattened, spreading manner that takes up space in open areas or places where our selected good turf grasses are stressed and not able to compete. India crabgrass has very short one-inch, smooth leaf blades and forms a mat of growth in dry areas. Blanket crabgrass prefers moister areas. Southern Crabgrass has large leaf blades of at least two-inches long and forms loose clumps. Another type, Tropical crabgrass, bends and roots at the lower joints or nodes on the stems.

There are many management strategies that can be used to suppress crabgrass. Proper mowing height is critical to help keep desirable turf grass healthy, unstressed and vigorously growing to out-compete crabgrass. For instance, common St. Augustine cultivars such as 'Floritam' do best when maintained at three and one-half to four inches. Bahia grass is another common turf plant that we want to maintain at this height as well. Try removing grass clippings when crabgrass plants are producing seed heads – next year's seeds. And, to keep grass growing strong, use the appropriate fertilizer (as per the Charlotte County

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Fertilizer Ordinance). Also test you soil occasionally to check for nutrient needs.

If needed, pre-emergent herbicides can be used to kill crabgrass seeds. Such pre-emergent herbicides are best used in areas where crabgrass has year after year been present. Timing is critical as there is a small window of opportunity to use this type of pesticide. In our area, February 1st is considered a prime time to apply a crabgrass pre-emergent herbicide. Generally, crabgrass seeds germinate when the soil is 50-55 degrees Fahrenheit, so the weather can make this a tricky task. There are a number of these pre-emergents available at local garden centers – always read the pesticide label – it is the law.

For more information about our Florida Yards and Neighborhoods Program, please contact our FYN Horticulture Program Assistant Allison Turner at 764.4351 or email Allison.Turner@CharlotteFL.com.

Allison can help educate you about the FYN Program so you can create a beautiful, Florida-Friendly landscape that saves you time and money while conserving precious water resources and reducing pollution.

CONTACT A MASTER GARDENER
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You can also visit them at one of our many Plant Clinics around the county:
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Once the grass is up and growing, there are really no practical and safe selective post-emergent crabgrass herbicides available for application on St. Augustine and Bahia grass. Established, mature crabgrass can either be hand-pulled or spot-treated with a non-selective herbicide such as glyphosate. Using this non-selective chemical will kill the crabgrass and possibly some of the surrounding good grass. This will cause an open spot which will need to be plugged or seeded back in.

Crabgrass is a difficult turf problem, but just like any weed, can be suppressed by both cultural and chemical means to a manageable level.

Resources:

- Partridge-Telenko, D.E., Unruh, J.B. & Brecke, B.J. (2009) Crabgrass Biology and Management in Turf. UF/IFAS Extension Service.
- Unruh, J.B., Barry, B. & Trenholm L.E. (2008) Weed Management in Home Lawns. UF/IFAS Extension Service.
- Trenholm, L.E., Cisar, J.L. & Unruh, J.B. (2006) St. Augustine for Florida Lawns. UF/IFAS Extension Service.
- Trenholm L.E., Cisar, J.L. & Unruh, J.B. (2006) Bahia grass for Florida Lawns. UF/IFAS Extension Service.

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