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Getting Rid of Bermudagrass and Nutsedge in Lawns and Flowers

by Michelle Le Strange, UC Master Gardener Advisor

Q. How can I get rid of bermudagrass in my fescue lawn and flowerbeds?

A. Bermudagrass is difficult to eliminate because of it spreads by seeds and has an extensive underground root system. It also spreads by stem sections, so rototilling just spreads it farther. If your fescue lawn is loaded with bermudagrass, then give up and let the bermuda take over. This warm season turfgrass is better adapted to our valley conditions. It is less finicky and requires 20-25% less water per year than a tall fescue lawn. If you are adamant about having a tall fescue lawn and bermudagrass is the dominant grass, then you will need to start over with your lawn (complete lawn renovation) and early fall is the best time to do that.

If you only have a few patches of bermudagrass, then you may be able to salvage your fescue lawn or your flowerbeds. If you have time and patience, then hand pull the rhizomes (creeping roots) and stolons (creeping stems). This is what I would do because once you've really dug around, you'll know just how serious a bermudagrass problem you have. If there is a way to isolate the bermuda away from the lawn and flowerbeds then spot treat with the nonselective herbicide, Roundup. For Roundup to be most effective the weeds should be well watered and have plenty of foliage. Then don't water or mow for two weeks.

There are a few selective postemergence herbicides that work on bermudagrass, but what's used in the lawn can't be used in the flowerbeds and vice versa. These products might seem expensive at first, but they are concentrated so many applications can be made from a small container. Read and follow label directions and cautions carefully to insure the best control without damage.

In fescue lawns, a product called Turflon® containing triclopyr can be used to suppress bermuda while it is actively growing and keep it from taking over. A few monthly applications will be needed and July is the perfect month to get started. Turflon is also effective on most broadleaf weeds including some tough ones like oxalis (creeping woodsorrel), clovers, and spurge. However it also kills desirable broadleaf ornamental plants, so be sure to avoid drift into flowerbeds and shrubs or damage will occur. Also avoid spraying Turflon on exposed roots of shallow rooted trees. Like Roundup, this herbicide is systemic and can penetrate green tissue (including exposed tree roots) of all plants.

In flowerbeds, use Grass Getter, Grass-b-Gon, or Ornamec II (products containing fluazifop) to kill any grasses (except annual blue grass) around broadleaf plants. We've used it around many trees, shrubs, and ornamentals with great success. The bermuda turns a reddish color and dies slowly in a few weeks. It works better in warmer temperatures during the summer and is less effective in the early spring and fall. Be careful not to allow drift onto your lawn.

In both lawns and flowerbeds follow up with a preemergence herbicide like Dimension (dithiopyr), Pendulum (pendimethalin), or Barricade (prodiamine) to control germinating bermudagrass seedlings in both the lawn and the flowerbeds. Be prepared to work on this problem for several seasons as bermudagrass is one of the toughest weeds in the world to really eliminate.

Q. There is a weed in my garden that looks like a grass, but when I hoe it or pull it out, a bunch more comes up?

A. You're describing nutsedge, which is a tough perennial weed worldwide and in our area we have two kinds: yellow and purple. Both produce an extensive system of underground tubers from which they generate. The tubers of yellow nutsedge are smooth and round and have a pleasant almond taste, while the tubers of purple nutsedge are rough and scaly and taste bitter.

The best solution is to not let either yellow or purple nutsedge get established. They thrive in waterlogged soil and their presence often indicates that drainage is poor, irrigation is too frequent, or sprinklers are leaky. Once you notice the problem, get on it and keep after it. Carefully hand pull plants before they develop five leaves and they won't have a chance to form new tubers and eventually the old tubers will run out of energy to resprout.

If your nutsedge problem is widespread in a lawn consider two applications of Sedgehammer® and you'll see a dramatic reduction in population. Also available are several products containing MSMA or CMA. Nutgrass 'Nihilator® is effective against yellow, but not purple nutsedge. Pennant® is a preemergence herbicide that can be used in flowerbeds in the spring and early summer to keep nutsedge from sprouting, but has no effect on actively growing plants. Spot treatments of Roundup, Scythe, and Finale can also be used.

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