

How to Control Weeds in a Florida Lawn

Florida's subtropical climate, abundant rainfall, and sandy soils create an ideal environment for lush, beautiful lawns. Unfortunately, these exact conditions also provide a perfect breeding ground for aggressive, fast-growing weeds. For homeowners in Palm Beach, Broward, Martin, and St. Lucie counties, maintaining a pristine lawn is a year-round battle. Weed control in Florida requires more than just spraying the occasional dandelion; it demands a strategic, multi-faceted approach that includes proper identification, cultural practices, and carefully timed herbicide applications.

Whether you are dealing with a sudden invasion of crabgrass or struggling to eradicate stubborn dollarweed, understanding the life cycles and preferences of Florida's most common weeds is the first step toward reclaiming your turf. This comprehensive guide will walk you through the process of identifying problematic weeds, utilizing pre-emergent and post-emergent herbicides effectively, and implementing natural cultural practices to keep your lawn healthy and weed-free.

Identifying Common Florida Weeds

The key to successful weed management is accurate identification. Weeds are generally categorized into three main types: broadleaf weeds, grassy weeds, and sedges. Each type requires a different control strategy, making it crucial to know exactly what you are fighting.

Crabgrass (Grassy Weed)

Crabgrass is one of the most notorious grassy weeds in Florida. It thrives in thin, weak areas of the lawn and germinates rapidly when soil temperatures begin to rise in the spring. Crabgrass is characterized by its sprawling, low-growing stems that radiate outward from a central point, resembling the legs of a crab. Because it is a grass, it blends in with your desirable turf until it produces unsightly, finger-like seed heads. Once established, crabgrass can quickly overtake a lawn, especially in areas stressed by heat or drought.

Dollarweed (Broadleaf Weed)

Also known as pennywort, dollarweed is a perennial broadleaf weed that loves moisture. It is easily identifiable by its round, bright green, fleshy leaves that resemble silver dollars. The stem connects to the center of the leaf, much like an umbrella. Dollarweed spreads rapidly through underground runners (rhizomes) and is often a clear indicator of overwatering or poor drainage. If your lawn is consistently soggy, dollarweed will thrive, making water management a critical component of its control.

Sedge (Sedge Weed)

Sedges, such as yellow nutsedge and purple nutsedge, are often mistaken for grasses, but they belong to a different family. A simple way to identify a sedge is by rolling the stem between your fingers; sedges have triangular, solid stems, whereas grasses have round, hollow stems. Sedges grow faster than most turfgrasses and feature stiff, upright, yellowish-green leaves. They are notoriously difficult to control because they produce underground tubers (nutlets) that can remain dormant in the soil for years before sprouting.

Chamberbitter (Broadleaf Weed)

Chamberbitter, sometimes called “little mimosa,” is an aggressive summer annual broadleaf weed. It has a distinctive appearance, with small, compound leaves that look similar to a mimosa tree or a fern. The most identifiable feature of chamberbitter is the row of tiny, round seed pods that develop on the underside of its stems. This weed thrives in warm soil and can quickly spread its seeds across your lawn and garden beds if not addressed promptly.

Spurge (Broadleaf Weed)

Spotted spurge is a low-growing, mat-forming summer annual that thrives in compacted soils and thin turf. It features small, oval leaves that often have a reddish-purple spot in the center. When the stem is broken, it emits a milky, sticky sap. Spurge germinates in warm weather and can spread rapidly, producing thousands of seeds in a single season. It is particularly common in areas adjacent to sidewalks and driveways where the soil is compacted and hot.

Pre-Emergent Herbicides: Timing is Everything

Pre-emergent herbicides are the foundation of a proactive weed control program. As the name suggests, these products work by creating a chemical barrier in the soil that prevents weed seeds from successfully germinating and emerging. They do not kill existing weeds; they only stop new ones from growing.

Spring Application

In Florida, the timing of pre-emergent herbicide applications is critical and varies slightly depending on your location. For South Florida, including Palm Beach and Broward counties, soil temperatures warm up earlier than in the northern parts of the state. The general rule of thumb recommended by the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) is to apply a spring pre-emergent when daytime temperatures reach 65 to 70 degrees Fahrenheit for four or five consecutive days. This typically occurs in early to mid-February.

Applying a pre-emergent at this time helps prevent the germination of summer annual weeds like crabgrass, goosegrass, and chamberbitter. Active ingredients such as prodiamine and dithiopyr are highly effective for this purpose. It is essential to water the herbicide into the soil immediately after application to activate the chemical barrier.

Fall Application

Fall pre-emergent applications are equally important to prevent winter annual weeds, such as annual bluegrass and chickweed. In South Florida, the ideal time for a fall application is usually in late October or early November, when nighttime temperatures begin to drop consistently to 55 to 60 degrees Fahrenheit. Maintaining this biannual schedule ensures that your lawn is protected against weed invasions year-round.

Selecting the Right Post-Emergent Herbicide

When weeds have already sprouted and are actively growing in your lawn, post-emergent herbicides are necessary. However, selecting the right product requires careful consideration of both the target weed and your specific turfgrass species. Using the wrong herbicide can result in severe damage to your lawn.

Florida lawns are predominantly composed of warm-season grasses such as St. Augustinegrass, Zoysiagrass, Bermudagrass, and Bahiagrass. St. Augustinegrass, in particular, is highly sensitive to many common herbicides. For example, herbicides containing 2,4-D or quinclorac, which are frequently used on cool-season grasses up north, can severely injure or kill St. Augustinegrass if not formulated specifically for it.

For broadleaf weeds like dollarweed and spurge, look for selective post-emergent herbicides containing active ingredients like atrazine (safe for St. Augustine and Centipede grasses) or a specialized blend designed for southern lawns. Atrazine is highly effective but must be used cautiously, as it can damage the roots of desirable trees and shrubs if applied too close to their drip lines.

Grassy weeds like crabgrass are much harder to control post-emergence because they are biologically similar to your turfgrass. Often, professional-grade products or multiple applications are required. For sedges, specialized herbicides containing active ingredients like halosulfuron or sulfentrazone are necessary, as standard broadleaf weed killers will not affect them.

Always read and follow the manufacturer's label instructions carefully. The label is the law, and it provides crucial information on application rates, temperature restrictions, and safe usage practices.

Cultural Practices: Naturally Suppressing Weeds

The most effective, long-term strategy for weed control is maintaining a dense, healthy lawn. Weeds are opportunistic; they do not create bare spots, they simply fill them. By optimizing your lawn care practices, you can create an environment where turfgrass thrives and weeds struggle to survive.

Mowing Height and Frequency

Mowing your lawn at the correct height is one of the simplest ways to suppress weeds. Taller grass blades cast shade on the soil, preventing sunlight from reaching weed seeds and inhibiting their germination. For St. Augustinegrass, the recommended mowing height is between 3.5 and 4 inches. Zoysiagrass should be mowed slightly lower, around 2 to 2.5 inches.

Never remove more than one-third of the grass blade in a single mowing. Scalping the lawn stresses the turf and exposes the soil to sunlight, creating a perfect invitation for weed invasion. Additionally, keep your mower blades sharp; dull blades tear the grass, leaving jagged edges that are susceptible to disease and environmental stress.

Proper Watering Techniques

Florida's sandy soils drain quickly, but improper watering is a leading cause of weed problems. Overwatering or watering too frequently encourages shallow root growth in turfgrass and creates the constantly moist conditions favored by weeds like dollarweed and sedges.

The UF/IFAS recommends watering your lawn deeply and infrequently. Apply roughly half an inch to three-quarters of an inch of water per irrigation session, and only water when the grass shows signs of wilt (such as folded leaf blades or footprints remaining visible after walking on the grass). This encourages the turf to develop deep, robust root systems that are more resilient to drought and better equipped to outcompete weeds. Always adhere to local water restrictions in your county.

Soil Fertility and Aeration

Proper fertilization provides your lawn with the nutrients it needs to grow thick and dense. However, over-fertilizing can actually stimulate weed growth and contribute to environmental pollution. Follow a fertilization schedule tailored to your specific grass type and always adhere to local fertilizer ordinances, particularly during the summer rainy season when nutrient runoff is a significant concern.

Compacted soil is another major contributor to weed infestations, particularly for weeds like goosegrass and spurge. If your lawn receives heavy foot traffic or has hard, compacted soil, core aeration can help. Aeration removes small plugs of soil, alleviating compaction and allowing oxygen, water, and nutrients to reach the root zone more effectively.

Hand-Pulling vs. Chemical Control

For minor weed infestations, hand-pulling is an environmentally friendly and highly effective method of control. It is particularly useful for scattered broadleaf weeds or young seedlings. When hand-pulling, it is crucial to remove the entire root system;

otherwise, the weed will simply regrow. Doing this after a rain shower when the soil is moist makes it much easier to extract the roots intact.

However, hand-pulling is not practical for severe infestations or for weeds that spread via underground rhizomes or tubers, such as dollarweed and nutsedge. Pulling a sedge plant often leaves the tubers behind in the soil, which will quickly sprout new plants. In these cases, targeted chemical control is necessary to eradicate the underground reproductive structures and achieve lasting results.

When to Call a Professional

While many homeowners successfully manage their lawns with DIY methods, weed control in Florida can quickly become overwhelming. The subtropical climate means that weeds grow aggressively year-round, and the specific sensitivities of grasses like St. Augustine make chemical applications risky for the inexperienced.

You should consider calling a professional pest control and lawn care service if:

- You are dealing with a severe, widespread weed infestation that is overtaking your lawn.
- You have persistent problems with difficult-to-control weeds like nutsedge, crabgrass, or Bermuda grass invading your St. Augustine turf.
- You are unsure of the correct herbicides to use and want to avoid accidentally damaging or killing your lawn.
- You prefer to have a consistent, year-round maintenance program handled by experts who understand the nuances of Florida's climate, soil, and local regulations.
- You lack the time, equipment, or desire to handle the precise timing and application of pre-emergent and post-emergent treatments.

Professional lawn care technicians have the training to accurately identify weed species, access to commercial-grade products, and the expertise to apply them safely and effectively. They can also diagnose underlying issues, such as soil compaction, nematode damage, or irrigation problems, that may be contributing to your weed issues.

Conclusion

Controlling weeds in a Florida lawn is an ongoing process that requires vigilance, knowledge, and consistency. By learning to identify common invaders like crabgrass, dollarweed, and sedges, you can tailor your approach to target their specific weaknesses. Implementing a proactive schedule of pre-emergent herbicides, carefully selecting the right post-emergent treatments, and adhering to best cultural practices like proper mowing and watering will significantly reduce weed pressure over time.

Remember that a dense, healthy lawn is your best defense against weeds. By providing your turf with the optimal conditions it needs to thrive, you naturally crowd out unwanted plants and create a beautiful outdoor space to enjoy year-round.



O'Hara Pest Control

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O'Hara Pest Control has been helping homeowners across Palm Beach, Broward, Martin, and St. Lucie counties since 1973. If you need expert help with controlling stubborn weeds or maintaining a healthy, beautiful Florida lawn, call us at 561-655-9011 or visit oharapestcontrol.com to schedule a free consultation.