

News Article

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Date: March 16, 2020
Please use by: March 26, 2020

It's Crabgrass Prevention Time

Spring officially arrives just before midnight EDT on March 19 this year, earlier than it has in over 100 years, and many homeowners are itching to do something in the yard. It is now crabgrass prevention time, so put that task toward the top of your list.

Good cultural practices like mowing high and encouraging dense turf are the most effective crabgrass controls, but herbicides may be necessary in some cases.

Homeowners who had a crabgrass problem last year should consider some type of crabgrass preventer application before very long. I like to tell people that it's a good task to complete before school spring break is over.

Crabgrass has a broader leaf than most normal lawn grasses, and the seed head is what scientists call a "panicle," with a few to several slender, fingerlike branches or spikes clustered near the top of stems. Two species of crabgrass are more common in Indiana lawns: large crabgrass and smooth crabgrass. Large crabgrass has hairy stems and leaf blades, while smooth crabgrass stems and leaves are smooth, except for a few sparse hairs.

Unlike our lawn grasses, crabgrass is also what we call a summer annual weed. In other words, seeds sprout in the spring, it grows and produces seed through the year, and completely dies before winter. If you had a lot of crabgrass last year, there is a good chance they dropped a lot of seeds.

Crabgrass herbicides available to homeowners are primarily "preventer" products, meaning that they need to be in place before crabgrass emerges. The way they work is that as soon as new seeds sprout, they come in contact with the product, die, and fail to emerge. Many of these products are combined with fertilizer, however, early spring fertilization of turf should be minimized. Look for products with mostly "slow-release" forms of nitrogen.

Pre-emergence herbicides must be applied early in the spring to be effective (best from March 1 to about mid-April in northern Indiana) – at least a week or two before germination of crabgrass. According to Dr. Aaron Patton, Purdue Extension turfgrass specialist, "The preemergence herbicides (crabgrass preventers) that are applied in spring to prevent the emergence of crabgrass seedlings work only as long as they remain in the soil." He said that generally, these products last in the soil about 60-120 days depending on a number of factors (rate applied, ingredient, turf cover, temperature, moisture, etc.). Data shows the average historical crabgrass germination date to be about April 29 in Fort Wayne. Of course, this will vary based on your location; the local weather and site conditions will determine that

date from year to year. Crabgrass germinates when soil temperatures are approximately 60 degrees F for 3-5 days at the one-quarter inch level.

A forecasting model developed by Michigan State University can help Midwest homeowners and professionals fine-tune the timing of their crabgrass preventer product applications and offer average crabgrass germination dates based on heat unit accumulations. You can stay up-to-date with the forecasts by visiting the model at <http://www.gddtracker.net/>.

Do not use most pre-emergence crabgrass preventers on newly seeded lawns, as they may inhibit desirable lawn species from growth and establishment, with one exception. Patton said, "Siduron allows cool-season grasses to germinate but prevents crabgrass from emerging." He said it is good for seeding but doesn't last as long as other preemergence herbicides, so it is not a good season-long preemergence herbicide.

Post-emergence herbicide products are available and are most effective on small crabgrass plants, but the products are very difficult to use effectively by most homeowners. Post-emergence treatment is probably best left to professionals. Do not attempt to control crabgrass with herbicides after mid-July because crabgrass plants are usually too large to control effectively.

When using any herbicide, always read and follow all label instructions.

For more information, access Purdue Extension's publication, "Control of Crabgrass in Home Lawns," number AY-10-W at The Education Store, www.edustore.purdue.edu. Find additional turf management tips at Purdue's turfgrass science website: <https://turf.purdue.edu/>.