



COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE
UNIVERSITY OF MAINE

AGRONOMY REPORTS

LAWN WEEDS – WHERE DO THEY COME FROM

FACT SHEET D-15

It becomes a little discouraging to spend a considerable amount of time and money building a new lawn, when the first plants that pop forth from your beautifully prepared seedbed are weeds. Since the contractor assured you that the topsoil had been tilled and stockpiled for two years, you know that the weeds couldn't have come from the soil. After a moment of deep thought you might logically conclude that the weed seeds must have been introduced with the high priced lawn seed that you purchased.

Although your reasoning may seem logical, it is very unlikely that your weed problem arrived with your lawn seed. First off – to get the weed population that shows up in most new lawns, you would most likely notice such a large amount of weed seeds in your lawn seed package. Secondly – inspectors from the Maine Department of Agriculture periodically collect seed samples to make sure they meet the proper standards (such as weed content and germination). Only occasionally does a seed sample show excessive weed seed levels, and never have I seen a weed seed content that would even begin to give you the weed population that shows up on many new lawns.

Where Do The Weeds Come From?

In nearly all cases, the weed seeds were present in the soil, and were just waiting for a chance to grow. Unlike most crop seeds, many weed seeds have the capacity to remain in the soil for years without losing their viability (ability to germinate and grow). Once conditions are right, they take off.

Like lawn seed, weed seeds need adequate moisture and the proper temperature before they will germinate. Unlike lawn seed, many weed seeds also need some amount of light to trigger the germination process. Thus, weed seeds can remain buried in a field for years and never grow. Then a contractor moves in, kills the surface vegetation and pushes the topsoil into piles. Even in the piles, a good portion of the seeds are buried deeper than light can penetrate. When you spread this topsoil on your lawn, a large number of weed seeds are placed near the soil surface where they now receive light.

After perhaps 20 years of lying dormant, you have given these weed seeds their one big chance. Since many of the lawn grasses take 2 to 3 weeks to germinate, those quick starting weeds get a good head start.

Mowing Helps

Don't give up on your newly developed weed patch and don't let it go unattended. Most all of the weeds that show up in a new lawn are annual types. That means that, come fall, they will die. The secret to success is to start your mowing program when the weeds reach about 3 inches high (cut to a height of 1.5 to 2 inches). In spite of how bad your new lawn looks, keep it mowed. Frequent mowing will minimize the competition from the weeds, thus allowing the grass plants to develop. Mowing will also prevent the weeds from going to seed – thereby preventing a weed crop next year.

Herbicides May Help

For those of you who are unwilling to put up with one year of those unsightly weeds, there are now herbicides on the market that can be safely used on newly seeded turfgrass.