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Wicked Weeds ~ Plantain

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Our approach around home to lawn maintenance is that “if its green, mow it”. We don’t use pesticides and seldom fertilize our lawn since it is near a lake and we don’t want to add to the runoff. However, there are a few weeds in our lawn that test my resolve. I consider using pesticides but I haven’t broken down yet. The main culprit – PLANTAIN.

Plantain is a common weed in southern Indiana. It can be found throughout Indiana and other parts of the country. There are two species – broadleaf plantain (*Plantago major*) and buckhorn plantain (*Plantago lanceolata*), with broadleaf plantain being the more common. It may be the second most common weed after dandelions.

Broadleaf plantain is reported to have been brought to North America by the Puritan colonists. It established itself in disturbed areas around European settlements and can now be found as far west as California, thus earning the nickname of “white-man’s footprint.”

In the past, parts of the broadleaf plantain were utilized as salad greens, as an herbal tea, as a compress for minor cuts and bruises and to treat upper respiratory infections. Buckhorn plantain had similar uses; notably, a tea made from the leaves was used as a cough syrup in Austria. Plantains are high in calcium and vitamins A, C and K. Today, their more useful characteristics are largely forgotten, in the quest for weed-free lawns and gardens.

Broadleaf plantain leaves are broad and egg-shaped – 1½ to 7 inches long – with several main veins running parallel to the leaf margins. The leaves are basal – found at the ground level. The leaves of buckhorn plantain, however, are narrow and lance-shaped (2 to 10 inches long – about five times as long as wide), often twisted or curled. Raised, parallel veins can be found on the underside of the leaf. Flowers and seeds are produced at the top of a stalk.



Both thrive in lawns and in disturbed areas and tolerate compacted soil and low mowing. Both are perennial weeds that spread by seed. Mowing may help spread plantain with the seeds attaching to the mower and then being spread around the yard. You may want to clean your equipment thoroughly before using it again to help prevent spreading the seeds.

The best way to prevent plantains in the lawn is to keep the soil aerated and healthy. Aerate compacted soil and follow a regular schedule of fertilization at least twice a year. Water the lawn deeply when there is less than an inch of rainfall in a week. A healthy lawn crowds out plantains, but the plantains crowd out the grass when the lawn is in poor condition.

If the plantain infestation is small, you can hand pull or dig the plants as they emerge or, at least, before the plants go to seed.

When large numbers of the weeds are present, plantain lawn weeds are best controlled with herbicides. Choose a post-emergent herbicide (2, 4-D, MCPP (mecoprop), Dicamba or Triclopyr) labeled for plantain control. The most effective time to do this is in the fall when the plants are moving carbohydrates to the roots for winter storage. However, you can also apply the herbicides in spring. Carefully follow the label instructions regarding mixing, timing and application procedures. Avoid spraying when temperatures are above 85 degrees F. (29 C.) and on windy days. Plantain is not successfully controlled with the use of pre-emergents.

References:

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