

How One Home Gardener Dealt with Chronic Centipede Lawn Problems

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Two years ago my centipede lawn contained an abundance of weeds, mainly chamberbitter, and a little healthy grass. Over the years the St. Augustine Seville from the neighbor's yard had spread into our yard and it was doing well, without weeds. My centipede grass, on the other hand, had many patches of brown, dead grass that did not seem to be attached in any way to the soil. When raked, it came up in clumps.

Thinking I would correct the problem, I spent many hours pulling weeds. But, they grew back faster than I could pull. I removed the dead centipede grass thinking the healthy centipede would grow into it. I just created fertile areas for more weeds. I have been told that one definition of insanity is to keep doing the same thing while expecting different results. Clearly I had to do something about my insanity.

I began by having a soil fertility analysis done at the University of Florida IFAS Soil Testing Laboratory . (You can pick up a mailing kit for this at the UF-IFAS Leon County Extension at 615 Paul Russell Road weekdays, 8-5). The results showed that conditions were correct for growing centipede as well as St. Augustine grass. Although I never had a test to determine the presence of ring nematodes, from what I had learned as a Master Gardener volunteer, I believed them to be the cause of the dead spots in the centipede grass. Ring nematodes are microscopic worms that attack grass roots, reducing their ability to obtain nutrients from the soil. Roots may then be abnormally short and appear darkened or rotten where damaged. Ring nematodes do not damage St. Augustine grass, however, and there were no dead spots in that part of the lawn. So, I decided to try plugging the bare spots of my centipede lawn with the Seville type of St. Augustine . I purchased the plugs at a local nursery. To my delight, the plugs I planted spread rapidly, filling the dead spots and causing me to conclude ring nematodes were the problem.

There were still large spots in the lawn where chamberbitter was prolific. Chamberbitter is a tenacious weed that looks like small mimosa trees. The underside of the leaves contain numerous round fruits. It germinates from early summer through fall. Pulling them is an option, but the vast numbers of seeds makes it difficult to get ahead of the problem. Therefore, I resorted to a herbicide.

In early October, carefully following the label directions, I sprayed the part of the lawn where the chamberbitter grew with atrazine. Atrazine herbicide has both a pre-emergence and a post-emergence activity and is effective on a wide range of weeds, including chamberbitter. It works by inhibiting photosynthesis in susceptible plants. Photosynthesis is the process by which light energy is converted to chemical energy. Atrazine should not be applied in the root zone of desirable trees, shrubs and flowers. Because pre-emergence products may interfere with lawn grass seed germination, re-seeding should be delayed for 6-16 weeks after application.

In May, using a fertilizer spreader, I retreated the same areas with 0-0-7 fertilizer containing atrazine. I have continued to plug with Seville St. Augustine and I am happy to report that I have a healthy lawn which is a mixture of centipede and St. Augustine . The two make a lawn that is visually appealing even when the shades of green are not identical. Because Seville is a short growing St. Augustine , it can be cut to the same height as the centipede (3-4 inches), so mowing is not an issue. While there are still some weeds in the lawn, I am very happy with the results. The grass is growing well and the weeds are finding it harder to compete.

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I believe my centipede lawn problem really started with my good intentions. In an effort to have a more perfect lawn, I used too much fertilizer. However, centipede grass will decline when fertilized too much. I will not make that mistake again.

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