So You Have Weeds in Your Lawn?

You’ll soon see the spring media advertisements showing beautiful homes and vivid green, manicured lawns. One of the products being promoted to achieve those lawns will be combination fertilizers and herbicides known as “weed-and-feed” fertilizers.

Although weed-and-feed products can be useful, there is a problem in that the correct time to apply the herbicide is not usually the correct time to apply the fertilizer. Their use is often at an increased cost to you and to the environment when those extra chemicals are transported via runoff to the ponds, rivers, and lakes of our region.

Let’s look at the care of three different lawns to see where “weed-and-feed” fits in.

The Healthy, Vigorous Lawn: Those vivid, green lawns you will see on TV should have no weed problems, since the best prevention of weed growth is a healthy lawn, which limits both sunshine and growing space for the weeds to germinate and grow.

Maintaining a healthy lawn (assuming reasonable sunshine and an appropriate variety of grass for your yard) is a product of three activities: proper cutting, proper watering, and proper feeding. Cutting: with sharp mower blades and at the appropriate height (e.g. four inches for St. Augustine, two inches for Centipede). Watering: only when necessary (e.g. when grass turns gray-blue). Application of ½ to ¾ inch of water will fully water the root zone. Water your lawn at a moderate rate to allow penetration into the soil, limiting runoff of your water AND of your chemicals. Feeding: for our area that’s generally a
spring fertilization with a 15-0-15 product (15% Nitrogen, zero Phosphate, 15% Potassium) and with at least half of the Nitrogen (7.5%) in slow release form. Application should follow the greening of the lawn (the second or third grass cutting of the season – March for St. Augustine and April for Centipede) at an application rate of six pounds of fertilizer per thousand square feet of lawn. One 50# bag of 15-0-15 fertilizer can cover eight thousand square feet of lawn.

For the healthy, vigorous lawn, weed-and-feed is unnecessary, excess chemical care.

**The Good Lawn with Patches of Weeds:** If the weed patches in your lawn are few to moderate in number, your best choice would be the application of a preemergence herbicide only to those general areas where weeds have been active. That’s a task for November, before the winter weeds germinate and (late February to early March) before the germination of most summer weeds. As above, the fertilizer would be applied separately in late spring. Any winter weeds that are present now should be mowed before they can produce seed, and the healthy grass should eventually win. Grass is a really efficient weed!

Again, note the timing problem for use of a weed-and-feed product: November and February for application of preemergence weed-killers; late March and April for fertilizers; as much as two months separation for ideal application.

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**The Lawn with Lots of Weeds:** If weeds occupy a significant portion of your lawn, weed-and-feed products would be a consideration. The herbicide is most commonly Atrazine (1%), and the fertilizer of choice for the mixture would still be 15-0-15 with at least 7.5 % slow release nitrogen. Some of the stores and nurseries in Tallahassee already carry such a combined weed-and-feed product. If you don’t see it, ask for it.

**Some Review Comments on Weed-and-Feed:**

1. Whether used in weed-and-feed products (where you cover your entire lawn with herbicide) or in direct application to weed patches, the pre-and post-emergence herbicides are dangerous chemicals. Family and pets alike can track them into your house where they will last for weeks in your carpets. It is wise to limit access to the lawn for a few days following the application of the herbicide. Be certain to follow label directions if “watering in” is appropriate.

2. Store unused herbicides in a locked cabinet or on a high shelf. Discard old chemicals at the special disposal center of your county landfill.

3. Remember the timing problem. If you had lots of weeds late last summer, then the timing for applications of preemergence herbicide is NOW, whether the application is a separate chemical or as a part of weed-and feed. Watch the weather from mid-February to early March: the application day should follow 4-6 days of 65°-70°F daytime temperatures; the dogwoods and azaleas probably will be blooming.

4. Remember that most weeds you now have in your lawn are maturing winter weeds and are not easily killed by herbicides without damaging your lawn. Make
a note to work on them next November before their seeds germinate for winter
growth. Then go out and mow your lawn, cutting down those weeds before they
seed.
5. Be careful to avoid herbicide application to heavily shaded areas of lawn
containing the roots of a tree or trees. Trees are also susceptible to herbicides like
Atrazine! Note that weeds will easily outgrow grass in such areas of stress for the
lawn (heavily shaded areas, and very dry or very wet areas). You might consider
using either mulch or groundcovers in such areas rather than a weak lawn with a
weed problem.

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