Some Lawn Weeds May Help Your Lawn

Photo by Les Harrison: Crimson clover has attractive red blooms, is beneficial to honeybees, and even adds nitrogen to the soil.

Les Harrison is an Agricultural Extension Agent with the University of Florida IFAS Extension in Leon County, http://leon.ifas.ufl.edu  For answers to your gardening questions, write ask-a-mastergardener@leoncountyfl.gov

Thursday, April 22, 2010
Tallahassee Democrat

After what may go down as the coldest winter in twenty years, spring appears to have finally arrived. And, as always, with spring comes the usual collection of weeds in the lawn.

Some of these unwanted weeds, though, are legumes and actually can provide some benefits to the lawn. Legumes are a plant family which includes many commonly known and widely used crops. Peanuts, soybeans, an almost innumerable variety of peas, and lentils are all commonly encountered legumes. Also in the legume family are clover, vetch and alfalfa.

What makes legumes famed in the plant world, and of interest to urban lawn owners, is the ability to extract and use nitrogen from the atmosphere. Earth’s atmosphere is approximately seventy-eight percent nitrogen. But, at present, it is expensive to isolate nitrogen from the atmosphere commercially. A major part of the production expense is natural gas. As with other petroleum resources, natural gas prices have risen dramatically and so have the products dependent upon this resource.
But legumes have evolved a symbiotic relationship with a bacterium, *Rhizobia*, found in the plant’s root nodules. Working together, the *Rhizobia* and the plant capture nitrogen from the atmosphere. This means that a substantial residue of nitrogen is left in decaying legume tissue after the plant dies.

Generations of farmers used legumes as “green manure” to improve crop production before the advent of commercial fertilizers. Cost considerations have resurrected this practice. And, for the homeowner, an unwelcome weed may turn out to be a blessing in disguise. While there are a variety of legumes in north Florida, the most frequently recognized weeds/legumes are clover and vetch.

Vetch is a spindly, vine-like annual with small dagger shaped leaves and small purple flowers. In addition to its nitrogen-adding benefit, it has a prolific root system that penetrates even hard clay soils. Grasses following the vetch benefit from the opportunity to establish roots in the soil where the vetch’s root system is decaying. This helps to improve the likelihood of establishing grasses on erodible land.

Crimson clover is the familiar red flowering plant frequently seen on roadsides, in hay fields and in grazing areas in the spring. This annual also imparts nitrogen to the soil, and it is popular with honey bees. Historically, its seed have been the least expensive of the clovers.

So, for a very low cost, you could overseed your lawn with crimson clover in the fall and enjoy the blooms in the spring. There is one caveat, though. Neighbors and homeowner associations may not be open-minded about the “neglected” look of your clover lawn in the spring. But, you can mow your crimson clover lawn after it flowers and by summer the clover plants will have died completely, leaving behind nitrogen for your lawn. The clover is a cool-season legume that dies as the days lengthen and temperatures rise.

To learn more about using crimson clover or other legumes, visit the University of Florida IFAS website at [http://ifas.ufl.edu](http://ifas.ufl.edu) and type “crimson clover” in the search engine.

###