



# Growing Green

Healthy gardens, naturally.

## Broadleaf Weeds in Lawns

### Pest Information Factsheet Series

#### What Do They Look Like?

Some common broadleaf weeds that grow in lawns are:

- **Dandelions:** The familiar bright yellow flowers turn into puffy seed heads. Plants have lance-shaped leaves and long tap roots.
- **English daisy:** These small, white to pink ray flowers blossom on small plants with oval leaves and tough, fibrous roots.
- **Buttercup:** These creeping plants root at stem joints. They have small yellow flowers with five shiny petals and deeply-toothed, three-lobed leaves.
- **Plantains:** Their smooth, oval leaves with parallel veins, grow in flat rosettes in the lawn. The flowers are carried on straight, stiff stems.
- **Clovers:** They also grow in lawns and may or may not be considered weeds. Red clover is a deeply rooted perennial. White clover is shallow rooted and is often sown as a nurse crop for new lawns because clovers produce nitrogen in the roots. Clovers are drought resistant, staying green longer than grasses in the summer.

#### When Are Lawn Weeds A Problem?

Even the most perfect lawns have a few unnoticeable weeds mixed in with the grasses. How many weeds you tolerate is a matter of personal taste. For example, some people like the flowers of English daisy and clovers in their lawns, but others don't.

- Grasses are highly competitive plants. Where there are a lot of weeds in lawns, it shows there is room for improvement in lawn care practices and soil conditions.
- Some common practices, such as close mowing, frequent aeration and raking out 'thatch' or moss, provide ideal conditions for weeds to invade. These activities thin the turf, disturb the soil and cause seeds that were dormant in the soil to germinate.

#### What Can I Do to Prevent Weeds?

- A healthy lawn is the most effective defense against weeds (see Grow a Healthy Lawn below). Dense, deeply-rooted grasses out compete weeds and shade the soil so that weed seeds can't germinate.
- Correct underlying soil conditions that favour weeds: improve drainage, apply lime on acidic soils and aerate compacted areas.
- For new lawns, sow a mixture of grasses that tolerate a range of growing conditions. Local suppliers can advise on the best mixtures.
- Increase the density of the turf by sprinkling turfgrass seeds over the lawn during February to April.
- Where grasses are growing poorly because of shade, tree roots, heavy traffic or other reasons, consider other kinds of ground cover plants, such as knickknick or coastal strawberry, or materials such as paving stones, gravel paths or bark mulch.



## What Can I Do to Control Weeds?

- **Corn gluten herbicides:** A non-toxic herbicide is sold at some garden centres. Compounds in corn gluten kill seeds as they germinate, but have no effect on established plants. The product is registered to control dandelions and smooth crabgrass in lawns.
- **Hand weeding:** Digging out weeds sounds like a lot of work, but with the right tool it is easy and effective. The most important principle is to disturb the soil as little as possible.
  - Use a weed fork to cut the root of a weed as far as possible below the surface. Don't use the tool to pry out the plant—instead, withdraw the fork at the same angle it went in. Then lift the plant out by the leaves. This leaves behind a small hole, just the size of the root, without disturbing the soil.
  - You don't need to remove every piece of dandelion root. Even if a small piece of root does sprout (most don't) it is smothered by the thick turf before it can emerge.

## Grow A Healthy Lawn

- **Mow correctly:** Cutting grass short allows weeds to invade. The longer the grass blades are, the deeper the roots grow and the more weed and drought resistant the lawn will be. For most lawns, a good mowing height is 6 - 9 cm or 3 inches. Keep mower blades sharp and remove no more than 1/3 of the grass blades at a time.
- **Provide nutrients:** Leave grass clippings on the lawn (called "grass cycling"). This weed-free, balanced, slow release (and free!) fertilizer can supply up to half of the nutrients for a lawn. For other fertilizers, top dress twice a year with compost. Apply in late May or June, when grasses are growing the most quickly.
- **Water deeply:** Deep, infrequent watering (no more than weekly) encourages deep rooting. A deeply rooted lawn can safely be allowed to go dormant in the summer. For a dormant lawn, one deep watering in each month with no rain keeps the lawn in good condition.
- **Dethatching?** A common misconception is that decaying leaf material at the base of grass plants should be removed. Don't do it! A layer of organic material, 1 - 2 cm deep is beneficial. It mulches the soil, cushions foot traffic, shades out weed seeds and provides nutrients as it breaks down. It is rare to see true thatch on a residential lawn, but if a thick, dark, water-repelling mat has formed (usually caused by excessive fertilizer and pesticide use) rake gently to remove the upper layer of thatch. This lets in air and water without disturbing the soil. Applying a light layer of screened compost over the area also helps digest thatch.



### Factsheet Series

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