

Weedy Lawn Grasses

Grassy weeds can be difficult to control in lawns. Many people will call any undesirable grass crabgrass. In our area, they are often right, but it's important to be sure, because different grasses have different controls. Furthermore, some of the problems we hear described about lawns actually have more to do with an undesirable plant than an insect or disease. Step one is to identify the problem:

If the turf is browning, but not in distinct patches or rings, then it's less likely to be a fungus or insect. Browning all over or in large areas can be a lack of fertilizer, drought stress or creeping bentgrass. Many golf courses use bentgrass for their greens, but in lawns, it is very undesirable. It's the last grass to green up in the spring and the first to go dormant in winter. It needs more water than other species, so it often turns brown during our summer heat. It prefers very low mowing heights and spreads above ground via stolons, which means it can crowd out grasses better adapted to our climate.

Sometimes the complaint is coarse grass in a lawn, meaning that the leaf blades are too wide and they visually disrupt the turf. While often called crabgrass, this is more likely tall fescue or quackgrass. Unlike crabgrass, these are perennials and can't be controlled with a pre-emergent herbicide in the spring. With these grasses, the whole area must be sprayed out or removed, and even then they may come back. It's worth noting that tall fescue is more drought tolerant than most turf grasses, and is one we recommend for low water areas. It's only a problem when it's seen in highly manicured lawns where visual consistency is important. Quackgrass usually enters lawns that are stressed in some way, and once in is very difficult to control, even when sod is removed. This is thanks to the thick rhizomes it sends out in all directions. They break easily, and with even a small piece left in the soil, new plants develop quickly.

At this time of year, crabgrass is showing itself everywhere. Like the last two, the leaf blades are wide and visually disruptive. Unlike them, however, crabgrass has a more prostrate growth habit and often turns dark purple in the fall. Crabgrass is an annual, so large infestations can lead to bare patches in the turf after it dies. It can be controlled by spraying a pre-emergent in the spring, to kill the seedlings as they germinate.

So how do we identify these annoying weeds? In turf it's somewhat difficult, because mowing often removes the part of the plant used for identification. But there are some clues.



Creeping Bentgrass

Creeping bentgrass (*Agrostis palustris*) is usually identified by the stolons that spread on top of the soil and the very fine-textured leaf blades. It rarely blooms in turf. When it does, the panicles are open for a short time, but mostly stay closed. Plants can grow up to 20 inches tall, but can tolerate mowing heights as low as 1/8-inch. It is a perennial that spreads via stolons and seeds.

Tall fescue (*Festuca arundinacea*) has a wide leaf blade, up to ½-inch wide. The upper side of the leaf is rough to the touch and is sometimes constricted like quackgrass; unlike quackgrass it has a fibrous root system, with only a few short rhizomes, if any. It can grow to three feet tall, but withstands mowing heights as low as two inches. It spreads via rhizomes or seed and is a perennial. While widely distributed, and considered potentially invasive, it's not labeled noxious.



Tall Fescue



Crabgrass

Crabgrass (*Digitaria sanguinalis*) is identified by its broad flat clumps that crowd out desired plants. It grows from 6 inches to 2 feet tall. The leaf blades can be as wide as ½ inch but are usually somewhat narrower. If they aren't removed by the mower, the seed heads are distinctive because they spread out like fingers from 1 to 5 inches long. Crabgrass thrives in hot dry weather, but is an annual that usually dies in the first hard frost. It often turns purple near the end of the season. Only Alaska, Hawaii and Florida have avoided this scourge of lawns and gardens. There are many species of *Digitaria* but none are labeled noxious in Washington.

Quackgrass (*Agropyron repens*) is familiar to most of us. Growing one to three feet tall, it has leaf blades up to ½-inch wide, like tall fescue. Both weeds may have constricted leaf blades. The seed heads of quackgrass are much tighter than fescue, forming a spike instead of panicle. It has rhizomes as long as 10 feet, and these are easily seen (and broken) when pulling the plant. These rhizomes are the key to the success of quackgrass, as anyone knows who has dealt with it. It can crowd out food crops and so is regulated as a noxious weed in 10 states including Oregon and Utah.



Quackgrass

Control of any of these weeds can be tricky. The perennials can be killed with Roundup, which will kill the whole area of lawn treated. The infested sod can be removed, although that is no guarantee. Crabgrass can be controlled by applying a pre-emergent in the spring, at the time that forsythias start to bloom.