

Cool Springs Landscape Resources

Crabgrass Control

Crabgrass is a common weed that most everyone knows. (The "great philosopher" Pogo said, "Work is the crabgrass in life.") There are two species of crabgrass common in California: smooth crabgrass, *Digitaria ischaemum* and large or hairy crabgrass, *D. sanguinalis*. Both species were introduced from Eurasia and are widespread throughout the United States. Crabgrass is found in turfgrass (mostly smooth crabgrass) and in ornamental landscapes (primarily large crabgrass). Large crabgrass is also found in orchards, vineyards, and other agricultural areas. Crabgrass also has many other names including crowfoot grass and summer grass. Crabgrass is often thought of as an East Coast weed; however, it is found in most parts of California, except at high elevations and in areas that receive no summer water.

Identification and Life Cycle

[Smooth crabgrass \[5K\]](#) is a low-growing, summer annual plant that spreads by seed and from rooting of the culm nodes (joints) that lie on the soil. When unmowed it will grow upright to about 6 inches, but it will tolerate mowing in turf at 1/4 inch and will still produce seed at this height. Seedling leaves are light green and smooth. True leaves are dark green and smooth, and the leaf blade is from 1/4 to 1/3 inch across, up to 5 inches long, and pointed. Crabgrass often forms patches in lawns, and plants can grow together to form large clumps. The ligule (collar) is small and inconspicuous without prominent appendages or auricles. The leaf sheath and upper leaf surface are smooth, but a few hairs may be found on the lower leaf surface. There may be a reddish tint at the base of the leaf. The inflorescence (flower stalk) has branches that originate from the main stem at 1/8 to 1/4 inch intervals. The branches are 1/2 to 2-1/2 inches long at the end of the stalk.

When found in turf, [large crabgrass \[9K\]](#) is a low-growing summer annual that spreads by seed and from rooting of the nodes that lie on the soil. When unmowed it may grow upright to a height of 2 feet. It will not tolerate close mowing as well as smooth crabgrass. Seedling leaves are light green and hairy. True leaves are generally 3 inches long and hairy on the upper surface of the leaf and leaf sheath. The flower stalk is similar to that of smooth crabgrass, but the branches are longer, about 2 to 5 inches at the end of the stalk.

In southern California, the major germination period for both crabgrass species is from January 15 to early March, depending on the temperature, and seeds continue to germinate throughout spring and summer. While germination is early in warm winter areas, growth is slow during spring months until mid-May. In June and July the plants produce tillers and shoots, and flower in late July and August.

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In the absence of a frost, crabgrass may overwinter in warm areas or during warm winters and produce new growth and a second crop of seed in spring or early summer. In the central and northern parts of the state, crabgrass begins germination around March 1 to 15 when soil temperatures reach 50° to 55°F for at least 3 days. Germination continues throughout summer and into fall.

Management

Crabgrass is easily managed using a variety of cultural and chemical controls.

Cultural Control in Turfgrass

Because crabgrass spreads and reproduces primarily by seed, any cultural operation that reduces seed production will decrease crabgrass. There are also a number of cultural operations that increase the vigor of turfgrass, thus decreasing the potential for a crabgrass invasion. These include using the proper mowing height for turf, applying fertilizer at the correct time of year, selecting the best turf species for your area, and properly irrigating turf.

Mowing at the optimum height for turf increases turfgrass vigor and reduces the germination and establishment of crabgrass. Select the proper mowing height from Table 1 for the dominant turfgrass species in your turf. After mowing turf that is infested with crabgrass, thoroughly rinse mower to remove seeds, to avoid transferring them to uninfested sites.

TABLE 1. Proper Mowing Height for Turfgrass Species

Turf Species	Mowing Height (inches)
bentgrass, colonial	0.5-1
bentgrass, creeping	0.25 or less
bermudagrass, common	0.75-1.5
bermudagrass, hybrid	
Santa Ana	0.5-0.75
tifgreen	0.25-0.5
tifway II	0.5-0.75
bluegrass, Kentucky	1.5-2.5
dichondra	0.5-0.75
fescue, fine	1.5-2.5
fescue, tall	2-2.5
kikuyugrass	0.5-1
ryegrass, annual	1.5-2
ryegrass, perennial	1.5-2.5
St. Augustinegrass	0.75-1.5
zoysiagrass	0.5-1

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Fertilization can also be used to increase turfgrass vigor and reduce the possibility of crabgrass invasion. The best time to fertilize is when the turf is actively growing, which depends upon the turf species grown (see Table 2). Because crabgrass is not very competitive, a vigorously growing turf will crowd out crabgrass seedlings.

TABLE 2. Periods of Active Growth of Cool and Warm Season Turf Species

Turfgrass Species	Period of Active Growth
<i>Cool season turf</i>	
annual ryegrass (for overseeding)	October-May
Bentgrass	March-June and September- November
Fine fescue	March-June and October- December
Kentucky bluegrass	end of February-end of May and October-December
Perennial ryegrass	February-June and October- December
Tall fescue	March-June and October- December
<i>Warm season turf</i>	
Bermudagrass	April-end of September
Dichondra	April-October
Kikuyugrass	February-November
St. Augustinegrass	March-October
zoysiagrass	April-October