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Controlling grassy weeds a challenge for homeowners

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Have you been struggling to control grassy weeds in your lawn with little or no effect? Chances are you've been battling quackgrass with crabgrass controls. Both are coarse-bladed grasses that can invade our lawns and overtake the more desirable fine-bladed grasses. That's where the similarity ends.

Crabgrass is an annual grass and is not that common in Montana, whereas quackgrass, also known as couch or twitch grass, is a perennial grass that is found in most parts of our state. A clump of crabgrass is anchored in the center and hugs the ground. It has a fine fibrous mass of roots and is easy to pull up by hand. Clumps of crabgrass plants will often grow together to form a large unsightly mat in the lawn. When the grass goes to seed, there are four or more straight strands about 1 ½" long that reach out in different directions. These seeds germinate in early spring, but this can be prevented by applying a pre-emergent herbicide before the seeds start to germinate.

Quackgrass is a perennial grass that is often confused with crabgrass and will thrive in undernourished lawns. Blades are a lighter shade of green and grow faster than turf grass. Hollow stems produce seedheads that look like wheat or other grains. Although, quackgrass can spread by seed, it will spread more quickly through its extensive underground system of rhizomes. Each length of these underground stems can grow up to five feet in one season and produce new plants at several nodes along the way. Tilling and weeding by hand are not recommended because new plants may start from pieces of broken rhizome as small as ½ inch. You may end up with more plants than you started with!

There is not any selective weed control product for quackgrass. That is to say, there isn't a weed killer that will be able to tell the difference between your good lawn grass and the "bad" quackgrass. A glyphosate herbicide is recommended (Roundup) as a control. Glyphosate is non-selective and will kill any plant it touches down to the root including the vegetative buds on the quackgrass rhizomes.

Amy Grandpre with the Yellowstone County Extension Service recommends wearing a good quality rubber glove with a cotton glove over it. Dip the cotton glove into the herbicide and stroke the blades of the quackgrass, being careful not to get any herbicide on other plants or your lawn. Be sure to apply the herbicide when the quackgrass is actively growing. Do not apply when the lawn needs to be watered. When a plant is in drought-stress, the internal activity slows down which retards the transport of the herbicide to the roots. According to the MSU Bozeman Weed Science website, glyphosate herbicides are relatively safe for people and the environment because of the low toxicity. The herbicide is quickly broken down by the soil and sun. But use caution and wear protective clothing. Another less-toxic herbicide that would work is a glufosinate-ammonium (Finale) applied in the same manner.

The best defense against crabgrass and quackgrass is a vigorously growing lawn.