



Crabgrass

Two species of crabgrass, originally introduced from Europe, have become widespread in eastern North America and are now common weeds in lawns and turf.

Small crabgrass, *Digitaria ischaemum* (Schreb) Muhl., sometimes called Finger-grass or Smooth Crabgrass, is found principally in the more northerly areas. Small crabgrass has smooth stems and a more prostrate habit of growth, with an average height of 1 to 6 inches, making it difficult to eradicate by mowing.

Large crabgrass, *Digitaria sanguinalis* (L.) Scop., is also called Finger-grass but more frequently Hairy Crabgrass, Purple crabgrass, Pigeon-grass, or Crowfoot-grass. Large crabgrass has spread throughout the United States and southern Canada. Large crabgrass has hairy stems and a more upright growth habit averaging from 12 to 48 inches.

Seed production is prolific. With significant space to allow for full-sized plant growth, seed produced per plant averages 180,000 for small crabgrass and 150,000 for large crabgrass. This averages out at around 10,000 to 20,000 seeds per square foot! Crabgrass seed remains dormant in the soil for many years.

Crabgrass seed won't germinate the year it is produced, but the following spring germination will occur in New Hampshire at the onset of warm weather and is correlated with forsythia blooming. Seed of either variety won't emerge from soil depth below 3 inches but as germination is not influenced by light, seed will sprout under black plastic.

After the germinating seed sprouts, the plants increase in size by tillering. Complete ground cover may result from only two or three plants per square yard. Where tillers or culms touch the soil, rooting will occur at nodes. This explains why cultivation is frequently ineffective – and difficult.

Crabgrass is a short-day annual with seedheads starting to appear within 40 to 50 days after germination and with seedheads and flower formation continuing on up to frost.

Control

Crabgrass control starts with good cultural practices favoring the desirable lawn grasses, as crabgrass does not invade a vigorous dense turf. Good management is the most desirable means of crabgrass control, and often least expensive, since it will also control other weeds and some diseases.

Seed new lawns in the late summer to provide a thick, dense turf the following spring before crabgrass germinates. Spring seeding should be extra early and always on a well-fertilized seedbed.

Mow at a height of 1 1/2 inches or higher in spring and early summer to enhance turf density and prevent crabgrass invasion. One or two close mowings in the fall will help cut off any seedheads, helping to decrease future infestations.

Water only when necessary then provide a thorough and deep soaking. Frequent light waterings can promote crabgrass germination.

Fertilize in fall or early spring to encourage vigorous turf growth. Summertime fertilizing can encourage crabgrass.

Lawn and garden centers carry herbicides for crabgrass control. Please use these products in strict accordance with the label.

adapted 3/01 from a fact sheet by Leonard P. Perry, Extension Ornamental Horticulturist, University of Vermont Extension

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