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Headline: Troublesome Pasture Plant of the Week – Native Summer Weeds



Hermitage, MO - Just what does it mean when you start talking about Native Summer Weeds/Native Weed Pressure? I often discuss this very issue in many of the classes I teach on pasture quality and weed control. These are the most often seen and misunderstood plants in pastures today. With this year's drought, it seems like the only thing growing are weeds.

First and foremost, "Why are they here?" and the answer is because they are. You may or may not choose to control them based on cost benefits, pasture outlook, pollinator habitat, being organic, or the fact you just do not care. Yet, they are present and usually become a major concern after they have just about taken over. At this point, the battle is about to begin, and the war will be long fought. Some summer annuals like ragweed and/or foxtail, in certain stages are edible, so grazing livestock will consume them. But many are not, so if left unchecked, they will develop seeds and increase in number over the next year. Plants like Cocklebur, Pigweeds, and/or Perilla Mint do not just go away over time. And what about the perennials like Multiflora rose, Blackberry, and Woody sprouts, they will all be back next year, you can bet on that. This time of the year is when they are most noticeable, and everyone wants to know what to do about them. If left unchecked, the seed bank will increase, allowing more seed to sit in the ground until conditions are right for them to germinate. I know... let's mow, rake, and bale them up for sale. After all, a clean field looks very nice this time of year. Neighbors beware when you buy this year's fall hay crop.

For a plant to be native, they have usually grown here long before we started farming the land or have been carried in on low quality hay fed in your pastures. They just grew here naturally and deposited a large seed bank for the future. Buffalo often grazed on them in the open grasslands. Why? Because the soil conditions and current weather patterns were what they liked and thrived

on. So, how does that affect us, especially during a drought year? When you choose to do nothing to your pastures and/or hay fields, the soil will return to its natural state for your region. For us here in the Ozarks, that is low pH, low Phosphorus, low organic matter, as well as limited water holding capacity. All ideal conditions for growing native weeds. Our introduced plants, like Tall Fescue, Red Clover, Orchard grass, White Clover, Timothy, and Ryegrass, do not thrive in these conditions, as well as the weeds, making it harder for them to compete. It's true, rain usually means grass will grow so what happens when it does not rain... the weeds still grow.

So, if you want to control the vast majority, what can you do? Do not let them go to seed!! There are enough seeds already in the soil and we do not need any more. Brush hogging at the right time, before they can make seed, is a start. This may require twice a year in certain fields. Grazing animals on weedy fields, at certain times, to control seed heads, may help as well. You can even pull them up if they are not too plentiful in your fields. Second, soil test your fields and address the fertility imbalances. If you can bring the fields up to adequate fertility levels needed for the forage desired, you may outcompete the native weeds in the long run. Third, do not bring in a new set of weed seeds with your hay. It is getting harder and harder to get clean hay and buying the cheapest you can find is not the best way to get weed control. Try to get early harvested hay and stay away from the low-quality late cut stuff. Fourth, do not unroll hay all over your farm if you are not sure if it is clean. Use a sacrifice pasture for winter feeding. It is easier to clean up a ten-acre paddock than the entire farm. And, last but not least, use chemical control wisely. Remember, revenge spraying to control weeds that have already went to seed is just costing you money that really did not accomplish much. Weed control just does not happen, especially when it comes to the natives, on low quality soils.

As with all agricultural chemicals read and follow the label as to protect yourself, loved ones, and our environment.

For more information on pasture plant identification, please contact your local MU Extension Agronomy Field Specialist.