Weeds in lawns. 1. Identification of weeds in lawns

Robert Dunlop Royce
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I. Identification of Weeds in Lawns

By R. D. ROYCE, Officer-in-Charge, Botany Branch

ACURATE identification of weeds is the first principal of weed control with modern chemicals. This is as true for weeds in lawns as any other weeds.

A spray which destroys one species may have no effect on another plant growing alongside, while a different spray may have exactly the opposite effect. The identity of the weed, therefore, is an important factor in deciding which spray to use.

TYPES OF WEEDS

A number of weeds are common in lawns in this State and these belong to a number of different plant families. These weed species can be divided into two groups, the temporary weeds and the permanent weeds.

The temporary species are ones which develop in a newly established lawn, and are principally those which require space to develop. Veldt grass, geranium and plantain, are examples of this type. As the young sward thickens up over the first two or three years these species gradually die out. They are usually of little consequence in the fully established lawn and only occasionally do they become troublesome.

On the other hand the permanent weeds are a constantly recurring trouble in maintaining a uniform surface on the lawn. In Western Australia there are numerous weeds of this type, and in this article 31 of the commonest and most troublesome of them are described.

To assist in their identification, a simple key based mainly on vegetative characters has been prepared. A description of each plant has been added, so that the identification from the key can be effectively checked.

USING THE KEY

The key has been prepared on the dichotomous system, that is, there are always two opposing characters from which to choose.

For instance, the first step in using this key to identify a lawn weed, is to decide between the two “A” characters; in other words whether the leaves are “narrow, and either flat and grass-like, or oval in cross-section,” or whether they are “flat and broad and sometimes divided into many lobes, but not grass-like.” Each of the sections is divided into two smaller sections depending on two opposing characters in the same manner.

The use of the key will be made easier by a little practice, while a number of diagrams of the leaves and other structures referred to in the key will assist in interpreting the terms.

During the winter months most metropolitan lawns show a strong growth of a small pale-green weedy grass which can become troublesome, particularly in a couch lawn. The identification of this plant will illustrate the use of the key.

The plant has slender grass-like leaves, and by a comparison of the two “A” characters in the key it would clearly go under the first “A.” There are then two “B” characters to choose between, and as the leaves are not rounded or oval in cross section, but are flat and grass-like, it would be placed in the first “B.”

The two “C” paragraphs in this section relate to the growth habit of the plant—it may either be present in the lawn all the year round, or it may be seasonal. The
The plant we are identifying is plainly seasonal, since it germinates after the winter commences, and it would go under the first “C.”

The final choice is then between plants which grow during the summer, and those which grow during the winter. Our plant is a winter grower, and this fact identifies it as WINTER GRASS. This identification is verified by the other characters “stemless and forming small clumps, leaves pale green and hairless.” The number 1 refers to the fact that the first of the attached descriptions is one which gives further details of this plant.

KEY FOR THE IDENTIFICATION OF WEEDS IN LAWNS

A.—Leaves narrow, either flat and grass-like, or oval in cross section. (Figs. A and B.)

B.—Leaves flat and grass-like. (Fig. A.)

C.—Plants short lived, dying at the end of the season, and regenerating the following year from seed.

D.—Plants growing during the winter months. Stemless and forming small clumps. Leaves pale green and hairless
   (1) WINTER GRASS.

D.—Plants growing during the summer, developing many stems which root at the joints. Leaves dark green, hairy
   (2) CRAB GRASS.

C.—Plants growing, and remaining green during both summer and winter.

D.—Plants forming clumps and not spreading by elongated stems.

E.—Leaves narrow, usually rolled, grey-green. Seed-head elongated, narrow, resembling rat’s tail. Growth mainly in winter
   (3) PARRAMATTA GRASS.

E.—Leaves flat, broad, bright green. Growth mainly in summer. Seed-head green with several spreading branches
   (4) PASPALUM.
F. — Leaves broad, resembling those of buffalo grass, but less harsh and of a paler green.

G. — Plant spreading by means of above-ground stems rooting at the joints. No underground stems. Leaves widely spaced on stem.
(5) WATER COUCH.

G. — Plant spreading by both deep underground stems and above-ground stems rooting at the joints. Leaves crowded on the stems.
(6) KIKUYU.

F. — Leaves narrow, bright green in colour; underground stems near the surface, and together with the bases of the upright stems covered with brown scales. Seed heads small, globular, green.
(7) KYLLINGA WEED.

E. — Plants with erect growing leaves which rapidly project above the level of the mown lawn. Seed heads large, brown.

F. — Underground stems thin, wiry, black and swollen to form small “nuts” at intervals deep in soil.
(8) NUT GRASS.

F. — Underground stems thick, nearer the surface, and covered with scales. No “nuts”.
(9) SCALY SEDGE.

B. — Leaves oval in cross section, erect in growth habit and projecting above the level of the lawn. Winter growing species. Flowers red or mauve.
(10) GUILDFORD GRASS.

A. — Leaves flat, broad, sometimes divided into many lobes, but not grass-like.
(Figs. E-N)

B. — Blade of leaf either much divided into numerous segments, or composed of three leaflets borne at the apex of the leaf stalk.
(Figs. E-K).
C.—Leaf blade consisting of three leaflets at apex of leaf stalk. (Figs. E-H).

D.—Plants present and remaining green during both summer and winter.

E.—Plants hairy, apex of leaflets deeply indented so that each leaflet is bilobed (Fig. E)

(11) NATIVE WOOD SORREL.

E.—Plants completely without hairs; leaflets with an obtuse apex, and not indented (Fig. F)

(12) WHITE CLOVER.

D.—Plants growing only in the winter months. Wing-like appendages (stipules) present at the base of the leaf stalk where it joins the stem. (Fig. F-H).

E.—Stipules small, sometimes with a long tapering apex. Plants without hairs. (Figs. F-G).

F.—Stipules with plain margins, not toothed (Fig. F)

(13) ANNUAL CLOVERS.

F.—Stipules with long narrow teeth along the margins (Fig. G)

(14) BURR MEDIC.

E.—Stipules large and leaf-like. Plants hairy (Fig. H)

(15) ANNUAL BIRDSFOOT TREFOIL.

C.—Leaf-blade divided into numerous lobes or segments, the divisions extending right to the axis of the leaf. The leaf stalk dilated at the base at its attachment to the stem. (Figs. I-K).

D.—Lobes again divided or branched.

E.—Leaf-lobes straight, narrow and with a very acute apex (Fig. I)

(16) FUNNEL WEED.

E.—Leaf-lobes broader, blunt at the apex or abruptly contracted into a short point. (Figs. J and K).

F.—Leaf-stalk of fully mature leaf very short, the central axis of the leaf bearing lateral lobes almost to the base. Dilated base toothed on edges (Fig. J)

(17) CARROT WEED.

F.—Leaf-stalk of fully mature leaf longer than blade. Edges of dilated base of leaf-stalk smooth, not toothed (Fig. K)

(18) ONE-HUNGA WEED.

D.—Lobes broad, not divided, small near the base of the leaf larger towards the apex. Terminal lobe largest

(19) CAPE WEED.

B.—Blade of leaf not deeply divided, but sometimes toothed or lobed. (Figs. L.N).

C.—Stemless plant. Leaves lobed, in a rosette closely pressed to the sward; flowers yellow, produced on wiry, leafless, sometimes branched stem. Sap milky (Fig. L)

(20) FLAT WEED.

C.—Plants normally with leafy stems, without leaves in a rosette at ground level. Repeated mowing produces hard enlarged woody-stem butts which continually produce lateral stems.

D.—Leaves completely without hairs and without teeth or lobes (Fig. M)

(21) STARWORT.

D.—Leaves hairy, usually toothed (Fig. N)

(22) FLEABANE.

DESCRIPTIONS OF THE SPECIES

(1) WINTER GRASS (Poa annua, Linn.)

Small winter-growing annual, forming small tussocks up to one inch in diameter. Leaves flat, hairless, pale-green in colour with two translucent lines near the middle and running the length of the leaf and referred to as “tram-lines.” Seed heads develop in mid winter and continue into spring. In well watered lawns it may continue growth into the summer months. Cosmopolitan, and widely distributed in W.A.

E.—Lobes completely without hairs and without teeth or lobes (Fig. M)

(2) CRAB GRASS (Digitaria sanguinalis (L.) Scop.)

Also known as SUMMER GRASS.

A vigorous summer growing annual, with a well developed root system, and long prostrate stems which frequently root at the joints. The stems usually grow amongst the lawn species and are difficult to effectively combat with the mower. Leaves hairy, short and broad, often
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with crinkled margins. Seedheads purple, resembling a large couch grass head, and in late summer a badly effected lawn has a purplish colour due to these seed heads.

Cosmopolitan, and widely naturalised in W.A.

(3) PARRAMATTA GRASS (Sporobolus caespitosus, Kunth.)

Plant present in the lawn all the year and remaining green. Strongly rooted vigorous tussocky plant, base stout but not woody. Under continual mowing the centre of the plant becomes turf-like, and the outside stems develop vigorously and almost horizontally. Leaves rolled, of a dark bluish green colour, elongated. Flowering stems a grey green or leaden colour, narrow and resembling a rat's tail, developing in the winter months. Very wiry in the lawn and difficult to keep cut.

Native to South Africa and naturalised in parts of the south-west.

(4) PASPALUM (Paspalum dilatatum, Poir.)

Green all the year. Base stout and woody, and under turf conditions producing lateral stems pressed into the turf. Leaves flat, ½ inch wide, often with a few hairs at the base, but otherwise hairless. Flowering stems develop in the summer months and grow rapidly so that mowing them sometimes proves difficult.

Native to South America; cultivated and widely naturalised in the south-west.

(5) WATER COUCH (Paspalum distichum, Linn.)

Present in the lawn all the year. Stems thick, rooting at the joints, prostrate among the lawn grass and forming part of the turf so that mowing has little effect on it. Leaves not crowded, flat, elongated, up to ½ inch wide, pale green in colour and with a few scattered hairs. Plant develops vigorously during the winter months. Seed head green, two branched, formed at the apex of the stem during early summer.

Native to tropical America, Africa and Asia; naturalised in swampy situations in the south-west.

(6) KIKUYU (Pennisetum clandestinum, Hochst. ex Chiov.)

Remaining green all the year, spreading by means of deep underground stems, white in colour, and by above ground stems rooting at the joints. Leaves short, broad, more or less crowded on the stems, and both stems and leaves pale green in colour. Where not cut, the leaves may develop to a length of 8 to 10 inches. Hairless except at the base of the leaf blade. Makes growth at all seasons, but develops most vigorously in the summer months. Flowers are produced in late spring or early summer, and appear as fine filaments with anthers attached and as feathery stigmas protruding from the terminal leaves at the apex of the stems.

Native to Africa; cultivated and widely naturalised in the south-west.

(7) KYLLINGA WEED (Kyllinga intermediarum, R. Br.)

Small plant making growth throughout the year. Vigorous plant with underground stem covered with brown scales. Erect stems brown at base. Leaves fine, grass-like more or less V-shaped in cross section and up to 6 inches tall, completely hairless and of a pale green colour. Plant is turf-forming and becomes an integral part of the lawn. When closely cut by a mower the brown scales at the base of the stems give the lawn a dead appearance. Flower heads small spherical green balls at the apex of fine stems slightly longer than the leaves, and forming during the spring and summer months.

Native and occurring widely throughout the State.

(8) NUT GRASS (Cyperus rotundus, Linn.)

Present in the lawn all the year. Underground stems fine, black, with a few scattered scales but swollen at intervals to form “nuts.” This stem gives rise to above ground leafy stems which root vigorously. Leaves keeled into a V-shape or flat, crisp and not fibrous. Flowering stem three angled, producing two or more leafy bracts at the apex and a cluster of brown coloured spikelets on long slender stalks. Grows vigorously during winter and flowers in spring and early summer.

Native to W.A., but a troublesome weed.

(9) SCALY SEDGE (Cyperus tenuiflorus, Rottb.)

Closely resembles true nut grass in the above ground parts. Differs only in the character of the underground stem, which in this species is thick, and covered by coarse leaves or scales. It is the presence of these scales which gives the plant its common name.

Native to W.A. and widely distributed.

(10) GUILDFORD GRASS (Romulea rosea, L.)

Appears in April or May. A single leaf, erect, smooth and more or less rounded or compressed develops from a brown bulk-like corn 2 to 6 inches below the ground. Eventually as many as 10 leaves may appear. The flowers are produced on short stalks and in a lawn they are usually borne at the grass level. They are bell-shaped, up to an inch in diameter when fully expanded, and red in colour with a yellow throat. The fruit are small cylindrical seed-filled capsules, which are sweet and juicy when young, and referred to by school children as “puddings.” Romulea rosea var. parviflora, J. G. Baker is a similar plant with finer leaves and a smaller mauve-coloured flower with a yellow throat. It is probably more common than the species itself, and is just as troublesome and difficult to control with a mower.

Native to South Africa; widely naturalised in the south-west.

(11) NATIVE WOOD SORREL (Oxalis corniculata, Linn.)

Present in the lawn throughout the year. Stems fine reddish coloured, hairy, growing close to the ground and among the turf species, rooting at the joints, much branched. Leaves consisting of three leaflets, each with an indented
apex, sometimes deeply divided and coarsely two-lobed, hairy, dark green in colour. Flowers small, yellow, bell-shaped, ½ inch across when fully out, single or in clusters of two to five at the apex of a slender stalk which is longer than the leaves. Flowers in spring and early summer.

Native to W.A. and occurring throughout the State.

(12) **WHITE CLOVER** (*Trifolium repens*, Linn.)

Present in the lawn all through the year and growing amongst the turf species. Stem wiry, hairless, rooting at the joints. Leaves of three leaflets at the apex of the leaf stalk, each leaflet rich green in colour, often with a white transverse mark and flecks of brown, broadest in the middle, tapering towards the base and finely toothed around the edge. Flower stalks produced during the summer. Flowers white, 30 to 40 in a cluster at the apex of the flowering stalk, turning pink and bending downwards when withering.

Native to Europe and Asia; cultivated and widely naturalised in the south-west.

(13) **ANNUAL CLOVERS.**

Many species of clovers occur as winter growing weeds in lawns. They all have leaves consisting of three leaflets with a small green appendage (stipule) at the base of the leaf stalk, where it joins the stem. Flowers are produced in heads at the apex of flowering stalks or in clusters on the stems. The principal species which occur in lawns in this State are:

1. **SUCKLING CLOVER** (*Trifolium dubium*, Sibth.): Slender wiry stemmed plant with small heads of yellow flowers. Flowers in spring.

   Native to Europe.

2. **HOP CLOVER** (*Trifolium campestre*, Schreb.): Wiry stemmed plant with large barrel-shaped heads of yellow flowers, heads up to ½ inch long. Flowers in spring.

   Native to Europe, Africa and Western Asia.

3. **DROOPING FLOWERED CLOVER** (*Trifolium cernuum*, Brot.): Leafy wiry stemmed plant with small heads of pinkish flowers which bend downwards and turn brown as they wither. Flowers in spring.

   Native to Southern France and Spain.


   Native to Western Europe and Mediterranean Region.


   Native to Western Europe and Mediterranean Region.

(6) **SHAPITAL CLOVER** (*Trifolium resupinatum*, L.): Leafy plant closely pressed to the soil and growing amongst the turf species. Flowers red, produced during early summer. Fruit bladdery with a fancied resemblance to a strawberry.

Native to Europe and Mediterranean Region.

(14) **BURR MEDIC** (*Medicago denticulata*, Willd.)

Coarse vigorous plant without hairs and with a stipule which has long slender teeth along its edges. Flowers yellow in clusters on the flower stalk. Fruit a spiny, coiled burr.

Native to Western Europe and Mediterranean Region; widely naturalised in the south-west.

(15) **ANNUAL BIRDSFOOT TREFOIL** (*Lotus angustissimus*, Linn.)

Wiry stemmed plant with leaves of three leaflets, and with leaf-like stipules at the junction of the leaf stalk with the stem. Leaves and stems hairy, leaflets with a pointed apex. Flowers yellow on a long stalk, single or two together, produced in spring.

*Lotus hispidus*, Desf. closely resembles this species, but the leaflets are rounded at the apex and the flowers are borne in clusters of three or four.

Native to Europe and Mediterranean Region; widely naturalised in the south-west.

(16) **FUNNEL WEED** (*Cotula turbinata*, Linn.)

Delicate winter growing annual plant, one to 4 inches tall. Stem branched, leafy, the leaves much divided into narrow, straight lobes, each terminating in an acute point. Leaf stalk dilated at the base where it joins the stem. Flowering stalk elongated and swollen upwards under the flower head, giving the appearance of a funnel. Flowers in a typical daisy head, yellow in the centre with white rays around the circumference. Flowers in winter.

Native to South Africa; naturalised in several districts and common in the metropolitan area.
(17) CARROT WEED (Cotula australis (Less.) Hook.)
Delicate winter growing plant 1 to 3 inches tall. Stem much branched, frequently rooting at the lower joints, the mature stem leaves much divided into broad rounded lobes with a blunt apex and with a very short leaf stalk. Seedling leaves frequently with a short blade and long leaf stalk, and difficult to distinguish from those of onehunga weed. The dilated base of the leaf stalk is toothed, and the flowering stalk is not swollen under the flower head. Flower head without evident white rays and is produced in winter and spring.

Native to Australia and New Zealand and widely distributed in the south-west.

(18) ONEHUNGA WEED (Soliva pterosperma (Juss.) Less.)
Slender winter growing plant resembling carrot weed. Stems rather thick and spreading along ground. Leaves much divided into rather broad rounded lobes with a blunt apex. Blade of fully mature leaf short with a long leaf stalk, dilated at the base where it joins the stem. Flowers few in heads borne on the stems without a stalk. Fruit is flat and plate-like, with a rigid prickle point at the apex. This plant is objectionable as a weed in the home lawn because of this spiny fruit. Flowers are produced in early winter, and seeds are formed very early in the season.

Native to Chile; common in the metropolitan area.

(19) CAPE WEED (Cryptostemma calendula, (L.) Druce.)
Stemless or shortly stemmed plant, growing along the ground. Leaves and stems fleshy and succulent. Leaves greyish-green and hairy above, white with hairs below, deeply lobed, the lobes rounded at the apex and extending down to the central axis of the leaf. The terminal lobe large, extending down both sides of the leaf axis and sometimes with shallow indentations or lobes. Lobes near base of leaf small. Flowers in typical daisy head, dark in centre with yellow rays. Flowers in spring.

Native to South Africa, widely distributed in the southern half of the State.

(20) FLAT WEED (Hypochoeris glabra, L.)
Stemless summer-growing plant with rosette of leaves at ground level, annual or persisting for a few years. Leaves 3 to 6 inches long, coarsely toothed or more or less deeply lobed with rounded lobes, hairless or with a few scattered rough hairs. Flowers yellow thistle-like on elongated usually unbranched flowering stalk 6 to 10 inches tall. Flowering mid-summer. Sap milky.

Hypochoeris radicata, L. is a similar plant but with leaves very roughly hairy, each hair with a rigid swollen base, and the flowering stalk coarser and mostly branched. Usually difficult to distinguish from H. glabra.

Both native to Europe and Mediterranean Region; widely naturalised in the south-west.
STARWORT (Aster subulatus, Michx.)

Woody annual reaching 5 or 6 feet in height in waste land. In lawns and under conditions of continual mowing, the base of the stem becomes hard, thick and woody, developing buds on all sides. The branches grow laterally, almost prostrate among the lawn grass, sometimes extending from 4 to 6 inches from the main stem. Leaves narrow, widest in the middle, tapering both ends 1 to 3 inches long and up to ¾ inch wide, occasionally with a few bristly hairs along the edges, otherwise completely hairless. Flowers daisy-like, with yellow centre and white rays in diameter formed at the ends of branches and among the leaves of the lawn grass. Flowers mid to late summer.

Native to eastern North America; naturalised in the south-west.

CANADIAN FLEABANE (Erigeron canadensis, L.)

Woody annual, normally reaching 4 to 5 feet in height. In lawns it has the same habit of growth as the starwort. Leaves and stems hairy with rigid hairs. Flower heads surrounded by numerous, narrow, green leaf-like bracts and the flowers do not expand as do those of Starwort. Flowers in early summer.

Native to North America; naturalised in the south-west.

COMMON FLEABANE (Erigeron bonariensis, L.)

Closely resembles Canada Fleabane and is difficult to distinguish from it in the vegetative condition and without flowers. This plant also occurs commonly in lawns and is in all ways similar to Canadian Fleabane.

Native to Mediterranean region; naturalised in the south-west.

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3 POPULAR SIZES

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