

## **It's Weed and Feed Time for Lawns**

### **AGRI-VIEWS**

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Most of us have cool season grasses in our lawn, namely tall fescue or Kentucky bluegrass. These grasses do the majority of their growing in the spring and the fall. How they look next spring is strongly dependent on the care that they receive this fall. Many homeowners get all excited in September to start the process and that's all good but they sometimes put the cart before the horse in their anxious attempt to have a perfect weed free lawn.

Starting in early September our cool season grasses really started growing again. Maybe not so much above ground but a lot of activity below ground. With cooler weather and shorter hours of daylight, and hopefully some rain, the plants start developing more roots and deeper roots. The crown of the plant - that point where all the growth occurs - starts expanding and developing more tillers. More tillers create more leaves which is important to shade the ground AND provide more photosynthetically active material to produce more food.

Fertilizing in September helps to stimulate more growth. I tell homeowners that if they want to fertilize just once per year, fertilize in September or October. That will allow the grass plants to take up those nutrients and have them ready to go come late winter when the grass starts to green up. In fact fall fertilization will lead to earlier greenup without the excessive topgrowth that a late winter/early spring fertilization will cause. While there may be a little bit more fall grass leaf growth with a fall fertilization, the plants are putting most of those nutrients into below ground activity.

This September fertilization really needs to be a high nitrogen form of fertilizer unless you know from a soil test that you also need phosphorus. Most established lawns have plenty of phosphorus. If it's been growing well in recent years then phosphorus levels are likely very good, but you can soil test if you want to be sure. Nitrogen is really the key to dark green leaves. Unfortunately, well meaning homeowners will use a weed and feed for that September fertilization and that is often a waste of time.

While there may have been some summer broadleaf weeds in the yard, those will be dying soon with colder weather. What most people want to control are all those pretty flowers that show up in yards in March and April. This includes things like dandelions (yellow flowers), henbit, (purple flowers), speedwell (little blue flowers) or chickweed (little white flowers). All of these germinate from seed during the fall. Dandelions are a perennial and may have been there through the summer, but the rest died in June so have to come back from seed. The problem is that in September, while a few may have germinated already, most of them are yet to start growing. Rains earlier in October caused a lot of the weed seed to germinate. If you go out and look at bare areas in your yard you will probably see them right now as tiny little green dots.

The herbicides that we use in weed and feed products don't prevent weeds from growing, they kill the weeds that are already growing. Even if you used a weed and feed in early September, you probably have a lot of weeds that have now germinated and need treatment. From now on this fall there probably won't be many more that germinate. Anytime from now through mid November is going to be a good time for a weed and feed treatment or a liquid weed killer. Read and follow all label directions and treat now so you aren't trying to kill those flowers in the spring, when it's much harder to do!