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Wild Onions and Garlic in the Lawn

I have received several calls and visits lately from folks wanting to know how to get rid of wild onions and wild garlic in the lawn. Wild onions and garlic are relatively easy to identify this time of year as they have green slender leaves similar to, but thinner than, garden green onions. They grow faster and taller than the surrounding grass, have a strong onion/garlic smell when fresh cut or mowed, and grow in patches and spread by seed. Garlic also spreads by underground bulblets. Both are perennial grass-like weeds found in many home lawns. They are wild cousins of the garden variety we use in salads and for cooking. Like their cousins, they are edible depending on what types of chemicals you may have used on the lawn. Once established, they spread rapidly and can seriously detract from the lawn's beauty.

Wild garlic and onions are easy to identify. They are cool season perennials meaning they grow actively during the cooler parts of the year. They grow equally well in shade as in full sun. The bulbs go dormant as the weather warms in late spring. Their rapid growth makes them easy to identify. They can grow up to 6-12 inches taller than the rest of the grass. When you mow the lawn, there is no mistaking the strong onion/garlic smell released when cut by the mower - the larger the patch, the more noticeable the odor.

A thick well maintained lawn provides excellent weed control against these and most other weeds. If the lawn is thin, it may be necessary to aerate and over-seed cool season turf annually or semi-annually. Also, thin warm season turf may require plugging, sprigging, or over-seeding to develop the thickness required to keep out many weeds.

Attempting to pull them out by hand is not recommended as the blades snap off easily and the plants will grow back. If you choose to dig them up, be sure to get all the bulb, bulblets and root system. Frequent mowing will slow their progress as wild onion and wild garlic need a certain amount of blade for sufficient photosynthesis. However, do not mow your grass below the lowest recommended height or your grass may decline and other lawn weeds take over.

Since these plants are perennials, there are no pre-emergent herbicides that will work against onion and garlic. However, several post-emergent herbicides are labeled for wild garlic/wild onion control. Look for triple herbicide formulations (containing three different herbicides) with at least 2,4-D and Dicamba. Also, MCPP, Clopyralid, triclopyr (active ingredients) will work. **ALWAYS READ THE LABEL!**

If not already in the formulation, you can purchase a small bottle of "slicker/spreader" and add the amount listed on the label to increase the efficiency of your spray. Many weeds have a waxy surface on the leaf and a sticker will allow the herbicide to stick to the plant and not run off. The spreader part allows the herbicide to flow out evenly over the surface of the plant increasing the leaf contact area and aids in absorption providing better weed control. Always read the label and follow its instructions!