A Common Weed in Fruit Orchard at Carbide Park

Weed of the Month (October 2010)

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Common Names: Spotted Spurge, Milk Purslane, Spotted Matweed, Creeping Spurge

Scientific Name: Euphorbia maculata (also Chamaesyce maculata)

It's possible to become something of an expert on a weed by reviewing books and utilizing the Internet as a resource. It's also possible to become something of an expert on a weed through sheer experience—when you pull a few hundred units of the same weed over two morning sessions, you can become very familiar with many of the characteristics of a particular weed.

The weed in question is known as Spotted Spurge. I had the opportunity to become closely acquainted with Spotted Spurge as the mulched beds in the fruit orchard in Carbide Park had a huge population increase of this weed during August. Fortunately, several other MGs helped to weed the area over the two morning sessions.

Spurges belong to the Euphorbiaceae family. Classification of spurges is not as clear cut as most other weeds. As already noted, the weed growing in the Carbide Park fruit orchard is commonly known as Spotted Spurge. Some plant authorities site its scientific name as Euphorbia maculata or while other authorities cite it as Chamaesyce maculata.

Spotted Spurge is a low growing, summer broad leaf annual that will tolerate some shade but thrives in harsh full sun. It has somewhat hairy stems with small oval leaves on opposite sides of the stem. Leaves are about one-half inch in length and usually have a conspicuous reddish spot or blotch in the center. Spotted Spurge develops a rather deep taproot, is freely branching and forms a circular mat or clump several inches to several feet in diameter.

Spotted Spurge plants will die back in late autumn but not before dropping thousands of tiny seeds. A characteristic common to all spurges is the production of an irritating milky-white latex sap when leaves or stems are broken or injured.

Spotted spurge is found in lawns where grass is thin so a healthy stand of turf grass is a good deterrent. It is also found around the edges of lawns next to curbs, driveways, sidewalks and where the soil has been disturbed. As was the case in the mulched beds of the fruit tree orchard, Spotted Spurge readily grows on the surface of mulch that has started to decompose.

The primary method of managing spotted spurge should be prevention as it can be very difficult to control this weed once it is established. If there are just a few sprouts in the spring, hand-pulling or a light hoeing may be sufficient to control Spotty Spurge. Having a long taproot, Spotted Spurge is best pulled after a heavy shower or a good irrigation.

Mulching does work as we have not had any subsequent problems with Spotty Spurge since mulching the fruit tree orchard a few weeks ago. At least 1 inch of a fine mulch or 3 inches of a coarse mulch (such as shredded pine bark) should be applied. Mulch should be replenished on an annual basis as Spotty Spurge can gain a foothold as the layer of mulch burns down or decomposes.

A bloodleaf preemergent herbicide can provide good control. Postemergent herbicides can be applied after the plant germinates while it is young and actively growing. When using herbicides, be sure to read, understand and follow all label directions carefully.

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