Weed of the Month (April 2009): Bur Clover

By MG Marian Kimbrough
Class of 2007

A common clover-type plant that grows in this area and is quite invasive is known as bur clover. Even though it is not a true clover, two species identified in this area are commonly known as large bur clover (Medicago polymorpha) and small bur clover (Medicago minima). Both species are dicots (broadleaf plants) in the legume family and are closely related to the true clovers. Large bur clover and small bur clover are native to Europe but brought to the States as grazing material (fodder crop) for cattle.

Large bur clover can grow from 6—22 inches and has flower clusters consisting of 3—5 flowers, blooming in early spring. Small bur clover can grow from 6—18 inches long with 10 or more flowers displayed per head (inflorescence). In this region, bur clover’s blooming period is from February to June but can grow year round. Germination is in the fall season when temperatures are cooler.

Bur clover can be readily identified by its small pea-like yellow flower, three green clover-shaped leaves and purple stems. It reproduces from seeds contained in “burred” seedpods, as well as spreading prostate stolons, which allow it to tolerate close mowing, increasing its survival and spreading abilities. The exterior of burred seedpods have numerous velcro-like hooks that may become entangled in animal coats or human clothing, which serves as a common means of dispersal.

Preventive practices, such as good turf management, are best in reducing infestation. Here in the Gulf Coast area, a lawn fertilization program based on soil tests will encourage growth of a dense, healthy turf, which will inhibit the clover from becoming established. Mechanical or physical removal is not recommended because stolons may break and sprout, increasing rather than decreasing the infestation.

Pre-emergent herbicides like those contained in “weed and feed fertilizers” may be used to prevent seed germination in the fall. Timing of the application is critical for effective control. Early October is recommended as cool fronts typically occur during this time and the seeds of cool season weeds start to germinate. While weed and feed fertilizers for lawns can be an effective tool, they can stress or kill landscape trees and shrubs if applied under or near their drip line.

Over-the-top herbicides or post-emergence herbicides like “broadleaf weed killers” may be used in the spring. If you choose to use a post-emergence herbicide, do so when the bur clover is actively growing. Apply a broadleaf lawn herbicide containing a combination of 2,4-D and MCPP or triclopyr as its active ingredients late May or early June. More than one application may be necessary. To be most effective, the herbicide should be applied when temperatures are between 60—80 degrees, no rain is forecast for 24—48 hours, and no wind is present to blow the herbicide onto desirable broadleaf plants.

For spot treatment of small, unwanted patches, you can avoid the use of a tank sprayer by mixing the herbicide according to label directions and then applying it with a disposable paint brush or a sponge tied to a stick. Glyphosate (Roundup) works well for this since the area may be reseeded seven days after application. Be aware, though, that glyphosate is non-selective—it can kill or damage the grass or other green, living plants that it touches. Be sure to read and follow the product’s label instructions and precautions.

When using herbicides and other pesticides, always read and follow label directions carefully.

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The exterior of burred seedpods have numerous velcro-like hooks that may become entangled in animal coats or human clothing which aides its dispersal.

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Photos by GCMGA

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