You’re in the midst of a turf war, and the enemies are invading from every angle—creeping in from neighbor territories and dropping in from the skies. They may only hold the low ground, but that’s their field of expertise. They’re weeds...and they’re not afraid to fight dirty!

Aside from being fertile ground for bad puns, a military invasion is an apt illustration when it comes to explaining the challenges faced by homeowners and lawn care companies. Weeds really are constantly seeking to invade your lawn anywhere they can, and unless you mount a strong defense, they will eventually succeed. So let’s consider how weeds spread, why they’re so difficult to control, and what can be done to minimize their presence.

Where Weeds Come From

Because many weeds spread by dispersing thousands of seeds, the only chance of their survival in a new territory is to land in an area without too much competition for sunlight and water. This makes thin or diseased areas of your lawn especially vulnerable to attack.

Once a weed infiltrates your property, it weakens surrounding turf by stealing food and sunlight, thus allowing for further invasion. And to make matters worse, weeds are also accomplished survivalists with an ability to thrive in harsh conditions that lawn grasses can’t handle.

Compact soil may be a problem for turf grasses, but weeds like thistle and dandelion have no problem burrowing right in. Dry patches due to
Weed Warfare  *(Continued from page 1)*

Poor irrigation pose no threat to drought-tolerant crabgrass and sandbur. Conversely, *overwatering* is dangerous as well. Although damp areas may cause fungus and disease in your grass, dollarweeds and chickweed will thrive nicely here. Each of these weak points is an opportunity for another weed to sneak in; and without a proper defense, your lawn may quickly be conquered.

**Managing Weeds and Expectations**

So what’s the key to a strong defense? Keep your turf thick, healthy, and well-fed! You can accomplish this with a properly executed fertilization program. If you don’t have a professional service, adjust your feedings throughout the year in response to turf growth and weather patterns. Herbicide applications are also important, especially in situations where there are several large problem areas. Just keep in mind that some herbicides take time to work, so you may need to be patient with results. Proper watering is also extremely important, as both too much and too little will lead to problems. Be sure to have your irrigation checked on a regular basis to ensure all zones are being covered and always adjust for rainfall. Also, watering deeply and infrequently is best, as this encourages deep root growth, which is crucial for healthy turf.

But even this comprehensive plan of attack won’t mean an overnight victory. This is especially true if you already have an existing problem. Always expect weed control to take some time and remember that it’s normal to find a few weeds in your lawn every now and again. You might liken this to your own health: Exercise and a healthy diet will certainly minimize health problems, but you wouldn’t expect to never get sick again. Likewise, keeping your lawn healthy will decrease the chance of infection (so to speak) but weed management will always be an ongoing practice.

Even as you read, weeds are probing your lawn for weaknesses. Some are in the air, some are creeping slowly underground from nearby properties, and some are lying dormant like sleeper cells waiting for just the right conditions to make their ambush. But don’t worry; with the right maintenance practices and a reliable control program, you’ll continue to banish any encroaching invaders and emerge victorious!

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**The Unlovable Lovebug**

It happens each May and September; you step outside and notice a pair of black bugs floating in tandem on the breeze. It may seem innocent, but it’s an ominous sign of what’s to come. Soon they’re everywhere—loitering outside your doorstep, harassing you at gas stations, and littering the roadways like a flurry of live snowflakes just waiting to decorate your windshield. We’re talking, of course, about lovebugs; and although lovebugs don’t sting or bite, the sheer number in which they swarm can make these semi-annual visitors an extreme public nuisance here in Florida.

Despite the persistent urban legend, these insects were *not* created in a lab and accidentally released upon the public. In actuality, Mother Nature can be more villainous than any mad scientist, and these bugs (*flies* technically—in case any entomology hobbyists are reading) have been making their way towards Florida since the 1940’s, where they were able to flourish in the absence of any significant predators.

But lack of predation isn’t the only factor contributing to their extraordinary numbers. The other is their unique mating habit; to wit, they mate almost non-stop...even as they fly (hence the romantic nickname).

During these nuptial flights, the females are attracted to heat as well as aldehydes, a major component of car exhaust. This is why it’s common to find so many along roadways and, of course, all over your
car. More than just a nuisance, if left to dry for an extended period, they may even damage the paint. In fact, in some cases this automotive assault has been known to clog radiator fins to the point of overheating vehicles!

As if their seasonal imposition wasn't bad enough, they're also nearly impossible to control. Though insecticides will kill lovebugs when they're sprayed directly, more will continue to float in right behind them.

The good news is that in the past 30 years, we've seen a continuing decrease in the severity of swarms here in Florida. There has been speculation among entomologists that this could be due to certain fungal pathogens controlling lovebug larvae populations. However, since it's unlikely that we'll ever be completely lovebug-free, we've provided a few helpful tips to help you get through the next visit from these amorous aerialists.

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**Customer Questions**

“What Can Be Done About the Squirrels Around My Home?”

Joe Tomasiello, Technical Director

With their fluffy tails and dexterous little paws, the occasional squirrel may be a welcomed sight when passing through your yard; but when your home or garden becomes the focus of their foraging for food and nesting material, these cute critters may quickly lose their charm.

Because there are currently no rodenticides labeled for squirrels, the key to their control is something called habitat modification. This means altering the environment to make it less hospitable to their behavior.

Reduce foraging by removing any potential food sources such as pet food or extra birdseed. To help discourage nesting, trim branches at least 7' away from your home and contact the proper authorities about having squirrel guards installed on any cables or wires leading to the roof. Also, ensure all soffits, screens, and ridgecaps are in good repair. In fact, even if you don't have a squirrel problem, these are also great practices to reduce activity from other (less fluffy-tailed) rodents.

Because habitat modification is both green and humane, it’s definitely the preferred solution. However, you may find a persistent squirrel that, despite your efforts at diplomacy, just refuses to give up. In this case, it may be time to find a professional trapper. Just be sure to hire only a licensed and insured professional.

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**WEATHERING THE SWARM**

- Try to avoid driving long distances during peak lovebug swarming hours (10-11 am and 6-8 pm).
- Install an automotive grill cover on your vehicle for each 3 to 4-week swarm season.
- Remove any dead lovebugs from your vehicle quickly to avoid possible damage to the paint.
- Keep doors and windows closed, especially during peak swarming hours.
- Avoid chemicals for the occasional lovebug you may find inside your home. Instead, try using a vacuum for a quick and safe removal.
Brown spots in the lawn are one of the most common turf problems homeowners must deal with. What makes these spots particularly troubling is that finding what caused them can be difficult. This is because many pests and diseases produce similar looking brown patches. Yes, many have found themselves wasting precious time and energy treating for the wrong pest while symptoms continue to worsen. This is why proper identification is so important.

Perhaps the most commonly misidentified disease is Brown Patch Fungus (*Rhizoctonia solani*). This fungus produces distinctly circular patches of dead grass (see picture at top-right). As the grass recovers in the center, a donut-like shape often occurs. But while named for the symptom it causes, not every brown patch is an indication of Brown Patch Fungus. In fact, conditions must be just right for this particular type of fungus to remain active.

Brown Patch Fungus thrives only in humid conditions at temperatures between 70 and 85°. When the weather heats up, the fungus goes dormant until favorable conditions return. Here in Central Florida, that all but guarantees dormancy June through September, since the average temperature exceeds this range. So if you’re noticing this (or a similar) pattern during these months, you may need to look elsewhere for the root of the problem, as it will nearly always be caused by another issue.

Irrigation issues are easily the most common cause of brown spots (and fortunately, the easiest to remedy), but as you can see in the illustrations on the right, there are other possibilities, and therefore a positive ID should be made by a reputable source. As always, we’ll be standing by should you have any questions!

Pets

The nitrogen found in dog waste will burn your grass, leaving irregular brown spots. Such damage tends to vary in size and location. You may need to train your pet (or your neighbor’s pet) to frequent a less conspicuous area.