
Stop Winter Weeds Now

by: Lynn Walsh

HOW TO USE PRE-EMERGENTS COMPATIBLY WITH NATIVE PLANTS

Our Desert Foothills forest ecosystem is gradually changing under the pressures of development and disturbance of the natural desert. Aggressive non-native grasses like the red foxtail and the buffel grass¹ have invaded our desert habitat and filled in the traditional bare spaces with persistent dead litter between plants. This allows desert fires to quickly burn out of control. It is important for homeowners living in the natural areas to develop a “fire smart” landscape plan and reduce the amount of plant litter near their homes and on their property. Our weed management advice also works for any garden where pulling weeds by hand doesn’t work.



Buffel Grass
[Wikipedia]

We are not advocating a bladed, denuded, “Disney” desert landscape of crushed granite and a few succulents. Our Sonoran Desert forest is blessed with an incredible biodiversity. Study and learn which plants are most beneficial to wildlife habitats and promote these.

Cesar Mazier, head horticulturist at the Phoenix Desert Botanical Garden, has studied the problem of winter seed control for areas where hand weed control is not possible and recommends spraying a pre-emergent “weed stopper” on any area where you do not want “weeds” or any seeds to germinate. A weed is basically a

¹ Buffel Grass or African Foxtail Grass; *Pennisetum ciliare*. See [Wikipedia article](#).



plant in the wrong place. He doesn't want plants growing where they may become a hazard, unsightly or fire fuel or choke out desirable vegetation.

Hand weeding is fine for small areas. But it is imperative that you keep after the new sprouts and pull them before they go to seed. In areas near your newly sprouted wildflowers or vegetable garden, use a pair of scissors to cut off the tops of young weeds and thin out seedlings. Pulling out large, dead, gone-to-seed plants actually helps next year's crop of weeds because you are cultivating the soil and sprinkling in the seeds. Native plant experts strongly recommend against doing anything that disturbs the hard desert crust which naturally inhibits the germination of seeds. Do not blade or disturb areas because this will actually stimulate the aggressive growth of non-native grasses and increase fire danger. Instead of denuding habitat, be vigilant and selectively remove dead plant matter near your home and remove the "ladder" effect that allows hot fires to reach your home.

Mazier recommends taking action from mid-October to the end of October by spraying a pre-emergent weed control before the first fall rains and you can virtually eliminate all winter weeds. He has found that 60 to 70 percent of all annual grasses come up with the first rain in the fall. It is essential to apply this at the right time before the weeds start to sprout. These chemicals are only effective if it rains at least one-fourth inch within 21 days of application. If the rains fail, it will be necessary to water treat areas with a sprinkler. Mazier also has found that he has greater success if he waters the soil surface just before the application.

The pre-emergent sprays do not harm any living plant, animal or organism except germinating seeds. They can be safely sprayed over the top of existing plants. They basically mess up the germinating seed's biochemistry and biodegrade them naturally in a short time. Do not use on areas where you seed plants or wildflowers.

Mazier states that a heavy application will be effective in the ground for about six months if the ground is only raked lightly. There are several pre-emergents such as Surflan and Dacthal that are readily available. It is important to use as directed. Mazier recommends changing the product from time to time as grasses develop a resistance.



He strongly recommends investing in a herbicide pump rather than an insecticide nozzle commonly found on household sprayers. The insecticide nozzle is cone shaped which allows too much coverage in some places while missing others. Any agricultural supply company will have an herbicide nozzle which has a flat line and is fan-shaped – an 80 to 120 degrees nozzle that allows one pass to give complete uniform coverage. He always recommends wearing protective gear.

If you missed spraying with your pre-emergent, you can still stop young grass seedlings (ideally two-inch high seedlings) with a post-emergence spray. Fusilade or Poast are over-the-top, post-emergent weed killers that kill only grass related plants, monocotyledons. You can safely spray it over your newly sprouted wildflower bed or established plants and only kill the grasses. Do not spray on agaves, yuccas, and desired grasses.

Please use these products only where and when you have a problem. You do not need to spray again six months later because the invasive grasses germinate each fall. This program allows our native plants to reproduce themselves in the summer monsoon season and maintain our Sonoran Desert vitality. Save yourself a lot of aggravation and act now. Your yard will be safer and more attractive thanks to a few hours of spraying.

