

Fighting a Losing Battle with Wiregrass

By Susan Camp

Last week I started cleaning out a small iris bed next to Jim's vegetable garden. I had lifted some irises from another spot and never replanted them, but irises are forgiving of neglect. They will continue to sprout even when left unplanted in a plastic crate. Unfortunately, I had waited so long to replant them that wiregrass had taken over the bed.

Wiregrass is a trickster. On the one hand, it is the most annoying, persistent weed that can invade a flower or vegetable bed. On the other hand, wiregrass is the recommended warm season grass for our coastal region. That's right. Wiregrass (*Cynodon dactylon*) is Bermudagrass. The same turf that is used for lawns, athletic fields, and golf courses is the leggy weed that is almost impossible to remove if it sneaks its way into your irises.

The term "wiregrass" may refer to different species of grass in other regions of the country, but this particular species is a native of Africa and not Bermuda. It is a perennial that thrives in our hot, humid summer weather. It turns brown with the first frost, only to sprout new green shoots in the spring.

Wiregrass spreads both by rhizomes, which are underground horizontal stems, and by stolons, aboveground horizontal stems that root at intervals called nodes. In undisturbed soil, the rhizomes remain 1 to 6 inches below the surface, but if the ground is tilled, the roots will grow deeper underground. In addition, cut stems will root in moist soil. Eventually, the stolons will grow together to form a tangled, wiry mat that is almost impossible to remove. Wiregrass also grows from seed, and improved Bermudagrass cultivars and sterile hybrids are available for lawns.

The thick, tough turf develops into a lawn that is drought and salt tolerant and requires little care, but it becomes the gardener's nightmare in a bed or border. If you spot a few sprigs of wiregrass, you may be able to dig them out, taking care not to break any stems. Wiregrass is easier to remove if the soil is moist, and a layer of mulch helps, too, because the roots remain shallow in mulched ground.

Wiregrass needs full sun, and shade from tall bushes and trees will produce straggly growth that is easier to dig up. It also requires irrigation during the summer, and the stolons will dry out if deprived of water. Killing wiregrass by water deprivation is a long, tedious process that will need to be repeated several times during the summer. All dried stolons and rhizomes should be raked up, because they can re-root if it rains.

Since wiregrass grows both from seed and by rooting, lawn clippings can spread seed or roots and should not be used in compost unless they are thoroughly dried out and weed seeds are dead.

A large area of wiregrass can be mowed and covered with black polyethylene to shield the grass from sunlight. This process will take 6 to 8 weeks, and the polyethylene must remain intact, because the wiregrass will emerge through any holes. Geotextile landscape fabric covered with wood mulch will achieve the same effect.

If all else fails, a post-emergent herbicide may be the answer. A grass-selective herbicide that contains the active ingredient sethoxydim is effective against wiregrass. Some retail products containing sethoxydim are available at garden centers; other formulations must be applied by a licensed pesticide applicator. See VCE Publication SPES-350NP “Selective Bermudagrass Control for Lawns” for other removal protocols.

My first inclination is always to tell people to use chemicals as a last resort. Toxic chemicals damage the environment. They contaminate our waterways; kill pollinators and beneficial insects; harm wildlife; and pose a danger to humans and pets.

Helpful information is found at <https://weedid.cals.vt.edu/weeding/189> ; the University of Maryland Extension Home & Garden Information Center article “Bermudagrass”; and the Clemson Cooperative Extension Home and Garden Information Center Factsheet HGIC 1208 “Bermudagrass.”