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April Showers... Bring May Weeds

Indeed, spring is near and so too are those pesky little yellow flowers, unlucky clovers and prickly thistles galore. And before we know it, hot, dry summer temperatures will bring out the crabgrass in us all. I know, I know, March seems far too early to think about weeds and, especially, crabgrass. But time is crucial in preparing for the splendor of lush lawns, bright flowers, and living landscapes; for what is done *now* will have enduring consequences for the season.

Weed control extends far beyond lawn maintenance and into the surrounding landscape. If the lawn is picture perfect, but the landscape beds are filled with unwanted weeds, the overall appearance is diminished. This should certainly be kept in mind when thinking about the first impression you would like your piece of paradise to present.

As far as the lawn goes, controlling weeds does not have to be overly complicated. A basic 4-step program of balanced fertilizer mixed with pre and post emergent weed controls will typically render satisfactory results. Improper timing of each application, however, will nullify the products and is the most common mistake do-it-yourselfers make. For instance, although crabgrass won't germinate completely until later in summer, the pre-emergent must be applied before soil temperatures consistently reach over 50 degrees. In Ohio, this is usually between mid-March and mid-April. If you are unsure about proper application timing, your local landscape supply store is a wonderful resource. Ultimately, with high quality products and proper application timing, maintaining a weed free lawn is just a few steps away.

The problem with controlling weeds in landscape beds, however, is that most common lawn weeds are equal opportunity attackers; so where as control can easily be obtained in a lawn with basic maintenance, it is proven much more difficult within the landscape.

Foremost, without any measures of control whatsoever, lawns still receive regular mowing which can limit weed activity. Without this most basic of acts, weeds in landscape beds are left to grow unimpeded, developing and releasing thousands of seeds to grow and flourish another day. Secondly, landscape beds contain a wider variety of plants than the lawn. Lawn weed killers are typically broad-leaf herbicides, which mean they kill only broad-leafed plants (dicots), but not grasses (monocots). While this makes sense for the lawn, it can be disadvantageous in landscape beds because many plants are susceptible to the broad-leaf weed killers.

Because of the complexities in maintaining a weed free landscape, a multi-pronged approach is essential.

If the beds are newly created, applying a weed barrier landscape fabric beneath the mulch layer will greatly reduce the impact of weeds for years to come.

Perhaps most importantly is the use of pre-emergent herbicides. A pre-emergent herbicide, such as Preen or Snapshot, which can also be purchased at your local landscape supply store, works to form a *de facto* chemical barrier which, when applied properly, prevents many weeds from growing altogether. Timing is crucial when using pre-emergent herbicides to prevent weeds, however. Similarly to the lawn, the best time to apply pre-emergent herbicide in landscape beds is typically from mid-March to mid-April. Keep in mind, though, that because some seeds are known to last as many as fifty years in the soil, pre-emergent *must* be applied each year to garner proper control.

Additionally, the use of mulch, such as cypress or hardwood, is very beneficial in maintaining a weed free landscape. Because weed seeds need contact with soil and light in order to germinate, oftentimes, a healthy layer of mulch (around 2-3") will prevent sunlight from ever reaching the weed seeds and keep overall weed populations stymied.

Nevertheless, despite the variety of measures one may take in order to prevent weeds from becoming a nuisance, at some point they will invariably attack. When this occurs, there are a couple of options. First, there are post-emergent herbicides, which include common products like Round-Up and Weed-B-Gone. The problem with these, if you remember, is that landscape plants can be very susceptible, so use these products with great caution. Indeed, some flowers may die at the scent alone of such weed killers. In this case, the tried and true method of hand pulling the weeds will no doubt be very useful in maintaining that weed free oasis you crave.

So now that spring is finally near, and our thoughts turn from inside the house to out, remember, the lawn and landscape beds work in harmony to present that striking first impression we longingly visualize all winter through.